



“Stop calling them that!”

The renowned sociologist begged us to *stop* throwing “student” in front of ministries. He explained that the dropout rate is high, and such a nomenclature eliminates many from finding a place in the church. But almost everyone read his remarks either with the shrugged shoulders of, *I don’t get it* or the rolling eyes of, *Come on, loosen up, I think you’re drunk on statistical tables*, feeling his comments as some kind of exhausting academic version of political correctness.

It’s now been nearly four years since Christian Smith, the sociological saint of youth ministry, made his plea, pushing us hard to rid ourselves of the label *students*.¹ I *completely* agree with Smith’s push; we in youth ministry should absolutely drop the use of *student*. But why did the words of Smith, who is so well respected and trusted, go in one ear and out the other of youth workers?

What Dropouts?

Smith’s remarks were short, only a few paragraphs in a 2008 piece in *Youth Worker Journal*. The point of the piece was to stir things up, to force youth ministry people to look at the use of this title that has become so *en vogue* in the youth ministry world.

The majority of the article justifies why we needed to stop with the student talk because of cultural and societal biases that hinge on the word *student*. Smith, with empirical research studies at hand, uses half the article’s paragraphs to remind youth workers that not all youth are students; not all teenagers make it through high school. He explains that if you hear that the student ministry meets in the basement, and you’re now 17 but not a student, you figure, Smith imagines, that the ministry and church really have nothing for you.

But his point was mostly lost on youth ministers because it just didn’t connect with most of our worlds. Maybe shamefully, we could think of few young people who had dropped out of school in our student ministries. The kids in our churches were in danger in many others ways, we figured, but not of dropping out of school.

Such thoughts point to two things that kept Smith’s important plea from connecting. One, it reveals that kids who do drop out of high school and fall through the educational cracks often also tumble through the church’s cracks as well. These kids may have been around in fifth, sixth or even seventh grade, but by the time they’re ready to stop going to school, they’ve long stopped coming to our student ministries. This made Smith’s point inconsequential; after all, how can the word *student* deter their participation, when it was over years earlier?

The comeback to this reality is an important one, stemming from the missional heart of youth ministry itself. There are big theological questions to ask, like why such so-called *at-risk* fifth, sixth and seventh graders could disappear. But this alone leads us into the second issue that Smith’s comments reveal, which is even more foundational.

The second issue is that youth ministry has historically and functionally been a middle-class phenomenon in America. Where dropout rates are at their highest, youth ministry (for the most part) is not. In other words, in low-income and urban centers, church-based youth programs tend not to exist. The cohort-based ministry programs that so love to use the word *student* tend to be in upper-middle-class white neighborhoods, where the dropout rate is much lower.

Add to this our first phenomenon—kids tend to drop out of church well before they drop out of school—and it is no wonder youth ministers read Smith’s comments funny, not understanding why it is a problem to use *student*. After all, most youth ministries have high school students who live in the demographical sweet spot that reveals they will not only be students for the next few years but for many more years after that, as they go to college and graduate school, as cultural middle-class people do.

Our deafness to Smith’s comments potentially revealed the cultural bias of youth ministry and particularly of those who have rebranded youth ministry as student ministry.

Away from Persons

Smith spends nearly his entire article using the dropout case as the teeth of the garbage disposal to grind and flush *student* from our ministerial vocabulary. But these teeth are dulled by our hard cultural bias, failing to make a mark. In the paragraph before baring the teeth of the dropout case, Smith makes a short, deeply philosophical and theological assertion that was lost on most readers. Smith asks why we would transition to an institutionally based functional label, defining these people, in other words, by the things they do.

Smith signals here that the use of *student* isn't neutral but comes with a particular (and, at times, hidden) definition of what young people are. Smith is making both an anthropological and a theological statement. He leads into the very question, *What is a person?* He gives clues that the personhood of young people cannot be defined in functional, institutionally based labels; that there is something deeper and more spiritual about personhood than just the functions we do. And I couldn't agree more.

So what Smith started in that short article, I'd like to continue, calling us in youth ministry to stop using *student*, not because of the dropout rate (though that is important) but because *student* may stand in opposition to the Christian tradition's definition of personhood. Being a student isn't bad. I loved being a student. But when it comes to ministry, when it comes to the ministerial action of the gospel, it is never done toward students but toward persons. And the label *student* fails to articulate *who* young people are at the core anthropological level of our theological commitment.

You Are Your Interest

"What is a Person?" was one of the panel discussions that surrounded the theology track at the National Youth Workers Convention. It was a question many of us struggled to make concrete, tripping over ourselves as we tried to get some handles on what it means to be a person. We often went to developmental or social theories for help, keeping us from connecting our very understanding of personhood with our theological perspective. This frequently led us into a certain unclear hazard of assuming persons and individuals are the same thing, but this isn't the case.

So, the first thing we can say is that being a person stands in *opposition* to being an individual. The words *individual* and *person* seem synonymous, but they are worlds apart. Individualism makes the assertion that people are free agents and therefore should be unbound to meet the interests they desire. They should be free to meet whatever goals they are interested in. To be human is to be free from all constraints to seek your interest.

An individual, then, is someone who seeks a goal, like property or happiness, and should be free to attain such an interest. People are competing individuals after their own interests. Everyone, individualism asserts, is ultimately out for their own self-interest, making competition the driving force of human action. We therefore need laws and other checks and balances to keep the competition level. This is why capitalism works so much better in Western, individualistic societies.

Boiled down to its anthropological foundational elements, individualism is the assertion that the human being is his or her interest. You are what you are interested in. This makes the human being ultimately pushed by his or her desire; what you are interested in, what you desire for yourself, sets the terms for who you are. Every commercial, selling whatever it is selling, tells us this much.

This, then, makes your own individual *wants* the driving engine of your action; you do things to meet your interests, to get what you want. Individualism says that your functions, the things you do, reveal to others who you are. You're a boss because you manage, a professor because you grade papers, a lawyer because you litigate and a student because you take tests. You do these functions to meet an interest. I define you by your functions because your functions, supposedly, reveal your interest, and your interest is, in the end, who you are.

In light of your functions I can decide, in this competitive environment, whether you are my friend or my foe. But you're only my friend, individualism says, if you are an asset to me meeting my own individual interest. If you stand in the way, then you're just an object I need to climb over. But even if you are deemed a friend, in the shadow of individualism, you're still an object but a helpful object I appreciate because you assist me in getting what I want.

Individualism, in the end, kills relationship because it does not see the human being as bound to others in mutuality and love. Individualism sees all your interactions as the playing field of some competitive game. Others become objects because I only know and engage them as functions; my coworker and a broom are essentially the same; they both support or assist me in getting what I want.

This, I think, is Smith's worry—that if you call young people students, you run the danger of defining them as their functions, taking in the ideology of individualism that assumes they are their wants, making ministry play out on the field of competition. Ministry to student then becomes the competitive game of trying to convert their interests, potentially judging young people as objects that either sup-

port your own interests (to have a big youth group, to be a successful youth worker) or oppose them.

The ultimate problem is that when young people are objects, there is no possibility for relationship. You possess and control objects, but you encounter and meet persons. An object can be defined and possessed. A person is infinitely more than any functional definition. To go with *student* in student ministry is to wade into the murky waters of individualism.

We Are Our Relationships

The Christian tradition may oppose the individualist foundation that *student* rests on. When it comes to defining the human being, the Christian tradition has claimed that to be human is to be a person. And to be a person is to *be* your relationships. It is not in instrumental functionalism that you *are* but in the relationships in which you are bound. We *are* in and through relationships of sharing love.

In the second creation account, Adam is asked to name the animals for the purpose of finding another, of being in a needed relationship. But as the animals are brought to him, they are named but fail to qualify as partners. So God, in utter horror, brings a judgment, claiming boldly, “It is not good for the adam to be alone.” This judgment is essential to Hebrew anthropology; there is no humanity without relationship. Adam cannot *be* without others who give him his personhood. At this point in the text Adam is not even called male, just generically the *adam*, the “earth creature” (from the earth, *adamah*). The adam has no personhood without a relationship and so cannot *be*, and is put to death, only to be resurrected, missing a rib, to hear another who calls him by name. This other is *she*, making him a *he*. He is no longer generic but particular; he is a unique person, and he is his relationship.

The Christian tradition follows this Hebrew anthropology. The Christian commitment is that personhood is bound in relationship. In other words, if individualism says that people are their interest, then Christianity and its commitment to personhood claims that people are their relationships. The Patristic fathers claimed that the Trinity was made up of three persons who share one *homoousian* (substance or essence), that these *three* are so deeply their relationship that they are *one*. These three share so deeply in each other’s person that they *are* in and through the others, indwelling each other (*perichoresis*). The Son is the eternal Son, begotten but not made because the Son is the relationship with the Father. Athanasius reminds us that there is never a time that this relationship of Father to Son was not. The Trinity then is dynamically constituted in relationship. The Trinity

is, the Cappadocians remind us, the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is such a relationship, and we are made in this image.

And this essential biblical language of Father and Son shows the depth of this perspective. We are our relationships because our most intimate and significant definition of ourselves like father, son, brother, sister, daughter and mother all substantively define us, but they are given to us as the gift of relationship. You can only be father because there is son and son because there is father. So Christianity more fundamentally defines people not as their interests and functions but as their relationships; relationships of love and mutuality give us our personhood.

For Patristic fathers, because God is the eternal relationship of Father, Son and Spirit all sharing in one *homoousian*, and because Jesus is the bearer of a hypostatic union, being *the* single person who possesses two natures (divine and human), and we are made in his image, then we too are persons who are our relationships. The early church addressed each other in these relational names of brother and sister, father and mother because its very anthropology was constructed off its larger theology of personhood.

And this is the very problem with calling young people in our churches *students*. It succumbs to individualism and its defining functionality of institutions and forgets that we are fundamentally persons who are our relationships. This is a central Christian confession to forget; it is not only embedded in anthropology but also in conceptions of Trinity and Christology.

So What Should We Call Them?

Whatever we call them, it should bear the fundamental relational depth of our confession of who they are and how they are connected to who God is with and for them. Whatever we call them, it should signal that they are their relationships. This is why, as unappealing as it is, the best name for those we serve in ministry might be *children*. It reminds us that, at their core, these young people are children bound in the relationships that make them. They are children connected to moms and dads who are either present or absent, children who put demands on us to see our ministry as first and foremost to uphold their needy personhoods. We are to protect and honor them over all the functional interest seeking of the world.

Ministry is often at its deepest when it bears, contemplates and participates in the relationships that *are* a young person. Standing with them as their parents divorce or helping moth-

ers understand why their daughters refuse to be confirmed, seeing young people as persons, as children, helps us witness the complicated beauty of their humanity.

It may be helpful for youth ministry not only to jettison the use of *student* but also to be open to returning (at least in thought and spirit) to understanding the teenager as a person who is the relationship with mom and dad, who is finding new, stressful ways to be in new relationships, who is seeing the day before her where she will also and maybe more fully define herself as friend, aunt, wife and even mother. These distinctions may be down the road, but she is moving toward them. And the church should remind her that they are more fundamental and beautiful than labels like CEO, skinny or All American; and that it's most fundamental that she is her relationship as the one whom Jesus calls friend, whom Jesus leads deeply in the love of his Father.

To see her as a person is to see ministry not as a competition of winning her interest but as the blessing of sharing in her life by being in a relationship that is her, as it is us. Ministry then is freed from functionality and moves to the beautiful location of shared humanity. Christian Smith is right; let's stop all this student talk.

1. Christian Smith. 2008. "Let's Stop 'Student' Talk in Youth Ministry." *Youth Worker Journal*. November/December. p. 80.

Andrew Root is the Olson Baalson associate professor of youth and family ministry at Luther Seminary. He is the author of *The Theological Journey Through Youth Ministry* series, of which the first two books, *Taking Theology to Youth Ministry* and *Taking the Cross to Youth Ministry* (both Zondervan 2012), are now available. Themes from this article can be found in a forthcoming book called *The Relational Pastor: Sharing in Christ by Sharing in Each Other* (IVP 2013).



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