



centered
youth
ministry

contributors

bo boshers • chap clark • mark devries • katie edwards
kurt johnston • dave livermore • jeanne mayo • walt mueller
judson poling • duffy robbins • thom & joani schultz • greg stier

by **rick lawrence** executive editor, Group magazine
foreword by **doug fields** pastor to students, Saddleback Church

JESUS- CENTERED YOUTH MINISTRY

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Executive Editor of Group Magazine

FOREWORD BY DOUG FIELDS

WITH BO BOSHERS, CHAP CLARK, MARK DEVRIES, KATIE EDWARDS, DOUG FIELDS,
KURT JOHNSTON, DAVE LIVERMORE, JEANNE MAYO, WALT MUELLER, JUDSON POLING,
DUFFY ROBBINS, JOANI SCHULTZ, THOM SCHULTZ, AND GREG STIER



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DEDICATION

*For my two girls, Lucy and Emma,
in honor of the beeline you're already following.*
—RL



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- For the “blacksmiths” in my life who’ve partnered with God to shape me into a desperate-for-Jesus sort of man: Most importantly, my wife Bev—your love for my heart has carried it to Jesus. And for Bob Krulish, Tom Melton, Ned Erickson, Dave and Georgia Rhodes, Doug Ashley, and Brad Behan—people who are still swinging their smithy’s hammer in my life. And for the hall-of-fame blacksmiths: Scot Douglas and Bill Rader.
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FOREWORD

If you're a youth worker, you know Brett Cervoni. Brett is a youth ministry leader who prepares his messages, assembles the program, and tries his best to organize adult leaders. He's active and busy doing ministry. When Wednesday night rolls around, you can find him setting up the chairs, preparing the media presentation, searching frantically for a funny and/or gross game, and making sure the music leaders don't stink when it comes time to sing. Brett is actively trying to create an attractive and engaging youth ministry!

After all his hard work, the teenagers leave to go home. Then Brett leaves to go home—he's tired, wondering if the program made any difference. He's trying to remember the names of that night's visiting students. He's feeling a little lonely...and a lot hungry. So on his way home he stops by Taco Bell for a late-night binge and runs into a former youth group student. Lindsey was one of the very active teenagers in Brett's ministry—in his words, she was "a star!" Chances are, you know a Lindsey in your group.

As they catch up on all their news, Brett feels a fond affection for Lindsey. He tells her how proud he is of her, in a spiritual sense, because she seems to be making good decisions about her life and faith while she's away at college. Brett is thrilled that at least one of his graduates is walking closely with Jesus. Then he casually brings up the names of a few of Lindsey's old cronies in the youth group—she pauses and acts almost embarrassed about them. She knows they're making some poor choices and living in a way that doesn't reflect well on a follower of Jesus. Her look and the stories that accompany it make Brett sink a little lower. He was happy to see Lindsey but sad when he thought about the kids who graduated from his ministry and were now wandering away from Jesus.

Brett's drive home from Taco Bell seemed long because the questions came fast and furious. What was missing in his teaching? Why did it seem like Lindsey was in the minority? Was he a bad youth worker? Were his programs weak and lacking creativity? Was his youth ministry really working? These were not neutral questions...and it didn't take long for the guilt to set in. Too tired to wait for answers, he fell asleep watching TV.

Do you know someone like Brett? I know him too well. Brett Cervoni could easily be Doug Fields. In fact, he probably is. As I read the book you're holding, I knew what Brett—and you and I—need. I also knew it wasn't going to be easy. I read Rick's work and I was filled with challenge, anger, hope, and confusion. I know Jesus is central. I've been teaching that for years—for goodness' sake, it's Chapter 1 in my book, *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry*. But I had to ask myself, "Is Jesus *really*

central? Is he central in everything I do, plan, create, and think about?" (The answer to this is where the anger—self-anger—may have come from.)

Rick Lawrence has done in this book what he has been doing as editor of Group Magazine for almost 20 years—he makes you think, he loves you, he wants you to win, and he provides you with practical ideas in a journey toward hope. Honestly, I also think he writes some material from an editor's perspective and not a practicing youth worker's. A couple of times I've yelled at him, "Come on, Rick—that's not going to happen in youth ministry—at least not at my church!" But it was also during those times that I thought: "Maybe he's right. Maybe I need to change the way I'm thinking and doing things... maybe it will work."

If you want to agree with everything that's written and are looking for an easy 1–2–3 plan for spiritual health and growth, this isn't the book. But if you want to read and be challenged to think and rethink the *how*, *why*, and *because* of youth ministry... this will be a great read for you.

Rick wants to lead us to Jesus and force us to think about how our youth ministry and teenagers and leaders would be different if Jesus were central...no, more than central...if Jesus were everything. He's convincing and convicting that teenagers, youth ministries, leaders, parents—and you and I—need more of Jesus and less of ministry. He's got the research, the stories, and the ideas to show youth workers like you, me, and Brett Cervoni how we might change youth ministry by making Jesus central—where he belongs.

I am excited for the impact this book will have on your personal life and ministry. It will energize and encourage you in your call to continue to make a difference in the lives of teenagers. What a wild journey!

Blessings,

—DOUG FIELDS
Youth Pastor, Saddleback Church
Founder, Simply Youth Ministry

INTRODUCTION

Here's mud in your eye!

Six months ago Greg Stier, founder and president of Dare 2 Share Ministries, said something to me that finally cured my blindness. We were sitting across from each other toward the end of a youth ministry brainstorming session held in the Loveland, Colorado, offices of Group Magazine, the youth ministry resource I've edited for the last two decades. I don't even remember what we were talking about, but I'll never forget the casual way Greg metaphorically "spit in the dirt" and then smeared the mud on my eyes:

"Well, you know," he said, "Spurgeon said that no matter what Bible text he was preaching on or what issue he was teaching about, he always made a beeline to the cross, to Jesus."

A beeline to Jesus?

I was blinded by that light. I knew next to nothing about Spurgeon—Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great British preacher and teacher—but I knew his "beeline to Jesus" had suddenly clarified everything for me. Five years of dissonance and restless exploration now made sense to me in the burning light of the beeline.



Back at the beginning of this five-year season in my life, during the heyday of the "What Would Jesus Do?" fad, I started to doubt the foundations of the movement. The central question of the book (Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*¹), which the WWJD frenzy was based on, is simple, really: "If Christians are supposed to be following Jesus, why aren't they making more of an impact in their daily lives?" The book's answer was to imagine what everyday life might be like if all of us simply talked and acted more like Jesus. Well, that *would* change everything. But as far as I could tell from my perch as editor of Group Magazine, the WWJD movement *hadn't* changed everything.

Maybe, I pondered, the Christ-following lives we think we're living are actually disconnected from the real Jesus of the prophets and the gospels and the epistles. It's fine to work up my imagined Jesus-response when someone cuts me off on the freeway, but really the whole thing desperately depends on my own intimacy with Christ. I realized something profound: I could miss Jesus entirely by arrogantly assuming my imagined responses to a partially understood Jesus meant I was really following...Jesus.

1 Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Publishing, 2005).

“What does ‘follow Jesus’ mean anyway?” I asked myself. Have I really soaked in the personality of Jesus—pursued him as the most fascinating, enigmatic, lightning-bolt person who ever lived? I decided to try an experiment. I’d quickly read through Matthew’s gospel looking only for patterns in what Jesus said and did. My experiment yielded 15 observations. Here’s a summary of what I wrote on my computer as I sat there with my Bible open:

1. Jesus spent more time praying than speaking. Why? I think it was because he knew he was in a fight with a formidable foe who was serious about “killing, stealing from, and destroying” the children of God. When he sent his disciples out on their own for the first time, he explicitly told them to “drive out demons.”
2. Jesus enjoyed spending time with self-confessed sinners. Why? I think it was because they weren’t shrink-wrapping themselves in man-made righteousness.
3. Jesus said we’d know we were starting to make an impact when people started insulting, persecuting, and defaming us because of him. Hmm.
4. Jesus hated it when people hid themselves behind religious rule keeping, and he told his followers to plunge themselves into the mainstream culture like a lamp in a dark room or salt added to a recipe.
5. Jesus spoke openly about hell and warned there are real consequences for those who cling to self-sufficiency and unbelief.
6. Jesus hated it when people prayed or served or sacrificed to boost their profiles or feed their egos. He honored secret acts because they revealed a desire for an honest relationship with God.
7. Jesus was quick to forgive those who were repentant and quick to condemn those who weren’t.
8. Jesus said the richest people were those who’d banked a lifetime of actions that honored God. He bluntly told his followers they could *not* be motivated by love of money and love of God at the same time.
9. Jesus told us to ignore people who talk big but don’t act big and to honor those who talk small but act big.
10. Jesus healed people of incurable diseases and permanent disabilities.
11. Jesus loved celebrations and enjoyed himself so much that the religious rule keepers accused him of public drunkenness.
12. Jesus said, metaphorically, that farmers who sat around in the farmhouse waiting for corncobs to launch themselves through the door were sadly misinformed about the concept of “harvesting.”
13. Jesus said our loyalty to him and his ways should outweigh our loyalty to our biological family and its traditions and practices.

14. Jesus told us not to focus our energies on fighting sin (pulling weeds), but instead to do everything we can to encourage good growth (growing wheat).

15. Finally, Jesus said the root of our lack of faith is our penchant to forget the acts and character of God—our biggest faith battle is remembering to remember God.

When I finished my experiment and sat back to soak in what I'd written, I was startled by how Jesus was so consistently offensive to my American Christian sensibilities, "inalienable rights," and everyday self-absorbed behaviors. And I was also passionately drawn to him.

In Mark Galli's excellent book *Jesus Mean and Wild*, he describes a similar startling encounter with an unmasked Jesus. Galli was pastor of a California church when a group of Laotian refugees asked if they could become members. Galli offered to lead them through a study of Mark's gospel as a foundational exercise before they made their commitment. The Laotians had little knowledge of Scripture or of Jesus. When Galli got to the passage where Jesus calms the storm, he asked the refugees to talk about the "storms" in their lives—their problems, worries, and struggles. The people looked confused and puzzled. Galli filled the awkward silence by asking, "So what are your storms?" Finally, one of the Laotian men asked, "Do you mean that Jesus actually calmed the wind and sea in the middle of a storm?" Galli thought the man was merely expressing his skepticism, and since he wasn't intending to spend the group's remaining time wrestling with the plausibility of Jesus' miracles, he said: "Yes, but we should not get hung up on the details of the miracle. We should remember that Jesus can calm the storms in our lives." After another uncomfortable stretch of silence, another man spoke up: "Well, if Jesus calmed the wind and the waves, he must be a very powerful man!" The Laotians buzzed with excitement about this while Galli looked on as a virtual outsider. While these newbie Christian refugees entered into something like worship, Galli realized he'd so taken Jesus for granted that he'd missed him altogether.²

In my own journey of awakening, I wondered whether I'd done the same thing as Galli. Had I so taken Jesus for granted in my life that I'd essentially stopped relating with him as he really is? Even more, had I so "understood" Jesus that the pursuit of him was far less interesting to me than the pursuit of Christian relationships or postmodern worship or artistic expressions of the Christian life or culturally relevant approaches to Bible study?

Now fast-forward a few more years from my personal deconstruction of WWJD. Last year I was invited to speak at a youth ministry conference in the Midwest. This time, my slot was a two-hour pre-conference session for people who wanted something a little deeper. At the time, I was experimenting with a training idea that focused all of youth ministry on three Jesus-centered questions:

2 Mark Galli, *Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), p. 112.

1. “*Who do I say Jesus is?*”

Jesus asked his disciples this question after one of his huge public gatherings, when he’d gathered those closest to him to debrief the experience. This question was preceded by a safer one for the disciples: “Who do the people say I am?” Jesus, ever shrewd, tossed them an easy pitch to swing at before he brought the heat.

2. “*Who does Jesus say I am?*”

After Peter answered the first question by telling Jesus he was “the Christ, the son of the living God,” Jesus fired back with his own answer to Peter’s unasked question: “And you are Peter, whose real name is ‘the Rock.’”

3. “*Who do I say I am?*”

Peter, after he betrayed his best friend, Jesus, had to answer the most important question of his life: “Am I the fake, duplicitous little man my betrayal is telling me I am, or am I the Rock Jesus told me I am?” After a little conference on the beach between Peter and the resurrected Jesus, when Jesus insisted on asking Peter *three times* if he loved him, the question is answered in Peter. You see his answer in the first two chapters of Acts as he stands before the crowds that only days before had demanded Jesus’ crucifixion, and he *Rocks* them.

Later in this book I’ll plunge more deeply into these three questions as crucial tunnels into Jesus-centered youth ministry. But for now it’s merely important that you know where my head was at when I emerged from that two-hour training session. It was one of the most powerful worship experiences of my adult life because we’d sort of locked arms together and ran fast and hard after Jesus, not to get something from him, but just to *cling to him* as our primary youth ministry practice.

Now, because my training time happened before the conference had officially started, I had an open landscape before me to explore every nook and cranny hidden in the general sessions and workshops. I love that—sampling at the idea buffet and connecting with youth pastors who are the best, most enjoyable people I’ve ever known. But it didn’t take long for the dissonance to set in. I was restless and, I had to admit, bored by almost everything I was hearing in the general sessions and workshops.

In truth, I was passionately bored.

These were some of the sharpest, most articulate and bold youth ministry veterans in the world. And I knew in my head that all the tips, techniques, and strategies they were dispensing were not only compelling but also practical. But the more I listened and tried to eat at their feast table, the blander their food looked to me.

Disillusioned, and suddenly feeling disconnected from the very people I’d looked forward to engaging, I found an empty seat in the large open space just outside of the conference room’s doors. Thousands of people were swirling

around me, but I felt like I was in a bubble. “Why, why, why, Jesus, am I feeling this way?” Tears welled in my eyes. I was literally pleading with him to shine His light on my sudden, unexpected darkness. And into that darkness I sensed him whispering: “You’re bored by everything but me now.”

What?

It’s not that all the tips and techniques I’d been hearing were somehow contrary to a Jesus-centered youth ministry, any more than innovative cup holders are contrary to the Honda Odyssey my wife wishes we had. The cup holders are a nice, attractive addition, but you’ve got nothing without the drivetrain—the engine and transmission.

Now, I’ve spent a lot of time and creativity as editor of Group Magazine trying to point leaders toward the “cool cup holders” of youth ministry. As I’ve mentioned, I know I’ve unwittingly taken the “drivetrain” for granted in my life. As I sat there in my God bubble, I knew he was inviting me to obsess about Jesus like a “car person” obsesses about Hemi engines.

If a car is just of functional interest to you—something to get you from point A to point B—then its cup holders may weigh equally with the engine’s specifications. But if you’re a “car person”—someone who’s fascinated and captivated by them—your primary passions are all about how it’s propelled. A Web site for “muscle car” enthusiasts touts its drivetrain passion this way: “We have compiled one of the most extensive lists of block, crankshaft, and cylinder head casting numbers available on the internet. There are well over 20,000 listings here.”³ No mention of cup holders, but an obsessive focus on stuff related to the drivetrain.

In the midst of the conference’s hubbub, it slowly dawned on me that my palpable boredom was the natural reaction of a “Jesus person”—I realized I’d slowly become obsessively interested only in youth ministry’s “drivetrain.” Somehow all of the workshops on relational ministry and postmodern worship and volunteer training—and all of the keynote speakers talking about creative processes and new youth ministry structures and axe-to-grind priorities—seemed like distractions from that thing rumbling under the hood. I felt like a “car person” at an auto show who’s disappointed to learn that most of the workshops are about new windshield-wiper technologies and improved tread design for snow tires.

Frankly, this whole thing caught me by surprise, like stumbling into the Promised Land when I was only heading to 7-Eleven for a half gallon of milk. If a youth ministry of brilliant tips and techniques (cool cup holders) was now secondary to a youth ministry that is radically, creatively, passionately, uncomfortably centered around Jesus (the drivetrain), how would it change the way I see youth ministry? More important, how would it change what we *do* in youth ministry?

Well, obviously this book is my attempt at finding the way. And it would be arrogant of me—and a sort of betrayal of God’s foundational commitment to relationship—to find the way using only the sonar of my own voice. So I’ve invited

3 From the www.musclecarclub.com home page.

the voices of youth pastors from all over the world, and of youth ministry friends and heroes, to join me in this adventure. And to the extent our voices resonate with your own, we've also captured your voice.

Now, let's see what it feels like when that engine is at full throttle.

Part One

THE BEELINE IMPERATIVE

The Spurgeon Way

The shadow cast by C. H. Spurgeon over this book is so broad it's not possible to go any further without exploring his life and mission a little first.

Spurgeon was a 19th-century English pastor who suffered from depression and a painful birth defect. He preached two services every Sunday in his London church, each with a crowd of 6,000 people attending (his

was before the invention of microphones). At the

time, he had more books in print than any other living person. He still has more

books in print than any other pastor in history, including more than

2,500 of his published sermons.

Historians call him the "Prince of Preachers," and his remarkable story holds the key to Jesus-centered youth ministry.

Spurgeon was born in England and committed his life to Christ in 1850, when he was 15 years old. He preached his first

sermon a year later and took on the pastorate of a small Baptist church a year after that, at 17. Just four years after his conversion, the 20-year-old Spurgeon became pastor of London's famed New Park Street Chapel. A few months into his new position his skill and power as a preacher made him famous—at 22 he was the most popular preacher of the day.

Much later in Spurgeon's ministry, a young pastor asked him to listen to him preach and give him a critique—a common request since Spurgeon was revered by other preachers. After he listened to the young man's impassioned sermon, Spurgeon was honest—he thought it was well prepared and well delivered but it nevertheless...stunk.

"Will you tell me why you think it a poor sermon?" asked the young pastor.

"Because," said Spurgeon, "There was no Christ in it."

I From an unedited sermon by Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

"If you think you can
walk in holiness without keeping
up perpetual fellowship with Christ,
you have made a great mistake.
If you would be holy,
you must live close to Jesus."¹

CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON

The young man said, “Well, Christ was not in the text; we are not to be preaching Christ always, we must preach what is in the text.”

The old man responded, “Don’t you know, young man, that from every town, and every village, and every little hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London?”

“Yes,” said the young man.

“Ah!” said the old preacher, “and so from *every text* in Scripture there is a road to the metropolis of the Scriptures, that is Christ. Dear brother, when you get to a text, say, ‘Now, what is the road to Christ?’ and then preach a sermon, running along the road towards the great metropolis—Christ.”²

Spurgeon called this “making a beeline to Christ.” It was his central, guiding commitment every time he opened his mouth to speak or teach or write.

He wrote: “Jesus is The Truth. We believe in Him—not merely in His words. He is the Doctor and the Doctrine, the Revealer and the Revelation, the Illuminator and the Light of Men. He is exalted in every word of truth, because he is its sum and substance. He sits above the gospel, like a prince on his own throne. Doctrine is most precious when we see it distilling from his lips and embodied in his person. Sermons are valuable in proportion as they speak of him and point to him. A Christless gospel is no gospel at all and a Christless discourse is the cause of merriment to devils.”³

I believe Spurgeon’s passion for Jesus, and his determination to track everything he said and did back to “the metropolis of Christ,” is really the central—but unexplored—imperative in youth ministry today. What would a youth ministry look like that proactively found a beeline to Jesus for (literally) everything it did?

For example, instead of approaching Bible study or Bible teaching from a “life application” angle, we would use interesting topics—and every Bible passage—as the first step on a path toward Jesus. So no matter where we’re studying in the Bible, or what topic we’re studying, we always—*always*—find a beeline to Jesus.

This is no theoretical possibility; it’s a practical reality. Let me show you what I mean.

Not long ago, I developed a series of youth ministry training events held in cities all over the country—it was called Group Magazine Live. At these events, we asked thousands of youth pastors to play with beeline Bible study. One person at each table closed his or her eyes, opened a Bible, and picked a random passage. Then, together with others at the table, the blind Bible stabber had just five minutes to identify the beeline to Christ from the random passage and put together a plan to teach that passage in a Jesus-centered way. (We gave them permission to use the “stabbed” verse in context with other verses.)

² Taken from Sermon 242, *Christ Precious to Believers*, preached by Charles Spurgeon on March 13, 1859.

³ From the published sermons of Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

I always loved it when a table got “stuck” with something from Ezekiel or (horrors!) Leviticus. In *every single* case youth workers, who were, at first, as skeptical about the beeline as that young preacher had been, discovered the hidden beeline. Some groups were so excited about the experiment they chose to dive into the Bible a second time if they deemed their passage a “no-brainer” beeline.

The activity created a buzz of anticipation and even a sense of awe and worship. We followed that experience by challenging youth leaders to never again teach from the Bible, or plan a Bible study, or do a topical study of any kind, without making a beeline to Christ.

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING A LITTLE MORE RADICAL

I know “a beeline for everything” sounds radical, but we’re in need of radical right now. Simply put, if what we’re doing in youth ministry has no apparent connection to Jesus, then we ask God to help us find it.

In my example of Bible study, it’s good to remember that John’s gospel tells us Jesus is “the Word”—meaning his fingerprints are all over the Bible. There’s a built-in beeline to Jesus no matter where you go in Scripture. It’s our imperative (and a grand, playful adventure) to find it.

I’m going to try again, right now, to experiment with this while you watch (read). Ready? Here we go.

First I close my eyes, and then I stab my finger into my Bible and come

DANGER OF IRRELEVANCE?

If we’re always making a beeline to Jesus, what do we do about the issues—the problems and challenges—facing our teenagers? Drug and alcohol abuse? Sexual activity? The push to succeed? Divorce? Depression? Stress? Cultural influences? This is exactly the issue the young preacher, flabbergasted and annoyed, was targeting when he told Spurgeon: “We are not to be preaching Christ always, we must preach what is in the text.”

Up until now most of us have been like overworked pruners in a fast-growing orchard. We scurry around trying to cut off the bad fruit we see around us. We do teaching series on sex, on money, on music and movies, on relationships... The truth is, as kids come to know Jesus more deeply and begin to abide in him as the “root” of their life, their fruit will change. They will be transformed “by the renewing of [their] mind” (Romans 12:2). We won’t have to run around cutting off rotten fruit!

But that’s not to say we won’t need to focus on these topics—we’ll just focus on them with the goal of helping kids find and experience the beeline to Jesus.

up with Job 5:22—it's in the middle of a speech by Eliphaz (one of Job's "friends") titled "The Innocent Do Not Suffer." The "advice" that encompasses verse 22 actually starts in verse 17:

"Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For he wounds, but he also binds up; he injures, but his hands also heal. From six calamities he will rescue you; in seven no harm will befall you. In famine he will ransom you from death, and in battle from the stroke of the sword. You will be protected from the lash of the tongue, and need not fear when destruction comes. [Verse 22] You will laugh at destruction and famine, and need not fear the beasts of the earth."

So I close my eyes again and pray: *God, where is the beeline?* In a moment, I have it (I'm sure there are many more ways to go with this, but this is the one that surfaces for me in this moment): I would use this passage for a study or teaching titled "What Does Jesus *Really* Promise Us?" I'd compare Eliphaz's view of a God who punishes the bad and rewards the good to Jesus' mission to love even his enemies. And I'd scan the gospels to pluck out every promise Jesus made and compare them to what Eliphaz *represents* as God's promises. That's the beeline—I'd attach everything in the study to it, and I'd use personal interactions, experiences, and relevant stories plucked from mainstream media (film, music, or video games).

As I mentioned, we've now trained thousands of youth pastors to do what I just did. The effect of finding the beeline in everything we do, all the time, is that the truth Spurgeon discovered—that all roads lead to the metropolis of Christ—gets injected into kids' spiritual DNA. It changes forever the way they view Scripture study, mission trips, service projects, games, retreats, and (most importantly) their everyday lives. And it will flip a switch in them that can't be turned off, one that enables them to find Jesus—or the kingdom of God he describes—everywhere they look.

SPURGEON THE YOUTH PASTOR

Not long ago I experimented with the beeline by crafting a commitment statement that would drive everything I do with Group Magazine. Here's what I came up with:

We believe that youth ministries have slowly, imperceptibly shifted their focus from Jesus as the center of all our ministry activities to lesser goals. We assert that Jesus is the obvious and persistent focus of effective youth ministries. And we believe that youth pastors have maximum impact, in partnership with God, when they work to connect everything they do back to Jesus.

I think this commitment statement well reflects the sharp turn we need to make in youth ministry—that's why I think Spurgeon would make a great youth

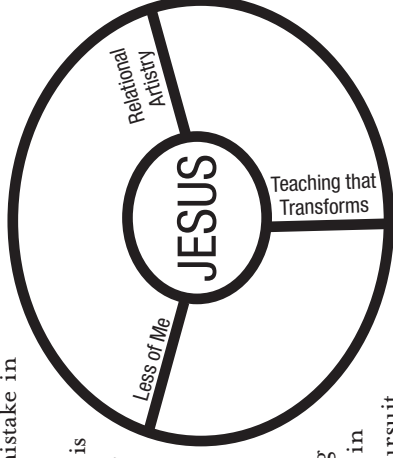
pastor in today's climate. He was scorned by the "Pharisees" of his time for being too "proletariat"—he spoke to the masses and was popular with working people. That's because his message was simple, simple, simple: "A sermon without Christ as its beginning, middle, and end is a mistake in conception and a crime in execution."⁴

Spurgeon's simple beeline focus is really the only pillar strong enough to serve as the central weight-bearing support for any and all ministry strategies—purpose-driven ministry, family ministry, relational ministry, postmodern/emergent ministry—anything. In fact, you can see this "pillar" propping up the most effective youth ministries in America—the passionate, consuming pursuit of Jesus is a common thread woven through their diverse structures, locations, and challenges.

In the groundbreaking *Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry*,⁵ researchers found that central pillar and named it—a single-minded, persistent, saturating focus on Jesus Christ. The three-year study combined quantitative research with qualitative insights drawn from intensive site visits to the targeted youth ministries. They focused on churches in seven major denominations that had become known within their circles as "exemplary"—profoundly "successful in shaping the faith lives of youth."

Pastors and youth pastors connected to exemplary youth ministries were asked to complete this sentence: "The youth ministry of our congregation would die if..." The common response was: "If the ministry's emphasis shifts away from its focus on Jesus Christ." These ministries are kindred spirits to the apostle Paul, who condensed his life's ambitions into one sentence in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (NASB). Can that statement be the simple driving force, the hub, of a youth ministry? I think it must be.

In this book I'll sprinkle examples, comments, and ideas drawn from the exemplary youth ministries in the study—to flesh out what it looks like to live out a beeline focus in every area of ministry. These ministries are organized like a bicycle wheel—where the hub is Jesus and the spokes are all the events, programs, practices, and activities of the ministry. Here's what I mean:



⁴ From the published sermons of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, 1625-598.

⁵ To learn more about the *Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry*, go to www.exemplarym.com. The quotes from youth pastors, adult volunteers, senior pastors, and teenagers cited in the study throughout this book are taken from the study's in-site interviews.