

## Prophesying in the Valley of Dry Bones

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life.

Then you will know that I am the LORD.'" Ezekiel 37:1-6



As you watch the groups of young people you pass in the street, as you scan their faces in the malls and movie theatres, as you read about the "younger generation" in magazines and newspapers, don't you sometimes identify with Ezekiel? Don't you see a valley full of bones – teenagers grasping after things they think will bring them pleasure, acceptance and significance, while they are dead inside? There are so many of them, and there are so few of us, so few people who love them and want to see them alive with the breath of God. And they are so very dry, so very skeptical of anything organized religion has to offer them, so resistant to any group who claims to have the Truth with a capital "T".

At ParaLideres.org we believe that God is calling individuals like you all over Latin America to "prophesy to these bones" and to look eagerly for what God will do with this generation: "So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army." Ezekiel 37:10.

We believe that the prophecy that will reach this generation will be like Ezekiel's vision: a story made up of unforgettable, vivid images. This story needs to draw people in so that their interest in it carries them past the barriers that keep their hearts cut off from God. And it needs to effectively communicate the reality of their need for salvation and the forgiveness and unconditional love God offers that make a relationship with him possible.

To this end we are announcing "The Parable Competition" to which you may submit original stories that express the truths found in the Parable of the Prodigal Son in a way that impacts the hearts of youth. Through this contest we hope to provide you with two opportunities:

- 1) The opportunity for you to reflect on the current state of youth culture, including the effects of postmodernism, and the role and function of the church.
- 2) The opportunity for you to discover principles and develop suitable tools for impacting the hearts of young people in the valley where God has placed you.

### ***The current state of youth***

Note: The purpose of this section is to provide a general overview of youth culture as found in most large cities throughout the world. This is not a photograph but an impressionistic painting of their spiritual landscape.

..."They say, 'our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'" Ezekiel 37:11

### ***“Our bones are dried up”***

Scripture is clear that anyone who is separated from God is spiritually dead, even though they look alive. Hollywood has given us a great picture of this in the movie “The Legend Of The Black Pearl” in which a curse has changed a group of pirates into “living dead.” When people look at them during the day, they see ordinary human beings. But moonlight shows them for what they really are, walking, talking skeletons. Teenagers look and feel alive but if they have not been made alive by the “breath of God”, when the light of His Word shines on them they are revealed to be walking, talking skeletons. And don’t forget: these skeletons can be found both inside and outside of the institutional church.

Of course this is true for all people in all generations, but it is a good starting place for our analysis of today’s teenagers because we must never lose sight of the fact that outside of Christ they are spiritually dead. This is their defining characteristic and their greatest need is to be brought to life.

### ***“Our hope is gone”***

The people of God, also called “the church”, are the prophets God sends into the valley of dry bones. Although God is the bone’s hope, we are the channels he uses to speak to them. But, more and more, we are speaking a language that doesn’t communicate to them while we require them to join a religious organization that doesn’t interest them. So we cut them off from their hope.

What do you think when you hear that someone had a fever of 101 degrees Fahrenheit? What would you wear if it were 30 degrees Fahrenheit outside? If all your life you have thought in terms of Celsius, you have only a vague answer to these questions. You can hear and understand the words, but they communicate very little to you. In the same way, it’s not that today’s youth can’t understand the words we say, the problem is that at best our words don’t mean anything to them, they don’t communicate with them at a heart level, and at worst they drive them away.

### ***“We are cut off/lost”***

Kids today have more information than any generation in history. But although they may know more facts than their ancestors did, they have lost much of the wisdom that guided previous generations. The constant bombardment of them by marketing and the media and their frequent exposure to contradicting opinions by “experts” make them skeptical about any claims that something is true. This skepticism about Truth Claims is strengthened by a culture that emphasizes every person’s ability to decide for him or herself what is right and wrong and that ridicules any group or person who claims to know what is right for everyone.

So today’s youth are standing at an intersection of innumerable choices about how they will live and what they will believe that fan out like the spokes of a wheel, but they don’t have any objective criteria to help them choose one path over another.



## ***The role and function of the people and institution we call “church”***

God offers life, hope and guidance to today’s youth and he has given his people, his body the church, the responsibility to communicate this to them. Having analyzed the condition of these youth, we also need to seriously consider the condition of God’s people, and the institution we have become, that should be reaching them and into which we hope to draw them. There are three images which will help us consider the role and function of the church: a monument, a weathervane, and a compass.



### ***A Monument***

Monuments are built by individuals who believe that particular events or people are so important that they should never be forgotten. Monuments are visited by people who want to enrich their lives, both in the present and in the future, by learning from the past.

Think about how many monuments, statues or commemorative plaques you have seen in your life. Now consider the impact they have had on you. Lots of people obviously think that monuments are important – our cities are full of them — but few of us have had our lives impacted by them in any way. Why?

Monuments are fixed and immovable, both physically and in their relationship to the culture. A monument exists in one and only one place. We have to go where it is, accommodate ourselves to it. And we have to work to understand them before they are of any use to us. Because they honor something that happened or someone who lived in the past, we have to know what or who they are talking about and understand what was going on in the world then that made that act or person significant before we can glean anything useful from it for our life. If we do have a positive experience with a monument, it is usually either because that person or event has been significant in our life or because someone, a teacher, tour guide, etc, made it come alive to us.

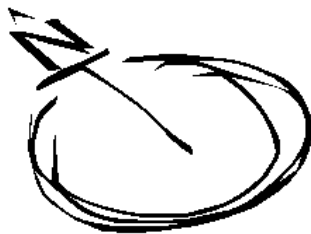
I hope the parallel with the institutional church is apparent, as are the reasons why, when the church functions as a monument, it is doomed to lose significance in the lives of people who are culturally removed from the church's Judeo-Christian culture.



### ***A Weathervane***

There are congregations who perceive the weaknesses inherent in the monument model and try to correct them by being more in touch with the culture around them. Instead of always pointing to the past, they are guided by every wind of cultural change that blows by, from the style of the music they play, to the way the pastor dresses, to the topics he or she teaches about. Instead of being monuments, they become weathervanes. They have changed from a group who applies the Word of God to people's lives into a group who allows the culture to dictate what they believe. Because they

abandon the transcendent for the latest trend they lose significance in the lives of people; they have nothing of lasting value to say to them.



### ***A Compass***

You may not own a compass, you may never have used a compass, but you know what a compass does – it points north. A compass is simple; its defining characteristic is a needle that always points to the earth's magnetic north pole. The purpose of the church, specified by its founder Jesus, is very simple – “Go and make disciples of all nations.” In other words, point people to God.

One of the strengths of a compass is that, unlike a monument, it is not fixed to any one place or culture. It is portable and can be used in any situation. The teenagers around us are lost; they don't know which path, of the many facing them, leads to abundant life. They need a compass. When the church meets youth where they are and points them to God, we have transcendent significance for them.

Meditating on the analogy of the compass can provide us with some helpful insights for the church. Surely people who have experience using a compass can teach us a lot from this analogy, but our treatment here will be quite basic. The needle of a compass is made out of a magnet or something that has been given magnetic properties. The magnetic properties of the needle are what make it point north

and give the compass its value. There are lots of religions and lots of people who say they point to God, while all pointing in different directions. God's written revelation to humanity, found in the Bible, is the "magnet" that always points to the true North—God. Only when what the church says and does is "magnetized" by God's Word can we know that we are accurately pointing to the Living God who IS.

In a compass the magnetic needle balances on a point that allows it to turn freely so it can constantly be facing North. If this pivot point has friction that impedes the free movement of the needle, the usefulness of the compass is compromised. In the same way, the church has to recognize that our bias, our theological, cultural, and personal preferences and opinions, can significantly hinder our usefulness as a compass.

People who have used a compass will tell you that, although a compass alone can be a lifesaver, you have the best chance of arriving at your destination by the most secure and direct route when you use a compass together with a map of the area. Most of the maps we commonly use show us the specific road to take to reach our destination. But there are also maps of areas without roads. Instead of showing us how to get somewhere, these maps show what exists in the area we plan to enter, where there are high mountains or wide rivers that will affect our journey. With the proper use of a compass in conjunction with a map of the area, a traveler can navigate safely and accurately in terrain without roads or trails.

Effective ministry with youth who are shaped by Post-Modern culture has no roads; there are no ready-made formulas you can adopt with hopes of great success. Prophets who set out into this valley now are trailblazers. But there have been scouts before us. There are thinkers and researchers, both secular and Christian, who have been studying the cultural shifts and can help us understand this new landscape. As you study cultural trends, don't be daunted if the term "postmodernism." If you work with teenagers, you will recognize the profile even though you might not be able to explain the philosophy.

## ***Principles for impacting the hearts of today's youth***

Now that we have considered, however briefly, the current state of the youth culture and the role and function of the church, we are going to consider some principles for impacting the hearts of the young people in the valley where God has placed you. These principles consist of two shifts in our way of communicating with youth in order to better reach their hearts: a shift from wielding the "Sword of Absolute Truth" to guiding youth to "God's Eternal Wisdom" and a shift from impacting the mind to impacting the whole person.



As we have said, there is no existing road map for Post-Modern youth ministry. Because we are all just entering this uncharted territory, these principles are based more on intuition, than on their "proven effectiveness." But we always need to be reminded that just because something "works" in one context is certainly no guarantee that it will be effective somewhere else. You must explore the valley God has placed you in, and be attentive to God's leading about what He wants to happen in your life and in theirs.

### ***"I guide you in the way of wisdom" [Prov. 4:11]***

One of the strongest criticisms of Post-Modernism is that it rejects the belief in absolute, or objective truth. There is no doubt that the Word of God contains truths that are completely true, not because we think they are but because they are an accurate description of reality. Because of this, we should not let the hostile environment of the world around us intimidate us away from proclaiming what God has revealed to humanity. However, we need to be wise, humble, and sensitive in how we approach this topic.

Right now the primary way the church addresses the prevalence of relativity in the culture is by trying to prove that there is such a thing as absolute Truth, in a rational and "Modern" way, using "propositions" or statements of fact. This approach still has value, especially when dealing with people who still think in Modern categories. But it can be useless, even counterproductive, when dealing with someone who is more convinced by personal experience than by intellectual reasoning (a Post-Modern characteristic).

We need to change our approach. Not just because rational, propositional arguments don't convince them, but also because (don't you sense it in the very word "argument"?) we are communicating the wrong thing to them even if we "win" the argument. To the Post-Modern teenager your "winning" smacks of superiority and arrogance. Trying to prove we're right brings division and creates feelings of rejection in those who are "proven wrong." None of these by-products of a confrontation create an accurate picture of the God of the Bible.

The words "absolute truth" sound like a sword, ready to cut down any lies, ready to fight for its superiority. A biblical shift is to change our focus from "truth" expressed in statements of "fact" to "wisdom" expressed in stories, proverbs or parables. The word "wisdom" is actually more prevalent in the Bible than "truth": "Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding." (Proverbs 4:7).

If to a Post-Modern generation "truth" sounds like a sword in the hands of the Crusaders, "wisdom" sounds like a Chinese grandfather with a long beard and flowing robes inviting them in for tea. Factual truth is intellectual; it is something the mind knows. Wisdom is holistic; it affects how we live all of our life, especially the choices we make and how we relate to others. Wisdom is also experiential. Someone can guide us towards the path of wisdom but we become wise only as a result of how we live, not because of what we know. Wisdom is inclusive and global, not exclusive and Western, because it encompasses what wise people have always known no matter what the age or culture. Wisdom is relational. It is both learned and practiced in the context of relationships.

Each of these characteristics of wisdom—holistic, experiential, inclusive, global, and relational—is something valued by Post-Modern culture. Incidentally each one is also important to God. So when we communicate these values to youth, we are giving them an accurate picture of what Christianity should look like.

### ***Love the Lord your God with all your heart***

One of the reasons the Post-Modern world presents the church with so many challenges is that in some very important areas we have let ourselves become more "Modern" than Biblical. A culture that values the spiritual, the holistic and the relational has much common ground with Christianity. But during the Modern era the church bought into the cultural focus on reason and science so much that we have become intrinsically tied to them. We need to hear Jesus warning to the Pharisees, "You should have practiced the former without neglecting the latter" Matthew 23:23.



Jesus told us clearly what God wants from his people, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment" (Matthew 22:38). Our goal should be to help youth, both inside and outside of the institutional church, move beyond mere intellectual assent to a holistic life, lived entirely for Christ. The shift from impacting the mind to impacting the whole person is not a trend designed to pander to Post-Modern youth; it is what God has always wanted. The Great Commandment provides us with a clue to the elements that need to be involved if we want to impact the whole person: the heart, the soul, and the mind.

We cannot ignore the importance of the mind, it is a valuable part of our spiritual transformation, as Paul says in Romans 12:2b: "be transformed by the renewing of your mind." But neither can we ignore the importance of the heart and the soul (the whole person). In fact the passage from the Torah that Jesus is quoting, Deuteronomy 6:5, doesn't even mention the mind.

The shift away from wielding the "sword of factual Truth" to guiding youth to "God's eternal holistic Wisdom" is a first step in moving from impacting only the mind to impacting the whole person, but we must go much further. Most of the teaching and communication in church centers on "propositional truth",

ideas communicated through statements of “fact.” In our Modern emphasis on word-centered, propositional or fact-based, communication we have forgotten that there are many other ways to communicate and teach. All we have to do is glance through the Bible to see the various methods used by a perfect communicator as He strives to impact the hearts and lives of his people. Notice how He uses all of the 5 senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.

For a vivid example of just how experiential God’s teaching to the Israelites was, just look at the offerings described in Leviticus chapters 1-7. The worshipers were to lay their hands on the animal before it was killed. They heard the animals as they were being killed and saw the animal’s blood be sprinkled on the altar. They smelled the burning flesh as the animal was offered to God. In some cases they even got to eat some of the meat. And keep in mind that these sacrifices were performed on a regular basis, some of them every single day, not just once a week! Now compare this teaching with a modern way to communicate the same idea from the “Four Spiritual Laws”: “Man is sinful and separated from God”. The idea being expressed is the same, but can’t you see how the propositional statement reaches the mind while the sacrificial system impacts the whole person?

In 1983 Howard Gardner, a professor at Harvard University, published a groundbreaking book containing the “theory of multiple intelligences”: all human beings possess not just a single intelligence, but rather a set of varied types of intelligences which are independent from each other. The implications of this are that humans have eight different pathways to learning. While this might be relatively new in educational circles, God has been teaching his people using all of these “intelligences” through history. Here is a list of the “Eight Intelligences” and Biblical examples of their use in teaching:

1. Linguistic (the whole Bible; Matthew 5-7)
2. Logical/mathematical (Ezekiel 40-48)
3. Visual/spatial (the world around us; Romans 1:19-20)
4. Bodily/kinesthetic (our personal experience; Matthew 14:25-33)
5. Musical/rhythmic (Deuteronomy 31:19-22)
6. Naturalist (Juan 15:1-8)
7. Interpersonal (Deuteronomy 6:7; Colossians 3:16)
8. Intrapersonal (Joshua 1:8)

“Facts” and beliefs expressed as propositional statements have their value, but they also have their limitations. They engage our minds and can leave our emotions and our wills untouched. So although this new Post-Modern cultural landscape presents the church with new challenges, it also gives us a chance to recapture things we have lost during the reign of Modernity: the importance of loving God with all of our heart and all of our life.

### ***A prophecy to speak to the bones***



Hopefully you have enjoyed what you have read up to this point and have been inspired to continue learning and growing in these areas. But you may still be wondering what this all has to do with a competition. A great challenge facing the church is how we can communicate the good news of salvation to the Post-Modern world, not as ideas, theories, or propositions, but in a way that impacts their hearts. As we have said, we believe that the prophecy by which this generation will be reached will be like Ezekiel’s vision: a story made up of unforgettable, vivid images. This story needs to be meaningful to today’s youth. It need to draw them in so

that their interest in it carries them past the barriers that keep their hearts cut off from God. And it needs to effectively communicate the reality of their need for salvation and the forgiveness and unconditional love God offers that make a relationship with him possible.

Stories, or narrative, reach the heart in a way that no propositional statement can. John Eldridge, author of "The Sacred Romance", explains the difference in impact between stories (narrative) and fact statements (proposition):

...proposition is helpful...for certain things...but proposition fails when it comes to the weightier things in life....Facts stay lodged in the mind, for the most part. They don't speak at the level we need to hear. Proposition speaks to the mind, but when you tell a story, you speak to the heart....And that's why when Jesus comes to town, he speaks in a way that will get past all our intellectual defenses and disarm our hearts. (Waking the Dead, p. 23, 24)

C.S. Lewis, author of the wonderful fantasy stories "The Chronicles of Narnia" and good friend of J.R.R. Tolkien, author of "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy, rejected the popular idea that stories are only for children. In his essay titled "On Stories", he explains that good stories can help us understand reality in some cases better than statements of fact, "A story does what no theorem can quite do. It may not be "like real life" in the superficial sense: but it sets before us an image of what reality may well be like at some more central region." (C.S. Lewis on Stories, p. 15)

We believe that the Parable of the Prodigal Son is just such a story, one that helps us understand our sinfulness (whether our sins are those of the younger or the elder brother) and God's love in a deeper way than any proposition ever could. Your challenge is to blow the dust off this parable, make it fresh and meaningful to today's teenagers, without losing any of its eternal wisdom so that youth today may come to life and know that the God of the Bible is the LORD.

## ***A Next Step***

You don't have to write an award-winning story for you and your group to benefit from this competition.

First, we hope that these meditations on youth culture, the church and a broader perspective of the methods and goals of our teaching, have been valuable for you.

Second, we believe that meditation of the parable of the prodigal son will both greatly enrich your relationship with God and your ability to communicate the good news of salvation to others. Here are some practical steps you can take to help both you and your youth group interact with the parable. If these activities help get your creative juices flowing and inspire you to write a fabulous story...Wonderful!

### ***1. Engage personally with the story by reading it and then answering the following questions.***

- How did you become aware of your sinfulness?
- What woke you up to your need for God?
- How did you return to God?
- How did He receive you?

### ***2. Understand how this parable communicates to the young people around you.***

Talk with a Christian teenager who did not grow up in the church (preferably someone who fits the Post-Modern profile) to find out how they became aware of their sin and their need for salvation. It might be helpful to ask them the questions from suggestion #1. Listen carefully to not just the ideas they express, but pay attention to how they express themselves, their words, emotions, etcetera.

### ***3. Lead a participatory Bible study with your youth group based on this parable.***

Before a the meeting, make a list of the cast of characters from the story, including creative touches like the younger son's party friends and the pigs, and prepare a version of the story that is only slightly modified from the original but includes all of the characters you have added.

Begin the Bible study portion of your meeting by assigning the roles to students. (If your group is small you might make sure they all participate.) Then read the script you have prepared while the students act out their role when they are mentioned (make sure you give them time to act a bit.) After the sketch, read and study the parable with them.

**4. Lead a multi-media Bible study with your youth group based on this parable.**

Create and implement a study with your youth group in which you first watch parts, or all, of a movie that powerfully communicates the message of forgiveness and then read the parable of the prodigal son and discuss what they have seen and heard.

Two possible movie clips the part of "The Mission" where the Guarani Indian shows his forgiveness of Mendoza by cutting off the burden he has been carrying and in "Les Miserables" when the priest lets Jean Valjean keep the silver candlesticks he has stolen. If you have time to watch a whole movie, use "Les Miserables" because it also includes the "elder brother" element of the parable.

## ***Helps***

The series of articles by Felix Ortiz, "Working With Adolescents In A Postmodern Society" is a helpful place to begin learning about the challenges to the church from this cultural change.

For further study on the role and function of the church, work through our study: Monument, Weathervane or Compass.

The Active Bible Study Series can help you reach the hearts of your youth as they make use of the eight intelligences and are frequently based on a Biblical narrative.