

## Hey Youth Group... This is My Body

Imagination. It's something kids have, and adults lose. Put kids in a room full of toys and watch them create an alternative world full of talking stuffed animals, tea parties, or all-out galactic battles. Put a couple adults in the same room and watch them attempt to clean up the "mess."

Where does imagination come from? It really can't come out of nowhere, unless we're prepared to conclude that our ideas are created "ex nihilo"... out of nothing. That seems to be reserved for God.

So our imagination must come from "images" – pictures in our mind that get manipulated or changed to create an alternative world. What a powerful resource! While kids can transform a room full of toys, adults can transform a room full of people called a congregation. And youth leaders can transform a youth room into an environment for encountering Jesus.

Our continual tension rests in the way we communicate images in our ministries. Do we use our imaginations, running the risk of making things so messy that the true image is distorted? Or do we keep things so neat and so safe, that the true image seems dull, lifeless, and irrelevant? We try so hard to make our ministry relevant to our students. And we often end up shaping our church programs according to styles, preferences, or traditions rather than upon sound, biblical images communicated to us through the Scriptures.

Over the next few issues we're going to explore four biblical images of the church, as developed by Robert Webber in his book Ancient-Future Faith. Webber quotes Paul Minear who describes these four dominant images of the church from the New Testament – The body of Christ; The people of God; The new creation; The fellowship of faith.

Each image speaks to the theology of the church as the presence of Christ in the world. Meaning, the church is the community of God's presence. Let's take a few moments and reflect on the image of the Church as the Body of Christ.

Paul writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ (1 Corinthians 12.12). Webber says, "We would have expected Paul to say 'so it is with the church'." But it seems Paul's emphasis is neither on the body nor on unity for unity's sake. His emphasis is Christ. Christ defines us. We do not define ourselves.

Our connection in our student ministries does not lie primarily in the beliefs we share. Instead, it's that we are unmistakably unified with Christ. Both our identities as individuals and together as youth ministries are wrapped up in Christ (Gal 2.20).

Suddenly Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12.27, "You are the body of Christ", take on new meaning. Might this be more than a metaphor of unity? Might this actually mean that we, Christ's "body," are *actually* Christ's physical presence in the world today? Could it be that the incarnation of God continues through us, the Body of Christ. We, "Christ's presence," are called to call people to see Jesus through our very tangible communities.

Think about how this image of the "body of Christ" brings light to...

- Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them (Mt 18.20)

- He who receives you, receives me (Mt 10.40)
- As you did to the least of these... you did to me (Mt 25.40)
- Saul, Saul... why do you persecute me? (Acts 9.4)
- The church is the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph 1.22b-23)

Christ, now defines you and me...together. Think of the implications for student ministry! To be ministers and students who are actually part of the community of God's presence is to see...

- Our identities in what God declares us to be as his ongoing physical presence wherever we are, whatever we do
- Our holy callings and career choices discovered best within the body of which we are part
- Our everyday lives as part of God's redemptive plan for the world, established by Christ and continued by Him
- Our unity wherein we welcome elements of diversity as we see the unifying factor of the church is our standing in Christ, not in our preferences. Might unity even look like Christians saying, "We're different and we celebrate that."

All this must be expressed beyond organizational flow charts and ministry initiatives and must flow through a body, being the body, expressing bodily characteristics.

As Jesus said to his disciples at the last supper "This is my body." May these same words "this is my body" ring in our ears each time we meet for small group and youth group. May God's image of the church continue to shape our identity, focus our imagination, and elevate a true picture of His church.