***Trued Empowerment in Multicultural Youth Ministry***

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*Multicultural youth ministry offers unique concentric circles of opportunity to leaders   
who are theologically discerning. At the core is the defining confession for Christians of   
all ages:* **Jesus is Lord.** *One day, this reality will be reflected as an ultimate power showdown. Until then, it is of significant consequence to consider how the Lordship of Jesus is the key   
to empowerment in youth ministry’s formational priorities. Jesus invites adolescents into a counter-cultural identity journey, calling them to become his disciples by surrendering   
self-determination. This is a holiness trek, setting young people apart to resist culture   
and learn Jesus’ way of dealing with power. Even as teens explore their identities by   
choosing groups of belonging, discipleship leads them to trust and defer to Jesus   
completely for revealing who they are. In humble submission they enter the Kingdom   
of God, exposing dissonance between their former world and their new, all-consuming allegiance. They come to recognize the oft-hidden, largely malevolent formational powers   
of culture at work in and around them. Leveraging a visibility advantage necessary for this Kingdom refit, multicultural youth ministry can provide adolescents a platform for Spirit-trued empowerment that results in unity beyond diversity, testifying that Jesus is, indeed, Lord.*

David Brooks once published an opinion column for the New York Times entitled, *Five Lies Our Culture Tells.[[1]](#endnote-1)* The substance of the article is worth consideration. Even more intriguing is to think about culture as a power-wielding force capable of lying. Truth matters, and youth ministers who aim to empower young people to follow Christ must contend with culturally rooted opposition to life with Jesus.

“Empowerment” is a dangerous word for Christians. On one hand, we can’t escape our utter necessary to host the Holy Spirit’s transformational power if we hope to be remade into new beings, fit for God’s Kingdom. On the other hand, power-seeking is the fatal core of human sinful corruption and rebellion. Power misuse is devasting, all too common, and — for all who trust Jesus as Lord — avoidable.

At his public ministry launch, Jesus was drawn to battle the temptation to embrace and exercise power incompatible with true love. Forty days in the wilderness without food depleted neither his recognition nor resolve in face of Satan’s repugnant invitations. What the Prince of this World offered was irreconcilably opposed to the perichoretic union Jesus timelessly enjoys in the Godhead, in whom everything was created, currently exists, and will one day be perfected. Eternally secured in the truth of love that is the source of life, Jesus showed no hint of betrayal.

The wily lies of a once luminous angel — deluded by his ravenous pursuit of power — could not upend our Lord in the slightest. Jesus’ continuous depth of fellowship with the Father and Holy Spirit is the taproot of his identity and missional purpose. Millenia later, a crucially corrective youth ministry enterprise is drawing from Jesus’ same lifeforce.

By uniting our efforts to engage teens in relational discipleship radically focused on Jesus, the **TENx10 Collaboration** seeks to reverse the trend of faith anemia for more than ten million young people over the next decade. Thousands of wildly diverse ministries will agree to root their adolescent spiritual formation in the same reality Jesus proved test-resistant in the desert. It’s a high alert rescue mission taking place behind enemy lines. Adolescent belonging, identity, and purpose is susceptible to Satan’s deceptive wreckage.

This paper aims to expose how – under the stealthy familiarity of day-to-day cultural attachments – destructive power works against Jesus-trued empowerment among young people. By reflecting on two familiar forms of cultural influence leaders can recognize avoidable pitfalls in pursuit of multicultural youth ministry blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ. Before tackling that tour, let’s see what’s at stake and embrace the hope we’ve been given when the risen Christ asserts his love.

Henri Nouwen’s parallels between ministry practices and Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness illustrates the subtlety at work in cultural forces.[[2]](#endnote-2) Without a doubt, ministry requires careful handling of power and its shape-shifting allure. If a reasonably good and quick response to someone’s expressed needs leads us to neglect seeking God, our assumption makes us glory-thieves. This reframes ministry as something we do *for* God, breeding us for pride, the posture most inclined to mishandle power. King Saul offered a sacrifice to God because he thought the urgent momentary need of battle couldn’t await Samuel’s arrival. Moses struck the rock for water – leaning on muscle memory – without realizing his “close enough” obedience was an affront to God. The culture of ministry elevates urgent needs to priorities deserving our immediate and unquestionable attention. When it does, this tempts us to act on our own, bypassing God’s situational direction. However well-intended, helping others does not equate to particular faithfulness. We can avoid the trap of unthinkingly usurping power by posturing ourselves for discerning companionship *with* God through humble prayer.

Satan also tempted Jesus to be spectacular, another common ministry pitfall. Silos of independence house corruptive power within us. We become obsessed with self-determination, following the power lust of Cain (or his famous descendent, Nimrod) to build something great enough to be worthy of our personal brand. Too many youth ministers fail to realize how slippery this slope is until they must navigate the life carnage they’ve established apart from God. Interdependence shrinks these self-assertive strongholds, and we learn this way in communities of mutual submission. The Body of Christ is how Jesus fits us perfectly for counter-cultural union with him. Partners who surrender personal entitlements for the sake of extending Jesus’ work together change the world. The evidence of this selfless, symmetrical beauty hosted by Christ is too rare to attract young people today. Should this surprise us? In his late years, John the Elder called out Diotrephes, a local church powerbroker who *“loves to be first”*[[3]](#endnote-3), reminding us that this particular temptation has been around for a while and needs very little space to assert itself. Vigilant heart-guarding is crucial. Every hint of self-centered living gives power a foothold to strain our relationship with God.

Jesus’ final desert temptation was an open promise of controlling power over the nations by Satan. The world, to be sure, doesn’t act like God is in charge. Does Satan get to divvy up such control? Jesus, the Word who spoke all things into existence, knows the whole truth behind this world’s reality. The entire deal offered was a con attempt. As Brooks wrote, closely related promises continue in modern form to the wider culture even today.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The temptation to impose our will on others is strong, even in ministry. Jesus called it out when his closest followers fought over who would be the greatest leader. Seeds bring forth life through death. Jesus calls for leadership that’s distinctly different from culturally honed power-hoarding. By extension, Nouwen observed how difficult it is for ministry leaders to be led where we might not want to go. It’s hard to curb the desire to articulate a personal vision and design our own plans and choose to discern the direction God reveals for today’s agenda. Careful, humble theological reflection is needed to raise *“human consciousness to the knowledge of God’s gentle guidance.”[[5]](#endnote-5)*

Power hides out in the culture-shaped habitats that have groomed so much of our life. In the pivot to survey two arenas, take heart in Jesus’ way of resisting power’s evil destruction. When embracing humility’s constant prayer posture, enjoying unity’s way of being interdependently fit together, and engaging clarity’s day-to-day direction as a gift revealed by our always loving God, power need not distract us from what’s possible: multicultural youth ministry trued by Jesus’ empowerment.

**ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

There’s a good reason that outside consultants are well paid to help organizations improve. Immersion in day-to-day operations makes some aspects of organizational life imperceptible to those whose participation in the familiar grind has infected their very identity. Perhaps that’s why management experts agree that *culture eats strategy for breakfast…*and why they’re so wary of its influence. Anyone who cares about the direction and weight of formation on others must become skilled at detecting what’s actually going on. Diagnosticians will commonly study leadership styles, history, environment, values, beliefs, goals, methods & technologies as forces giving shape to any organizational culture. So, too, are the forms of power that lurk within control of resources, communication patterns, officially adopted rules and protocols, a structure that delineates responsibilities, and decision-making processes that can be mapped.

Simple scrutiny of the multiple elements in an organizational culture can lead to insights that reframe perceptions and offer new pathways for mission betterment. As a personal example, I began my own ministry career in a small parachurch operation where staff meetings could be held in a restaurant booth. By necessity, everyone’s best efforts were needed. Each of us felt highly valued and co-owned the mission. When God favored us with explosive ministry growth, the dozen paid staff and 80 volunteers did not share similar positive experiences. Deeply troubled by how our expansion seemed to be changing the ministry culture for the worse, I took a leave of absence that included graduate level exposure to organizational development. It was then that I realized how the inclusive goal-setting and decision-making processes we had enjoyed while smaller had been replaced by the efficient work of a few sitting atop the organizational chart. We had unwittingly misshaped our operations to create power and distancing gaps that violated the importance of cherishing each member in our family of youth ministers.

When we noticed what we had done, we adjusted to align with our values. Of crucial importance to this paper is to note that our damaging routines were so naturally cloaked inside of organizational culture that their hindrance to our faithfulness was invisible to us. That’s why culture is so formidable for those of us who seek to embody Jesus’ Kingdom rule on earth. Undetected and mal-formational power hides out in the cultural enclaves of ministry organizations everywhere.

Before considering family as culture, consider how simple empirical inquiries can expose where power exists. Locating hidden power, of course, must precede the fair evaluation of any hindrance it may be to those who hunger for Christ’s transformation.

* *Trace who talks to who about what.* This can surface those with organizational power embedded in observable communication patterns. It can also identify those who are outliers, and why they may feel powerless.
* *Catalog every resource, naming who holds the access keys others need.* Be sure to include valued expertise as a resource. The more often someone’s name is attached to various assets the more organizational power that person wields. Don’t overlook including the crisis specialists in this survey.
* *Who knows existing rules and can navigate those official protocols?* Some changes require formal and systemic solutions that will depend on those whose know-how can guide others through a powerful maze of boundaries.
* *Draw an organizational chart that locates everyone.* Some will immediately appear to be furthest removed from where all of the action takes place. They feel their powerlessness; they can also carry the additional burden of seeing themselves too-often crushed under the weighty organizational machinery.
* *Investigate how decisions really get made.* Some problems get solve in coffee-shops. Like shrewd lobbyists, this form of power exists as political activity. Access allows their voices to be heard. Not everyone knows how all of important organizational decisions are made; on the other hand, some patterns are noticed by everyone – especially those excluded from input.

Nouwen’s warnings about the diversionary temptations of power tucked inside the culture of ministry tag each element for warranted vigilance. We may, for instance, want to abandon an authoritarian leadership style in favor or Christ’s selfless, gentle, loving influence among others. While this shift may be motivated by an explicit desire to align with Kingdom values, it can easily get snagged by organizational routines that carry the power of normalcy. *“We’ve always done it this way”* is a formidable blockade to aspirational change. Unless leaders recognize how existing control over resources, communication patterns, formalized protocols, structured responsibilities, and decision-making processes can work to implicitly reinforce the same authoritarian style they want to change, too many shadowy battles will be lost.

But we needn’t fear – God’s love expels wispy ghosts and triumphs over massive giants. Nouwen’s reminders lay claim to this pre-creation meta-force. We can join God through unceasing prayer, mutual submission, and preferentially trusting his daily direction over our own best plans. This counter-cultural weaponry of the Kingdom vanquishes death by dying and neuters destructive powers via sacrificial humility.

**FAMILY AS CULTURE**

While the United States landscape of more than half a million local churches, ministries, and religious business makes organizations an apt starting place for our thinking about culture, the equivalent in Jesus’ day might have been to target the Temple system that was misguiding so many people. It’s evident in table-flipping and countless confrontations with religious elite that Jesus aimed to expose what was a hindrance to experiencing God’s love at the center of our life together. His mission to reveal God necessitated calling out the oppositional influences posing the greatest threat to his followers. That helps us understand Jesus’ teachings about family.

Scholars invested in family studies are likely to engage a widely different body of literature than those with expertise in organizational development. “Family dynamics” and “family systems” are much more common language constructs than the notion of a familial culture. Without attempting to redefine this academic discipline, can we borrow a crucial idea from the previous discussion about how formational influence gets a turbo-boost when cloaked in the natural rhythms of day-to-day normalcies? It is this *stealth* property of culture that lets it dodge our careful interrogation and intentional choice. And the stakes are especially high for anyone intent on helping young people become disciples who locate their identities in their relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Angela Duckworth describes this connective tissue in her discussion of how *grit* works:

*“Culture has the power to shape our identity… ‘The way we do things around here and why’ eventually becomes ‘The way I do things and why’… Identity influences every aspect of our character, but it has special relevance to grit… Often, our passion and perseverance do not spring from a cold, calculating analysis of the costs and benefits of alternatives. Rather, the source of our strength is the person we know ourselves to be… And that’s exactly why culture and identity are so critical to understanding how gritty people live their lives. The logic of anticipated costs and benefits doesn’t explain their choices very well. The logic of identity does.”[[6]](#endnote-6)*

If our identities flow from a cultural reservoir of experiences, so too does our vulnerability. We absorb values and ways of living that slip under our radar without conscious approval. Nowhere is this more likely to happen than through family life. Young people who are positively empowered with family assets for their life journey are equally likely to be encumbered by deficits they inherit. Indeed, family therapy offers helpful breakthroughs precisely because it supports those brave enough to engage eye-opening trauma. Healing begins for many when they see how culturally hidden power infected their family experience.

What Jesus taught about family is upending. Perhaps we can better understand his warnings as an extension of his mission to lead us out of confusing darkness. Under the guise of normalcy, family cultures too often smuggle destructive lies into the mix of our identity formation. Jesus’ (somewhat) unsettling statements invite us to thread a discernment needle and capture his heart’s values, even when they clash with those we’ve been raised with:

* *Then Jesus’ mother and brothers came to see him. They stood outside and sent word for him to come out and talk with them. There was a crowd sitting around Jesus, and someone said, “Your mother and your brothersare outside asking for you.” Jesus replied, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” Then he looked at those around him and said, “Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”[[7]](#endnote-7)*
* *Then he [Jesus] said, “You skillfully sidestep God’s law in order to hold on to your own tradition. For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: ‘Honor your father and mother,’and ‘Anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.’But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, ‘Sorry, I can’t help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.’In this way, you let them disregard their needy parents. And so, you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own tradition. And this is only one example among many others.”[[8]](#endnote-8)*
* *A large crowd was following Jesus. He turned around and said to them, “If you want to be my disciple, you must, by comparison, hate everyone else—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple.”[[9]](#endnote-9)*
* *Peter said, “We’ve left our homes to follow you.” “Yes,” Jesus replied, “and I assure you that everyone who has given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, will be repaid many times over in this life, and will have eternal life in the world to come.”[[10]](#endnote-10)*

Any pause to reflect on our family’s gifts and liabilities can be a fruitful exercise. Using carefully constructed questions will only serve us better. Can family scrutiny benefit from adapting methods of inquiry that make discoveries about organizational culture? By employing a simple research mindset toward exploring how/if family life might be at odds with Jesus’ Kingdom culture, these questions can reveal much:

1. What leadership styles are most prevalent in our family? Who leads most often? *How well do we reflect Jesus’ teaching about his way to lead others?*
2. What values are most important to our family? How are they expressed? *Where might our family values be in tension with what Jesus taught?*
3. What fundamental beliefs give definition to our family? *What beliefs do we live by that are inconsistent with truth as Jesus taught?*
4. Do we share explicit or implicit goals that pull our family in a particular direction? Are the goals agreed upon or have they been imposed on most of us by a few? *How does Jesus engage our family goal setting and pursuits?*
5. Are there (near sacred) routines, practices, and ways of doing life together that give shape to our family culture? *How do these include Jesus? How does Jesus occupy the central role in these most common connective habits?*
6. What part(s) of our family history are cherished more than others? *To what degree does our family celebrate and/or repent with Jesus over our history?*
7. How has our family location influenced our life together? *In what sense has our family felt called by Jesus to a particular place and purpose?*
8. Who seems most invested/least invested with power in our family due to our communication patterns? *How does Jesus want to change these patterns?*
9. What would a portrait look like if drawn to represent our felt inclusion and contributing roles within the family? *What would be the result if Jesus were explicitly located inside a redrawn family portrait?*
10. What are the most valuable resources in our family and who has the greatest control over them? *Would Jesus want to redistribute this power in any way?*
11. How do various family members make decisions? What decisions is each person empowered to make? *How does Jesus participate in the vast array of decisions made within our family? How could he be more directly engaged?*

Each of the eleven lines of inquiry above contain two different layers of depth. The first is purely operational. The second, represented by those questions in *underlined italics*, requires some measure of theological reflection…like that which Nouwen calls for in our resistance to the temptation of wayward power. Borrowed from an analysis of organizational culture, adapted for thinking about a family’s way of life together, there’s no reason that a version of these same questions can’t helpfully reveal cultural assumptions that inhibit the range or depth of work Jesus wants to accomplish in us.

It may be useful to briefly test the efficacy of using this sort of careful reflection process with a few of the near-endless variety of culturally formed groups. I live among America’s third largest Amish community. Buggy life abounds. Sunday church gatherings take place every other week at family homes assigned about twice yearly to host. The local bishops (and there are about 21 tucked within a 10-mile radius) are authorized to say what is allowed and what is forbidden as they interact with English lifestyle options. Personal Bible study is largely discouraged in this communitarian power structure. Further, bishops are chosen by lot; the short straw wins (or loses!) These elements and more fascinate tourists in their drive-by encounters of Amish cultural distinctiveness. They also feed into a lucrative source of income for many Amish. Young people raised in this culture often get caught between power-held rules of belonging and personal truth-seeking around the mysteries of God.

Another inquiry might seek to identify widely held characteristics among African American churches. There we could note how common it is to treat their pastors with unusual honor and respect. Understanding slave history in this country is crucial to appreciating this cultural distinction. But sometimes this explanation disallows brave consideration about whether the privileges conferred on pastors are good for them or their congregations. Intended for good, it’s possible that culturally sanctioned perks may be hindrances to the humility pastors must cultivate if they hope to resemble Jesus in their leadership. Culture can’t be allowed to cripple faithfulness.

As a final example, consider what features in Dutch Reformed churches can be traced to nationally derived values of efficiency, proper order, a work ethic of near-legendary productivity, and more. Being accurate, serving quietly, and correcting errors may manifest as cultural strengths that, in excess, can inhibit authenticity, intimacy, grace, and forgiveness. If exposed, cultural obstructions can be overcome. If ignored, we can be sure that power pop-ups will do damage.

**MULTICULTURAL YOUTH MINISTRY**

Two nearly universal cultural attachments are sneakily infectious. What we absorb from both our workplace and home life illustrates the evasiveness of culture; it exerts much formational power because it seldom encounters conscious resistance. Most humans are socialized into the membership of multiple groups, each with varying degrees of importance to us and influence on us. Young people formed in their peculiar cultural cauldrons of sin-baked familiarity need Spirit-endowed discernment for their new life journey with Jesus.

We scholars could be very helpful in this journey if we find the resolve to overcome the cultural dangers of academia. The humility that once compelled us to discover God’s truth for God’s purposes is routinely challenged by an oppositional value set. When the pinnacle of achievement revolves around learning something never before known we must cope with an inclinational bias toward inventiveness. We diminish mere clarity, once a thoughtfully cherished virtue. Teachers seeking to pass along a helpful way to live appreciate better illumination, but this is not how Nobel prizes are won.

If one of the lies embedded in culture today is, as Brooks wrote, that “*we all have to find our own truth*,” chances are that it is scholars who’ve blazed the trail and invite us all to join the journey. A highly fractured and confused world desperately needs help to integrate life. When scholars who could help don’t,[[11]](#endnote-11) we may have evidence that the contemporary culture of academia breeds elitists whose interest in hearing Jesus pronounce them good and faithful has diminished.

We will find no vitality in the brackish water where the sea of such scholarship is met by youth ministry’s reckless, flowing preference for whatever’s new and creative. In that space discernment is more likely to be considered the reward of good study than a gift from Jesus. Nouwen’s caution, lodged thirty years ago, rings true:

*“…seminaries and divinity schools…have to become centers where people are trained in true discernment of the signs of the time. This cannot be just an intellectual training. It requires deep spiritual formation involving the whole person—body, mind, and heart. …Formation in the mind of Christ, who did not cling to power but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, is not what most seminaries are about. Everything in our competitive and ambitious world militates against it.”[[12]](#endnote-12)*

If an academic culture of elite scholarship prevails, one of its significant assaults will be to shrink the scope and depth of Jesus’ welcome influence. For more than 2,000 years the facts about Jesus’ life, teachings, death, and resurrection have been in circulation. But if they can remain tucked away in musty library corners without any claim to relevance for life today, they will sit in dead pools of brackish water, never moving upstream where so many of us are fascinated by possibilities of multicultural youth ministry. The consequences of minimizing Christ’s Lordship for today based on uninvented, eternally empowering truth will soon be apparent.

Multicultural youth ministry can be understood as an effort to engage young people from various ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds in a shared discipleship journey. But if its emphasis is placed too squarely on whether sufficient diversity expectations have been met, we could fail to disentangle young people from every form of belonging, identity, and purpose that intrudes on the Lordship of Jesus Christ in their lives. The Kingdom of God lays claim to every aspect of their identities. As they become transformed by Jesus, they will enjoy maturity’s trued empowerment, absorbing the fresh life available in the Kingdom they now occupy. Discipleship trains teens to pursue faithfulness in their day-to-day culture. It must also equip them to sniff out and avoid whatever lying scams come from culture to resist life with Jesus.

Did Jesus engage in multicultural ministry? On the surface, where checkboxes suffice as indicators, it doesn’t seem so. He insisted that his calling was to the lost sheep of Israel and each of his chosen apostles were Jewish. How then could he expect this homogeneous group to make disciples from among all nations (cultures)? He did so because he had thoroughly prepared them for his thorough, ongoing allegiance overhaul. Families and family fishing businesses, wealth-producing careers and political zealotry, religious reputations, status, comfort, and power in every form…all of these and more were expected to be offered up wholly to Christ as Lord. Jesus showed them how cultural attachments crawl into and claim part of their hearts, then warned that we simply cannot serve two masters. Discipleship is an all-or-nothing call. Even our most cherished identifiers are to be transformed by immersion in Jesus’ Kingdom culture. Apparently, dual citizenship isn’t allowed. When that exclusivity was secured, an all-Jewish band of brothers and sisters hosted Pentecostal unity unlike anything the world has ever seen.

Multicultural youth ministry – like every temptation to be relevant, spectacular, or powerful – could become an end in itself. If so, it risks becoming a rogue, disruptive force in the Kingdom of God. Wherever life and ministry are done *for* God, we open ourselves to making choices unaligned with Jesus’ Lordship.

To illustrate, during one spring seasonal thaw of snow, 14 dead rats were scattered near our front door. Our dog had done her best to please us with the skills and instincts (culture?) bred into her. But her inability to know my heart accurately meant that her offerings were rejected. Poor Mandy: she wasn’t even part of his species, but she demonstrated Cain-likeness in her error.

Multicultural youth ministry *with* Jesus as Lord includes every big and small question about what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. This is what it means to abide in Jesus. Obedience to Christ’s directives need not be sidetracked by the challenges of actual implementation. In prayer we can discern *how* to make something happen, carefully avoiding the temptation to veer into self-constructed outcomes. Jesus is Lord of enablement, too. In spite of youth ministry’s inclination to pivot quickly to practical problem-solving we can only produce lasting fruit when we’re tethered to Christ. If a few Jews living in a small region can be taught to reach a multicultural world, anyone can. Done *with* Jesus, we enjoy all-access benefits of his prevailing love. Jesus’ Kingdom is not of this world. He can’t be bound by blustering power feints that cower us into culturally cocooned conformity. There will come a day when malevolent power – eviscerated on the cross – finally surrenders so we can watch every knee bow in acknowledgement of love’s ultimate reality: *Jesus is Lord*.

Imagine a slight reversal in the storyline of Peter’s rooftop vision. As Scripture reports it, the risen Christ rolled out a smorgasbord and directed Peter to eat. His response exposes the reflexive inhibitions that culture can place on Jesus’ Lordship: *“No, Lord,” Peter declared. “I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean.”[[13]](#endnote-13)* Ultimately, this vision emboldened Peter to minister beyond his native culture.

In today’s culture, in order to reset historical imbalances of privilege and power, some would say *“No, Lord”* to any vision that’s *not* multicultural. It’s as if we present a list of approved candidates to Jesus and invite him to select from among those we’ve culturally endorsed. Jesus is Lord. He may have his own reasons for ignoring our attempts to presume on his authority.

Where Jesus is Lord, the lies of pretensive power about better ways to live are exposed. Where Jesus is Lord, cultural presumptions about the boundaries of true belonging are erased. Where Jesus is Lord, love prevails, sets us free, heals our wounds, squashes our fears, and unites us. God *IS* love. Because Jesus is Lord, young people of all stripes and sizes will one day join Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their glorious dance of symmetry. Multicultural youth ministry can let the world preview this hope, an epic saga to come when all things are reconciled by Jesus, our Lord.

The Lordship of Jesus might feel like a giant “should” to young people enculturated with a *“who’s to say?”* mindset. They may demand to know “why” so they can agree to obey. This posture exposes two deficits to be overcome through discipleship: a) they don’t know the heart of Jesus, and b) they don’t know the depth of their own self-centeredness.

Some attempts at multicultural youth ministry are failed machinations by those who settle for brochure pictures of diversity without engaging the journey of mutual submission and power sharing. When Jesus is Lord, we should expect everyone can share stories about the personal identity concessions they’ve made in order to see multicultural unity emerge from individual diversity.[[14]](#endnote-14) In our collective testimonies we focus on God’s unfailing love and faithfulness. Herein we find encouragement to trust God fully. All prove they have skin in the game. Those who only appear supportive of multicultural youth ministry but misrepresent their own level of sacrifice introduce an “Ananias and Saphira infection”[[15]](#endnote-15) to the cause. Jesus deals severely with intolerable deception and expects his church will insist on interdependence fueled by his love.

Jesus is Lord *and* he invites followers to probe the love in his heart behind his directives. Jesus is Lord *and* he constantly flips power relationships on their head so that love can become a truer, deeper, and more trustworthy directional guide. In every way and in all things, God is love. The original Easter storyline – from Christ’s execution to his resurrection – proved that God’s immeasurable love is, indeed, the inextinguishable life at the center of all things. By contrast, every fitful, culturally-embedded claim of power is aimed to kill, steal, and destroy humankind – a scorched earth strategy by heaven’s biggest loser.

If multicultural youth ministry unduly celebrates gathering a diverse group of young people, God’s larger purpose for their journey may be sidetracked. The destination isn’t diversity, it’s unity. Those adolescents who believe that God is love and Jesus is Lord will be eager to find their place in the Body of Christ, embracing the radical cultural identity Paul commended:

*Put on your new nature and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. In this new life, it doesn’t matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile,circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.[[16]](#endnote-16)*

Between the Lordship of Jesus and love of God, we can expect to be taken where we’re needed, which is often far beyond where we’re invited. Young people learn to become branch extensions of Christ’s life. No self-empowerment efforts can gain this status. Trued empowerment is rooted in Jesus’ love; when teens embrace that reality, they may even become unimaginably transcultural! Paul’s prayer hit this bullseye:

*When I think of all this, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.[[17]](#endnote-17)*

The notion of *trued empowerment* hints at the existence of misguided forms of empowerment. Well-intended youth ministers, keenly aware of the deficits felt by young people who’ve been underprivileged, imagine that they are called to correct this imbalance through explicit strategies of power redistribution. But Jesus is Lord, and his way with his beloved people – *all* of us – does not call us to Robin Hood tactics. Trued empowerment exclusively trusts that faithfully abiding with Jesus will lead us to discern what, when, where, and how to act. Nothing that needs to be done will be left undone, and the doing will bear fruit. It’s rooted in prayer, enjoyed in community, and unleashed in obedience. “Radical focus on Jesus” is sought by those engaged in **TENx10** relational discipleship. Trued empowerment can guide their efforts, including the expressed (and needed) desire to center leaders of color throughout the movement. So, too, when adults and teens alike experience trued empowerment as they engage in multicultural youth ministry, glorious fruit will result. Strolling through these orchards will lead many to see why we believe Jesus is Lord.

1. David Brooks, “Five Lies Our Culture Tells” *The New York Times* April 15 (2019): section A, page 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1993)*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *3 John 9,* The New International Version. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Brooks called out these five lies: 1) Career success is fulfilling; 2) I can make myself happy; 3) Life is an individual journey; 4) You have to find your own truth; 5) Rich and successful people are worth more than poorer and less successful people. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus,* 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Angela Duckworth, *Grit* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2016), 247 – 250. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Mark 3:31-35,* New Living Translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Mark 7:9-13,* New Living Translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *Luke 14:25-27,* New Living Translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Luke 18:28-30,* New Living Translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. see the discussion advanced about theology done primarily as a self-serving academic exercise in Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun, *For the Life of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2019)*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus,* 69-70. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Acts 10:14,* New Living Translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. I’m grateful for Ebonie Davis’ insights about the practical challenges of multicultural youth ministry. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Acts 5:1-11,* New Living Translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Colossians 3:10-11,* New Living Translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Ephesians 3:14-21,* New Living Translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)