

Becoming a NEW TESTAMENT Leader

**Biblical Reflections  
for Training Youth Ministry Leaders**

**Dan McGill**

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To my wife, Lawana, and my children, Megan and Brendan, the invisible foundations of my ministry

To Barb and Rick Beaver, Bob and Connie Borchardt, Anne Brost, Chris and Sue Cameron, Rosa Cisneros, Sarah and Mike Clear, John Costanzo, Adam Czaplinski, Amber Dennison Jones, Rosemary Engard, Natalia Forrest-Smith, Mary Glenn, Mary Ann and Van Graham, Paul Gray, Deniese and Brian Kohles, Karen and Rich Leivad, Jay and Lalie McCormack, Judy Mikesell, Martin and Therese Moran, Jim Partsch, Angela Peña Rubalcaba, Mary Lou and Ron Rish, Christy and Alvin Rubalcaba, Teri and Jim Shea, Rochelle Simpleman-Arviso, Bev and Jerry Vig, and the hundreds of other youth leaders who worked alongside me as brothers and sisters in service of the Gospel

With appreciation for Brian Singer-Towns and the commitment of Saint Mary's Press to Catholic youth ministry

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# Introduction

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**No book is more important** to Christians than the Bible. Yet even in the most scripturally based churches, youth leaders of all kinds feel inadequate in their understanding of its teachings. *Becoming a New Testament Leader* helps remedy this problem in a unique way. It connects youth leaders' need to know the New Testament of the Bible with their need to perfect their ministry skills. The reflections in this book speak to real issues that youth leaders face, and at the same time they give an overview of the main themes of the New Testament.

The New Testament is the ideal place to start in developing a ministerial mindset and ministry skills. Almost every incident in the Gospels shows Jesus teaching his disciples how to minister to others and setting the standard by his own actions. Almost every chapter in the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles shows these same disciples struggling to put these principles of ministry into practice. To study the New Testament is a fundamental way to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. The Christian life is a call to holiness, and the New Testament shows a path to holiness that both leaders and youth can imitate. Paraphrasing Saint Jerome, to become familiar with the New Testament is to become familiar with Christ.

This book reflects what I have learned in twenty years of training youth leaders for ministry. It is intended to be used by veteran youth leaders as well as rookies. Youth ministers, teachers, pastors, education directors, counselors, and others will also benefit from its approach, which is focused on every Christian's call to conversion as a foundation for ministry. Due to the wide audience, the generic term *youth*

*ministry leader* is used to represent all Christians working with youth.

## How to Use These Reflections

This book can be used for individual reading and reflection. A single reflection can be read and meditated on in ten or fifteen minutes. Further, Saint Mary's Press gives the purchaser of this book the rights to photocopy the reflections for use in the training and formation of parish or school volunteers and teachers. (Please remember, though, that you may only photocopy these pages for use in your parish or school.) Listed below are some ways in which the reflections could be used by coordinators of youth ministry (CYMs), directors of religious education (DREs), or principals. Feel free to adapt and use this book as you like.

- Use a reflection for a twenty-minute discussion to start a weekly or monthly planning meeting. This approach offers youth ministry leaders sustained study and reflection on the books of the New Testament.
- Tie together several reflections to create a workshop or a leader retreat.
- Use a specific reflection to provide special training on an issue that the young people or leaders in your group are struggling with. Scan the table of contents to find topics of interest.
- After your regularly held youth group meetings or classes, send a reflection home with the youth ministry leaders who were present. Encourage them to use it for their own individual reflection and growth.

The reflections are organized to be simple, practical, and effective. Each book of the New

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# Introduction

Testament has one to three reflections. Each reflection begins with a focusing Scripture passage. In order to focus on the reflection theme, the passages were sometimes selectively edited, but you or others who use each reflection are encouraged to read all the Scripture passages in their original context. Each one is followed by a simple presentation on a theme in that Bible book. The commentary is followed by several reflection questions to help you apply the theme to your ministry with youth. The commentary and reflection questions focus on the practical, to help you answer the question, “How can I seek my own conversion and better serve youth using the wisdom of the New Testament?”

If you want to share the reflections with a group, here is a simple process you can use:

- Begin with prayer, either something spontaneous or a prayer on the reflection’s theme that you’ve written or chosen.
- Have someone read aloud the Scripture passage at the beginning of the reflection.
- Have someone else read the reflection out loud.
- Give everyone three minutes to read the reflection questions and to select one or two that they would like to respond to. Then have each person share his or her answer to the question that was of greatest interest to him or her. If time remains, the participants could each share their answer to the question of second greatest interest to them.
- End with prayer, listening to Christ’s voice and asking for the Holy Spirit’s guidance to put into practice what you and the participants have learned.

Each lesson has more than enough questions to begin a healthy discussion of its themes. Youth leaders are encouraged to read all the questions before answering them, and to focus *only* on the questions that are of most interest to them. Similar questions sometimes appear in various lessons because the New Testament turns again and again to the major themes of the Gospels and the conversion of our life in Christ. Feel free to skip or ignore questions that do not seem helpful, but be cautious of avoiding questions simply because they raise difficult issues. Often the greatest growth happens with the questions that disturb us.

This book was developed out of Roman Catholic youth ministry and school experience, and it makes assumptions based on this point of view. However, almost all the themes addressed are of interest to any Christian group. I’ve gained tremendous insights from youth leaders of other Christian traditions and would be most pleased if this book is able to train their youth leaders and build up their churches in any way.

## **About the New Testament**

The New Testament is a collection of many different writings by early Christians. These words were written, gathered together, and preserved decades after Jesus’ death and Resurrection. This work was perhaps prompted by the deaths of the first Apostles. Later, bishops of the church decided which of these writings most authentically portrayed the apostolic Tradition, which had been passed on to them by their predecessors. This final official list, or canon,

# Introduction

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was made up of writings that contain the essential message of the Gospel and are inspired by God.

The Gospels are placed first in the New Testament because of their importance: they tell about the life and ministry of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles is a continuation of Luke's Gospel and tells the story of the early church. Most of the remaining books are letters written by early church leaders, usually grouped by author and then length, not the order in which they were written. The last book, the Revelation to John, is a mystical vision received by an early Christian during a time when Christians were persecuted for what they believed.

The Gospels take youth leaders to the heart of their faith in Jesus Christ. Through them we come as close as anyone can to how Jesus of Nazareth taught and lived. Scholars believe the Gospel of Mark was the earliest Gospel, written around A.D. 65–70. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke followed. The authors of those Gospels appear to have used the Gospel of Mark as a primary source, adding new material and reshaping the stories to reflect their theological perspective. The Gospel of John was likely written last, perhaps as late as A.D. 100 and is quite different from the other three Gospels.

The New Testament letters show how the original Gospel message was adapted to many different people in many different situations. The most prolific letter writer was Paul. The story of Paul's own conversion can be found in Acts 7:54—8:3 and 9:1–30. Paul, sometimes called the second founder of Christianity, pioneered the expansion of the early Christian church from a relatively small Jewish sect into a

religion that reached out to everyone. His letters to the various Christian communities he founded give us a glimpse of the challenges Christians faced in believing and living out the Gospel message.

The Revelation to John gives us a peek at the cosmic dimensions of what God is doing through Christ and the church he founded. It was written to bolster the hope of persecuted early Christians that God would always triumph over evil. Largely mystical and symbolic, it still speaks to our culture, which tends to sensationalize it, drawing the attention of youth to it, and its meaning for the Christian remains profound.



# The Reflections

## Ministry Starts with Prayer

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,*

*'One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*"

*(Matt. 4:1–4)*

**The Gospel of Matthew**, like many ancient books, was written anonymously. Sometime after it was written, a tradition developed that Matthew, one of the twelve Apostles, wrote it. There is no direct evidence to verify this. However, a great deal of evidence shows that whoever wrote Matthew used most of the Gospel of Mark as a primary source, as did the author of the Gospel of Luke. The authors of Matthew and Luke added material of their own to their Gospels, and their Gospels share material that does not appear in Mark. The Gospel of John does not appear to rely on any of the first three Gospels, but it does seem to verify much of their content.

The Gospel writers all presented Jesus of Nazareth, his life and ministry, his death and Resurrection, and the Good News (*gospel* is an old English word for "good news") that he brought into the world. But how they did this depended on their intended audience. For example, Luke's audience was Gentile Christians, and Matthew wrote for Christian Jews.

Some events in Matthew's description of the childhood of Jesus may be more symbolic than historical because they do not seem to agree with similar stories in Luke's Gospel. For example, Luke, the only other Gospel to speak of Jesus' infancy, never mentions the Magi, Herod's slaughter of children, and the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. Perhaps these events are meant to echo early Jewish history—a technique Matthew uses in other places.

We should not impatiently expect photographic history from the Scriptures. This kind of reporting was impossible back then. Instead the Gospels were written within the limits of the authors' age and culture, to retell the heart of Christ's life and ministry so that others could encounter Jesus. That these books are the most influential in Western history is testimony to their success and their inspiration by God.

Although the story of Jesus' temptation in the desert includes some symbolic elements, such as the forty days, which echo the forty years that Moses led the Israelites in the desert, it probably has historical elements as well. Many people in Jesus' time did withdraw to the desert in order to grow spiritually. The important lesson is that Jesus prepared for his ministry by taking time for prayer and fasting.

If youth leaders hope to follow in Jesus' footsteps, they need to prepare through prayer and spiritual discipline as well. Jesus faced his temptations only after many days of preparation, and he also continued to pray throughout his ministry. He asked his disciples to do the same, even insisting that if necessary they withdraw from needy crowds seeking them out. Youth leaders do well to occasionally withdraw from the busy world of youth ministry to establish a regular habit of prayer and balance in their life as a foundation to ministry to youth.

## Reflection Questions—Ministry Starts with Prayer

1. Catholic scriptural tradition believes that God inspired all the writings of the Bible, no matter what literary style the authors used. Jesus himself created fictional stories called parables to illustrate many of his most important lessons. Storytelling is an important element of Christian youth work. How would you retell one of the stories from the Bible as a modern fable to inspire young people?

2. Read the complete story of Jesus' temptation in the desert in Matthew 4:1–11. Retell one of the three temptations as if Jesus were a youth leader. For example, the devil might tempt Jesus to focus on how many youth come to his group (all the kingdoms of the world) rather than on how to serve whomever God sends.

3. Three times the devil tempts Jesus to abuse his power. In what ways are youth leaders tempted to abuse their power? How does a life of prayer help to resist these temptations? How can supervision and accountability help?

4. A desert is symbolic of silence and emptiness, of time away from other people and things. Mother Teresa said, "Everything starts with prayer." When do you find time for solitude? Are you balancing your active ministry with prayer? If so, how? If not, what can you do to improve the balance in your life?

5. During the first centuries of Christianity, the church fathers taught that the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures is more important than their literal meaning. But to approach the Scriptures on a spiritual level, we need to open our heart to God and listen. Take a moment now to read Matt. 4:1–11 slowly and prayerfully, listening for the words and phrases that most catch your attention. Write these down if you wish. Read this passage again. What might the Spirit be speaking to you about your life, through this scriptural passage? Read it a third time and then pause a moment in the presence of the One speaking to you through it. (This is a simplification of an ancient method of praying the Scriptures called *lectio divina*.)

## Living from the Heart

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (5:1–3)*

*“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. . . . For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (5:17–20)*

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (5:38–48)*

*“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” (Matt. 7:12)*

**How would you summarize** the teachings Jesus proclaimed day after day, in a way that would make sense to people who never met him? Matthew chose to present Jesus giving a summary of his teachings from a mountaintop, echoing Moses giving the law to the Israelites from Mount Sinai. Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience, and his Gospel contains many references that would have been familiar to Jews of that time. He was trying to demonstrate how the teachings and example of Jesus went beyond and yet fulfilled the Law God gave to the ancient Israelites.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew, chapters 5–7), perhaps the most famous sermon in the world, is familiar to most people in Western culture. Its words and phrases are still

used daily. Many of the questions youth ask about God center on this sermon, as they try to understand the concepts of loving enemies, forgiveness, and turning the other cheek. Indeed, this sermon is ideal for adolescent reflection because it speaks clearly to the moral development of young people, their move from legalism and literalism into an understanding of the heart and its central role in moral decision making.

One of the most critical tasks of leaders is to caution youth about easy answers. Jesus uses exaggerated examples that he doesn't intend for us to take literally, such as cutting off a hand or striking out an eye. He wants us to open our eyes and look beyond our easy moral assumptions to see the peril brought by negative inner attitudes.

## Reflection Questions—Living from the Heart

1. Skim the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapters 5–7. What is one lesson that you feel applies especially well to a situation youth face today?
2. When we are too familiar with sayings like the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, we have a hard time hearing their real message or applying it to our life. What are some creative ways you might present some of the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount to youth so that they hear them in a different way?
3. The Sermon on the Mount can inspire because it presents a vision of life as our heart longs for it to be lived. But this vision can seem unattainable when we realize how often our moral decisions are far from the ideal the sermon presents. What advice would you give to a youth who is discouraged about meeting the sermon's high standards?
4. In this sermon Jesus pulls the mask off of many of the things we supposedly do for religious reasons and reveals how selfishness often lies at the root of our most religious actions. Youth are very sensitive to hypocrisy. They can see it in others but miss it in themselves. How can you help them to accept the challenge of the Gospel message without becoming judgmental of others?
5. Ultimately, the Gospels are always written about us. We are the sinners who need to own up to our own sins. Read Matt. 7:1–5. A speck of dirt in our own eye is far more painful for us than a speck in our neighbor's eye. In this sense it is like a log in our eye. Allowing ourselves to become aware of our own sins can be painful. Why is it important for us to face this pain? How can it deepen us as youth leaders?