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ADOLESCENT IDENTITY AND THE IMAGE OF GOD:
A PARADIGM FOR YOUTH MINISTRY PRAXIS

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ABSTRACT

Adolescent Identity and the Image of God: A Paradigm for Youth Ministry Praxis

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The overarching premise of this paper is that the way ministry to adolescents is shaped should be intentionally connected to the fundamental task of adolescence: identity formation and discovery, and that this connection should be a theological task guided by the richness found in being created in the image of God. Adolescents, by definition, are trying to resolve the internal, developmental question, “Who am I?” and this drive is as much theological as it is a psychosocial.

Those who work in various aspects of ministry to adolescents, whether in a local congregation or in a parachurch ministry have a unique opportunity to profoundly influence the adolescent’s emerging, core self in the shape of the image for which they were made. This task of shaping the self, however, is complex and easy to underestimate. The contemporary assumptions about the “self” are deeply embedded in the consciousness of our culture and are rarely examined. This paper seeks to uncover the history of our understanding of the self as well as the influence of psychosocial identity theory to place them in proper perspective, while making the case that being created in the image of God is truly the “first word” in identity and that this first word has enormous implications for shaping ministry praxis theologically.

Adolescents long to know who they are, that it is safe and good to be “uniquely me” and that their decisions matter in the world. Ministry should take these longings seriously and shape ministry accordingly. This paper is not meant, however, to serve as a model or strategy for youth ministry as much as a paradigm that encourages theological reflection on current ministry structures or new ministry ideas such that they are theologically faithful to the identity shaping dimensions of the image of God.

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INTRODUCTION

In Atlanta, Ga. there is a restaurant called the *OK Café* that is a common gathering place. Because of its proximity to several high schools, on any given morning, among attorneys, bankers, politicians and other deal makers, you could always find a youth minister or a Young Life leader or two having breakfast with a student before school. Having been a Young Life volunteer in the area in the early 1990s, I made the early morning pilgrimage to meet a student at the *OK Café* many, many times. One particular morning, I ran into Katie, an 11th grader who not only was involved with Young Life but also attended the same church I did. I asked her what was going on at school that day and she told me she was stressed out about a difficult situation she would have to confront later. She was anxious about it and really did not know quite how to handle things. Always wanting to encourage, and perhaps wanting to be known for “always knowing what to say” in difficult situations, I offered Katie what seemed to me to be the advice that she had almost certainly not considered at this point. “Katie,” I said, “just be yourself.” Without hesitation, and with brilliant honesty, she shot back, “but I don’t know who that is!”

Clearly caught off guard by her response, I stood speechless for a few seconds. Whatever I said next I do not remember and I am rather certain that is because it was not worth remembering anyway. What has become certain is that in that instant I discovered I had nothing meaningful to say in reply to a deeply revealing and vulnerable statement. I simply had not anticipated, nor understood at any deep level, the challenge a 16 year old middle adolescent faced when confronted with the seemingly simple – and yet at times

overwhelming – admonition to “be yourself.” Although Katie navigated her way through adolescence, grew-up, married, started a family and remains good friends with my family today (nearly 20 years later!) my inability to respond to her existential crisis with any sort of depth that day continues to haunt me. More haunting to me today is my hunch that my facile response (“be yourself”) is an example of the rule rather than the exception among those who work with adolescents in ministry settings.

Academic and institutional professionals – developmental psychologists and psycho-sociologists, for example - largely agree upon the kinds of existential questions first encountered within adolescence such as “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” Even as a relatively young youthworker, that was not news to me. I had, in a general sense, the understanding that any adolescent I encountered in my work with Young Life or the church youth group was at some level trying to figure out who they were. I clearly lacked, though, a deeper understanding of the complex, internal processes involved in the search for and discovery of a coherent and reliable sense of self during adolescence that psychosocial and developmental science provide.

Scientists and researchers that study adolescents provide an understanding of the driving task behind the questions, “who am I?” or “why am I here?” but typically leave to others to provide answers of purpose and ends to those questions.¹ What I also lacked was a deeper understanding of the theological complexities of the self; that the human life is directed toward God as its end and that the human self is rooted in its proper beginning

¹ Michael D. Langford, "A Very Present Help: James Loder's Trinitarian Soteriology and Adolescent Identity Formation," *Koinonia* 18, no. 3 (2006): 8.

– in God’s image.² A rudimentary understanding of the task, process and *telos* of adolescent individuation that leads to discovering an identity is probably all the average youth worker possesses. Unfortunately, a rudimentary understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God, especially for adolescents who are in the very crucible of identity discovery, is also probably all the average youth worker possesses. Delving deeper into the implications of psychosocial research or theological thinking about identity to shape youth ministry praxis is rarely at the top of the youth ministry agenda.

Existential questions of belonging, autonomy and identity remain at the core of adolescent identity but we have learned, especially over the course of the last fifty years, to think of them as primarily psychosocial issues, whereas such issues in the overall human experience previously fell to religion to answer.³ Developmental science has given us more precise vocabulary to describe adolescent identity and this is important because adolescence itself is a relatively new dimension of the human lifespan. While the sciences may very well give us the vocabulary we need to understand the intricacies of adolescence in the journey of their development but it does not appear to have the capacity to describe the purpose or *telos* of that journey.⁴

Youth ministry needs to move past the simplistic and tacit assumptions about identity formation in adolescence and into a practical, thoughtful and textured

² Robert Louis Wilken, "Biblical Humanism: The Patristic Convictions," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, ed. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 16.

³ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8.

⁴ Langford, "A Very Present Help," 8.

understanding, not only of the task, purpose and ends of identity formation, but how ministry can be ordered and how those adults that walk with adolescents can come along side them in a deeper sort of way to usher them into discovering who they are. The need for those in youth ministry is essentially this: a deeper understanding of the “first word” in identity – being created in the image of God – and its implications for ministry praxis. Those in youth ministry also need a broader understanding of what typically is the “last word” in identity – the developmental and social sciences, so they might offer proper influence ministry praxis. Existential questions adolescents ask (“Who am I?” “Where do I belong?” “Do my decisions matter?”) do not find ultimate answers in the social and psychological sciences. Human identity must always be oriented to a reality that transcends itself.⁵

To integrate the “first word” in identity (the image of God) with what typically enjoys the “last word” (developmental and social science) in our culture into ministry praxis requires critical reflection about key assumptions regarding identity. First are the assumptions about identity formation and discovery as a primary task of adolescence.⁶ The internal processes that propel the adolescent toward the task of identity formation as those processes are integrated with internalized social roles and expectations of social institutions from external social settings is complex.⁷ Adolescent identity is not simply a

⁵ Wilken, *Biblical Humanism*, 16.

⁶ Among theorists, often times depending on their particular academic discipline, there are subtle differences of meaning assigned to the words “identity” and “self.” For the purposes of this paper, they will be used interchangeably, unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Peter Blos, *The Adolescent Passage: Developmental Issues* (New York: International Universities Press, 1979), 144.

developmental reality that is a function of maturing cognitive functions. The interplay of those internal processes and social interaction leaves room for error in the developing adolescent, leading to an even more nuanced reality – that the normative emergence of the self could still go awry if this self-development is highly dependent upon social interaction with a lot of liabilities associated with it.⁸ This should reinforce the fact that identity formation does not merely “happen” but is full of subtleties and variables.

To say to Katie, “be yourself,” was more than an ill-timed exhortation. It also reflects a tacit assumption about the reality of the self. The Greek philosophers famously said, “Know thyself.”⁹ However, they may not have had in mind the same concept when they spoke of the self as we do today when we speak of the self. It is important to unearth the history of what has been understood as the self, the trajectory this understanding has taken and how it has been redirected and redefined through a few thousands of years of history, until it reaches its current destination, in the postmodern period, where the self has been “disembedded” from the previously assumed norm of “settled identities.”¹⁰ Adolescence is a relative latecomer in the grand story of the history of the self, having observably emerged in the industrialized West slightly more than 100 years ago.

There are a host of social factors that have been attributed as causative in the “creation” of adolescence: industrialization, child labor laws, mass education, mass

⁸ Susan Harter and Kurt W. Fischer, *The Construction of the Self: A Developmental Perspective* (New York: Guilford Publications Incorporated, 2001), 228.

⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 60.

¹⁰ Ali Rattansi and Ann Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities: Modernist and Postmodernist Frameworks," *Identity* 5, no. 2 (2005): 99.

media, urbanization and suburbanization.¹¹ These societal shifts also began to diminish the institutions, collective consensus, sacred texts and historical traditions, that prior to this time, bore the burden of providing clarity and direction in the task of identity formation.¹² In other words, adolescence and its fundamental task of becoming a self emerged at the convergence of two significant social changes: the concept of the self was becoming more vague and unanchored and the social capital from true community, institutions and sacred texts was becoming dramatically scarcer. The effect of this convergence is still significant today, as adolescents are presented with a less stable environment within which to develop than that of adolescents even a decade or two ago.¹³

Today, the self is caught between the appealing, idealistic notion that it should be a multiplicity of free floating selves in order to find its way and the ironic reality that the self just cannot quite escape the deep seated need for belonging and social support for identity discovery. The postmodern construct of socially unsupported, free floating selves are increasingly the norm and this construct has influenced ministry practice. To say to an adolescent “Find your identity in Christ” is the right thing to say, but if it is not supported with ministry praxis that builds a socially supported, Kingdom oriented trajectory for adolescent identity discovery, then it remains equally “free-floating” and will not take root deep within the self of an adolescent. There can be a richer, fuller understanding of

¹¹ Christian Smith, "Getting a Life: The Challenge of Emerging Adulthood," *Books and Culture: A Christian Review*, November/December 2007. www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/006/2.10.html. Accessed 11/6/2007.

¹² Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 173.

¹³ John W. Santrock, *Adolescence: An Introduction* (Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark, 1997), 17.

identity, in light of both the best of contemporary psychosocial research and solid biblical theology. The foundational text on Christian identity, quoted by early Christian thinkers in many different contexts, is the creation of human beings in the image of God found in Genesis 1:26.¹⁴ The image of God is the cradle for identity – the contemporary human self is only truly understood in relationship to God.¹⁵

There are certain times when the moon passes in front of the sun, causing an eclipse. The moon is not larger, brighter or more powerful than the sun; it just gets in the way so that the view of the sun is blocked. In a similar sort of way, the contemporary understanding of identity has eclipsed the original source in the created order where God set out to make human beings in his own image. It is not that the contemporary understanding of identity, the demands of the current assumptions about the self or even the influence of popular culture, are bigger, brighter or more powerful than the image of God. They are smaller but just in the way. The recovery process starts by laying the groundwork for understanding identity from a theological perspective. Bringing this purposeful created order into the forefront of understanding human identity will require the introduction of an integrative “paradigm” for ministry that is rooted in the image of God. This paradigm involves two key dimensions: the organic dimension, characterized by the capacity to relate to God that is intrinsic, formed and fixed, and the dynamic dimension characterized as the active, lived out reality of human identity discovered

¹⁴ Wilken, *Biblical Humanism*, 13.

¹⁵ John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Volume 2: Israel's Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 518.

through the creational designs of worship, authority and completing relationships.¹⁶ This paradigm will be contextualized as a means to evaluate methodology, function and form so that ministry is organized with a robust understanding of biblical/psychosocial/theological dimensions to adolescent identity. This paradigm is the means for recovering the image of God from the eclipse of the modern understanding of the self and adolescent identity – not at their expense, but only to put them in their proper perspective. This is the means to returning the image of God to the “first word” in adolescent identity.

Those who work in ministry to adolescents are in position to have the most significant impact on one of the most needful life stages at the most crucial time in the short but significant history of adolescence. But to do this well, to be true agents of the Kingdom for the sake of adolescents, will require more than just willingness and passion, certainly more than simplistic and superficial encouragement such as, “Just be yourself.” It will require a commitment to a deeper understanding of contemporary psychosocial research in adolescent identity and to bring it in line with a recovered understanding of identity rooted in the image of God. This allows for a practical, evaluative means to organize ministry in such a way as to take seriously the opportunity to walk with adolescents on this journey of discovery, to bring them into a true sense of self rooted in the life that God has intended for them all along. It is, simply put, what I wish I had understood that day at the OK Café so many years ago.

¹⁶ Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 165.

PART ONE
MINISTRY CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

ADOLESCENT IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

Telling 16 year old Katie to “be yourself” that day at the OK Café several years ago, produced not only a pointed, if not anguished, reply (“But I don’t know who that is!”) but also a vivid vignette into a major task in the life stage known as adolescence. Many developmental theorists, psychologists and sociologists would agree to some extent or another that adolescence is a time, at least in most industrialized western cultures, when one is confronted with the problem of self-definition – the task of resolving the question, “Who am I?”¹ At the same time, in the contemporary setting, finding consensus among these theorists, psychologists and sociologists as to the process adolescents take, what exactly it is they are doing to resolve this question of “Who am I” or even what the term identity means is a challenging matter.² As one sociologist says, “Everyone seems to be talking about identities but it is not at all clear that they are talking about the same

¹ Jane Kroger, *Identity in Adolescence: The Balance between Self and Other, Adolescence and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1.

² Psychosocial literature and research use the terms most often *identity formation* or *identity construction* to describe this developmental process. This may at times come in conflict with biblical and theological perspectives from the image of God that allow for identity discovery as part of a transcendent as well as internal process. More will be said about that in Chapters 5 and 6. For now and for simplicity, this chapter will use the terminology employed by the contemporary academic literature.

thing.”³ For the most part, the dominant word on adolescent identity has resided in the psychosocial perspective and that perspective is certainly useful for discerning the more complex and nuanced realities of the phenomenon of adolescence. It is worthwhile, therefore, to survey contemporary adolescent identity from a psychosocial perspective.

Most texts on adolescent development agree in general, that the period of adolescence represents a dramatic developmental transition on many levels; pubertal and related physical changes, cognitive-development advances and changing social expectations.⁴ When speaking of identity formation in adolescence specifically, the matter becomes more complicated. There remains considerable debate as to whether this task of identity formation is created by the social circumstances of a technologically advanced Western society, various internal developmental phenomena, or a combination of both.⁵ For example, a brief survey of several texts on adolescent and human development illustrates this debate, as some reflect emphasis on the internal processes, some on the social circumstances or, for some, a combination of the two:

“Adolescence is that phase of life in which individuals seek and formulate a self-concept and identity.”⁶

“The task of adolescent identity formation requires establishing a hierarchy of goals, establishing aspirations in an order of priority, an inner guide as it were.”⁷

³ Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 98.

⁴ Harter and Fischer, *The Construction of the Self*, 59.

⁵ Kroger, *Identity in Adolescence*, 1.

⁶ Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 102.

⁷ Arthur Thomas Jersild, *The Psychology of Adolescence* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 7-8;

“Adolescence is a time of significant personality reorganization in such a way as to form the core aspects of personality structure.”⁸

“Identity is an internal self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history.”⁹

“A major developmental task in adolescence is the creation of a sense of identity. Society places demands on adolescents to experiment and try various attitudes, styles, and behaviors before selecting an identity based on commitment.”¹⁰

“Emotional development during adolescence involves establishing a realistic and coherent sense of identity in the context of relating to others and learning to cope with stress and manage emotions.”¹¹

“Identity [in adolescence] is that underlying center of awareness and of volition in personality, the core which is in some sense real and not created by our definition.”¹²

“Identity is the successful integration of impulses into life, the humanization of conscience and the stability of a sense of self.”¹³

⁸ David Paul Ausubel, Raymond Montemayor, and Pergrouhi N. Svajian, *Theory and Problems of Adolescent Development*, 2nd ed. (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1977), 17.

⁹ James Marcia, “Identity in Adolescence,” in Joseph Adelson, ed. *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980), 159.

¹⁰ John S. Dacey and John F. Travers, *Human Development: Across the Lifespan*, 2nd ed. (Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark Publishers, 1994), 268.

¹¹ Eileen L. Zurbriggen, Rebecca L. Collins, Sharon Lamb, Tomi-Ann Roberts, Deborah L. Tolman, L. Monique Ward, and Jeanne Blake, *Report of the Apa Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2007), 15.

¹² Kroger, *Identity in Adolescence*, xii.

¹³ Rolf E. Muuss, *Theories of Adolescence* (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1988), 83.

“During adolescence the self is derived by relinquishing identification with others as a primary means to self, while transitioning to seeing others as independent agents helping to recognize the ‘real me.’”¹⁴

Yet another layer to the complex understanding about identity formation in adolescence surrounds the traditional notion of the centrality of adolescence as the period where identity is established versus what others now contend is the commonly accepted view that identity formation neither begins nor ends during adolescence. It can be conceded that identity is not formed exclusively in adolescence but is an ongoing process throughout the lifespan. That does not exclude the premise here that young people in this stage of development do focus intense energy on issues of self-definition and self-esteem.¹⁵

While other stages of the lifespan do contribute to a sense of one’s self, adolescence is the first time, however, when individuals have the cognitive capacity to consciously sort through who they are and what makes them unique.¹⁶ Certainly there is growth in terms of identity across the life span, but the emphasis here is that the primary grounding of one’s uniqueness is a major component of the process of adolescence.¹⁷ In more recent times challenges and revisions of the most widely described models of adolescent development – that adolescence is a transition from childhood to adulthood during which individuals explore alternatives and experiment with choices as part of

¹⁴ Kroger, *Identity in Adolescence*, 6-7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁶ Zurbriggen et al. *Report of the Apa Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*

¹⁷ Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 198.

developing an identity – have brought an awareness to important limitations. Namely, those limitations are that though these models fit more accurately for most white middle class adolescents, they are less well suited to adolescents from low income families, school dropouts and that are unemployed.¹⁸

These insights remind us of the importance of recognizing that attempts to understand adolescent identity in the contemporary setting is complex and will have inherent limitations. However, getting a sense of the state of adolescent identity, its processes and its significance today is not impossible. Most debate about adolescent identity today goes back to sociologist Erik Erikson, who is considered by many to have laid the foundation for most of the research on adolescent identity.¹⁹ While Erikson was influenced by psychoanalytic theory early on in his career, he became somewhat dissatisfied with its limitations. Psychoanalysis could not grasp identity fully, as he wrote, “because it has not developed terms to conceptualize the environment.”²⁰ While biology is important to individual biology, so, too are an individual’s life history and the presiding cultural and historical context.²¹

Following Erickson, many psychologists construct identity as an inner-core, which is the self, and which requires continuity of commitment to that core in social settings. Erikson certainly understood identity formation across the lifespan, however he viewed the stage of adolescence as critically important in order for young people to

¹⁸ Santrock, *Adolescence*, 18.

¹⁹ Dacey and Travers, *Human Development*, 268.

²⁰ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), 24.

²¹ Kroger, *Identity in Adolescence*, 13.

assume and internalize adult responsibilities.²² According to Erikson, in adolescence, all sameness and continuities relied upon earlier in childhood are more or less questioned again, because of, not only the rapid rise in the physiological changes at the onset of puberty and the growth of abstract cognitive abilities but also the opportunities for new social roles.²³ Up until adolescence, the self of childhood is derived from significant identification with important others, specifically family, that have been selectively available to the child as a legitimate identity extension.²⁴ For Erikson, the final identity, as fixed at the end of adolescence, creates a new, unique “superordinated” relation that includes but transcends all identifications with individuals of the past. It includes all these significant identifications, but also alters them, through the new framework of a coherent self, in order to make a unique and reasonably coherent whole of them.²⁵

While the overriding internal emphasis of adolescence is on finding oneself – establishing an identity – the external, social parallel to this emphasis is one of fitting into groups and, in a sense, seeing oneself and believing oneself to be a part of a group – eventually moving from the “adolescent marginal person” to being a full-fledged adult.²⁶ This double sided task has become more problematic in the past few decades, given the status of at least two significant social factors: the discontinuity of social-structure conditions and the loss of cultural ideation. First, Western, post-industrial society has

²² Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 101.

²³ Jersild, *The Psychology of Adolescence*, 7.

²⁴ Blos, *The Adolescent Passage*, 144.

²⁵ Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 161.

²⁶ Guy J. Manaster, *Adolescent Development and the Life Tasks* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1977), 128.

normalized a dysfunctional social structure that creates an expansive, if not unnavigable, gap between the status of the child and that of the adult.²⁷ In that “gap,” the contemporary quest to answer “who am I” by adolescents is complicated by a more flexible, and therefore abstract, sense of personal identity rather than traditional, internalized roles.²⁸ Selves are defined today by preferences that are influenced by fluid peer relationships and arbitrary value systems, with little appreciable influence from the adult world.²⁹

Whereas the assumption that this sort of flexibility in identity formation can afford more opportunities for exploration to find one’s true self, this has led, at least in part, to the rise of alternate dimensions of existence where adolescents exhibit a deep longing to connect to something that orients and provides meaning. However, in such a flexible and vague setting, adolescents tend to reach toward entities as ethereal as the “Global Soul,”³⁰ as pragmatic as the “World Beneath”³¹ and as casual as the “parasocial” connections of Facebook or MySpace.³²

²⁷ Hans Sebald, *Adolescence: A Social Psychological Analysis*, 4th ed. (E Rutherford, NJ: Prentice Hall PTR, 1991), 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁹ Robert Neelly Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 80.

³⁰ Pico Iyer, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for Home* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 23. Iyer describes the “Global Soul” this way; “Having grown up in three cultures, none of them fully my own, I acquired very early the sense of being loosed from time as much as from space” Iyer celebrates having been raised, “with a keen sense of the blessings of being unaffiliated.”

³¹ Clark, *Hurt*, 59.

³² ‘Parasocial interaction’ is where social networks and media exposure leads audiences to experience the illusion of face to face, primary relations with others. See, Stella C. Chia and Yip Ling Poo, “Media, Celebrities and Fans: An Examination of Adolescent’s Media Usage and Involvement with Entertainment Celebrities,” *Journalism and Mass Media Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 25.

Second, at one time, institutions, collective consensus, sacred texts or historical traditions bore the burden of providing clarity and direction in the task of identity formation.³³ This societal infrastructure, along with the expectation of authenticity in relationships, was characteristic of the modern period. Modernism has given way to postmodernism, characterized by complexity and flux to a much greater degree than its predecessor.³⁴ In the postmodern world, marked advances in technology, particularly communication technology, has dramatically accelerated our social connectedness, albeit at a shallow and less authentic level, and has dissolved the connections to traditions, consensus and institutions.³⁵

With the disintegration of meaningful belonging to cultural traditions, ideals or meaning-giving norms, adolescents now must bear this responsibility of developing his or her identity essentially alone and on an individual basis.³⁶ In what is now a multi-cultural, multi-narrative, postmodern world, the task of establishing a personal identity is in jeopardy of being absorbed into a diffuse, global mass of options rather than into a meaning-giving cultural ideal.³⁷ Early to mid-twentieth century psychosocial adolescent development theory assumed identity to be a holistic phenomenon that is relatively integrated and grounded in a few fundamental precepts (the personal, psychological level), and supported by and consistent with surrounding sociocultural conditions (the

³³ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 173.

³⁴ Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 99.

³⁵ Harter and Fischer, *The Construction of the Self*, 236.

³⁶ Sebald, *Adolescence*, 34.

³⁷ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 1-3.

societal level).³⁸ In other words, many influential developmental psychologists, sociologists and psycho-sociologists of this time period (Erikson, along with Jean Piaget and Peter Blos, to name a few) assumed that adolescent identity would form internally as a progressive, developmental process and externally as guided by supportive social structures. Given the reality of flux and fluidity in the postmodern context, some now advocate for a more flexible, protean, if not multiform, self. Others see this as a capitulation to the postmodern culture that results in the erosion of an immutable, core self.³⁹ The traditional assumption is that in adolescent development a holistic, integrated and unified identity is the ideal. For others, rapid societal and economic changes, social uncertainties and even unmanageable expectations from history call this ideal into question.⁴⁰

The assumption regarding culture and society is that there should be a design of motives directing the self outward toward those communal purposes in which the self can be realized.⁴¹ The reality is that modern social structure and new technological innovations are impeding, if not arresting this realization.⁴² Beyond that, the postmodern propensity for “disembedding” and “detraditionalizing” older patterns of life (combined, incidentally, with a context of a qualitatively new significance for consumption) provide

³⁸ Sebald, *Adolescence*, 51.

³⁹ Harter and Fischer, *The Construction of the Self*, 24.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴¹ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 4.

⁴² Sebald, *Adolescence*, 53-55.

for a proliferation of lifestyles.⁴³ The consumption of commodities is central to the construction of images, styles and, thus, identities, in the contemporary period. Western societies may be fairly characterized as consumer societies above all else and as such, “status, pleasure and belonging are bound up with the practices of keeping up with the consumption of an ever increasing array of sign-laden commodities which announce the owner’s identity.”⁴⁴ While it would be easy to be skeptical or even critical of the notion of the construction of identities via consumption of fashionable commodities, some research contends that, at the least, this allows young people some sense of location in a rapidly changing world in which bearings seem hard to find.⁴⁵

Finding the bearings for one’s sense of self remain elusive in this amorphous and fluid social context, to the extent that a style of social interaction has arisen that no longer requires or even profits from a unitary identity, and this style has a profound influence on adolescence.⁴⁶ Adolescents living in virtually every segment of Western, post-industrial life (urban, suburban, rural) are ensconced in a social structure that patterns life into discrete, multi-positional segments (e.g. family, multiple layers of school, peers, church, etc. and then various subsets of each), each requiring its own set of communicative and interactional skills rather than a consistent, principled self.⁴⁷ In a sense these different

⁴³ Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 99.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁶ Sebald, *Adolescence*, 53.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 56.

environments call not only for different behaviors, but virtually for different persons.⁴⁸ The fluidity characteristic of the postmodern ethos regarding identity in adolescence is exemplified, if not encouraged, by communication technology such as social networking sites and the like, where participants are able to be whomever they want, to try on new identities with ease, even to the point of becoming a different person with each foray into cyberspace.⁴⁹ So while in the 20th century the dominant developmental assumption about the task of adolescence was the inherent drive to form a unitary, integrated, internalized, principled self, the contemporary societal scaffold (or lack thereof) might dictate that the adolescent should instead become a situational character who exists in multiple stages, each with its own audience and script.⁵⁰

Postmodernity and its technological advances create, for some adolescents at the least, the space for this situational character schema to continue as if normal. This, of course, creates for adolescents a conflict between learning skills to eliminate the interpersonal friction of each stage play verses learning and internalizing basic, static roles and principles that shape a core self.⁵¹

All of this is to say that there has been essential agreement that identity formation is at least a significant, if not the central task in adolescence. For the most part, there is consensus that adolescent identity is, in some form or another, the self-directed, self-

⁴⁸ Sebald, *Adolescence*, 53.

⁴⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self: Toward a Theology of the Imago Dei in the Postmodern Context," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, ed. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, Mark R. Talbot (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006).

⁵⁰ Sebald, *Adolescence*, 54.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

constructed organization of drives, beliefs and abilities into an integrated core self. In the early days of contemporary adolescent identity theory, there was a growing recognition that this internal drive did not happen in a vacuum but that identity formation in adolescence required support and buttressing from social structures, institutions and even socially established roles. There appeared to be, as well, the tacit assumption that this social scaffolding was readily available to all or most adolescents and that it was consistent with the consensus outcome – producing fully integrated adults.

Postmodernity ushered into the latter part of the last century a new way of seeing the world, a challenge to old epistemologies that brought with it the mandate to deconstruct previously held assumptions and metanarratives. Consequently, assumptions about adolescent identity formation began to be called into question. First of all, the social scaffolding acknowledged earlier as essential and readily available for successful identity formation has been challenged by some as oppressive because it melded, with a generalized controlling story, the particularities of social divisions such as gender, race, ethnicity and social class. Second of all, the assumptions about the ideal ends of identity formation – a stable core self – was challenged as too rigid to allow for more flexible understanding of identity as multiple positions, each one acquiring salience in the different contexts of a diverse and fragmented society.⁵² Some have concluded this new epistemology of the self and deconstructed social scaffold provide exactly what adolescents need and long for – unencumbered freedom from imposed or embedded fixed roles and from overly confining societal restraints- to now finally be and do whatever

⁵² Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 104, 106.

they want to be – as long as their creative possibilities are bounded, ever so slightly, so as to prevent identity formation from slipping into total postmodern nihilism.⁵³ Others are quite suspicious, or at the least, not so willing to part with the more established theoretical traditions going back nearly sixty years to Erikson.

Thriving or Simply Surviving?

The question “who is right?” would be essentially moot, if in fact adolescents were thriving under any conception of identity formation that led to a successful entry into the adult world, regardless of whether it was considered modern, traditional, or postmodern. Simply stated, they are not. There is evidence that suggests the contemporary understanding of identity and its process of formation, whether centered in the notion of core, true self of late modernity or in a notion of a fluid, situational self of postmodernity does not appear to adequately support adolescent identity. This is not an allusion to the historically held view that adolescence is typically characterized as a period of storm and stress anyway, so forming an identity is just a difficult process. More recent research has led to the widespread agreement that storm and stress are not typical characteristics of adolescence.⁵⁴ To say that adolescents are not thriving in their effort to develop a true sense of self is also not the same as alarmist accusations blaming adolescents for increased violence, pregnancy rates, drug use and suicide rates.⁵⁵ It is to

⁵³ Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 118.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 7.

⁵⁵ For more perspective on the tendency to categorically blame youth for social ills or hype the supposed increase of deviant behaviors, see Mike A. Males, *The Scapegoat Generation: America's War*

say that regardless of statistics about adolescents, society has an obligation to usher them into the fullness of who they were meant to be as created in the image of God.

Adolescence is not a fixed stage of life that has existed throughout history.⁵⁶ It is a construction of late modernity, brought about as much by dramatic social changes and familial rearrangements as anything related to individual development. Contemporary society has a role, therefore, in shaping the process, length and outcome of the adolescent journey.

The Extending of Adolescence

The most obvious support for the notion that adolescents are not thriving is the fact that it takes longer than ever to transition from adolescence into adulthood.

Adolescence is a relatively recent phenomenon, having observably existed perhaps since the late 19th century. Life stages such as adolescence are not naturally given as immutable, organic phases of existence for all of history. Rather, they are social constructions that interact with biology and are profoundly shaped by the social and institutional conditions that generate and sustain them. Beginning with the publication of the two volume work, *Adolescence*, by G. Stanley Hall in 1904, it was generally accepted that adolescence was a two stage process (early and late adolescence) and that this transition took three to five years.

against Adolescents (St. Paul, MN: Common Courage Press, 1996). and Mike A. Males, *Framing Youth: Ten Myths About the Next Generation* (St. Paul, MN: Common Courage Press, 1998).

⁵⁶ Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 8.

With the advent of compulsory schooling and then the post-World War II G.I. Bill allowing significant numbers of young service men to go to college, decisions such as career choice and marriage began to be postponed. These social changes and others impacted adolescence such that by the early 1980s scholarly research began to refer to a generalized lengthening of adolescence beyond the teenage years and three periods of adolescence: early, middle and late. Today it is generally agreed that adolescence can last upwards of fifteen years, well into the late twenties.⁵⁷ This extended adolescent period situated between the teenage years and full-fledged adulthood, now referred to as “emerging adulthood,” also has reshaped the meaning of self, youth, relationships, and life commitments as well as a variety of behaviors and dispositions among the young.⁵⁸ Characterized by experiment and exploration, this phenomenon exists, “only in cultures in which young people are allowed to postpone entering into fully adult roles and taking on adult responsibilities and instead experiment with a variety of life possibilities in love, work, education and worldviews.”⁵⁹

The transition to adulthood today is more complex, disjointed, and confusing than it was in past decades, and the steps through and to schooling, first real job, marriage, and parenthood are simply less well organized and coherent today than they were in generations past. In terms of successfully transitioning to adulthood with a core and secure sense of self, adolescents are not succeeding in navigating their way.

⁵⁷ Clark, *Hurt*, 35-36.

⁵⁸ Smith, "Getting a Life," 3.

⁵⁹ Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 14-15.

Systematic Abandonment: Responsibility and Performance

Further evidence to support the ideas that adolescents are not thriving in the task of identity formation is what has been termed the “systemic abandonment” of young people by society at large.⁶⁰ This is not just true among the poor and the inner-city – areas plagued by the loss of a sustainable values system, viable and steady employment, stable family structures, etc. It is true systemically, even among middle and upper class adolescents who have the social capital to maintain the façade of success. The image of a stable and successful middle class is often used as a scorecard against which the less fortunate and less successful parts of our society are measured. This makes it easy to overlook the fact that “resourced” adolescents are struggling as well.⁶¹

When middle class or privileged adolescents struggle (as evidenced by substance abuse, delinquency or antisocial behavior) to suggest that the cause is they have been indulged and have an inordinate sense of entitlement is a shallow and convenient explanation for a complex and deep reality.⁶² The idea that teenagers get in trouble because they feel too entitled and their families too solicitous fits badly with the real-world experiences of many American teenagers. Far from being lenient and indulgent,

⁶⁰ Clark, *Hurt*, 43.

⁶¹ Elliott Currie, *The Road to Whatever: Middle-Class Culture and the Crisis of Adolescence*, (New York: Metropolitan Books Henry Holt, 2005), 2.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 46.

their parents are often found to be simultaneously punitive and heedless.⁶³

In a general sense, this notion of systemic abandonment came about in the transition from late modernity to postmodernity. During the late modern period, the needs of children and youth were weighted more heavily than those of parents.⁶⁴ As society has become more postmodern this need imbalance has shifted in the other direction. Today the needs of children and youth are often weighed less heavily than are the needs of parents and the rest of adult society.⁶⁵ This is not simply to reassign blame to self centered indulgent parents. To be certain social and economic factors that have impacted the middle class today have made this a common condition.⁶⁶ The result however, is a disturbing and widespread abandonment of adolescents that can be observed in two key ways: an inversion of responsibility and contingent performance.

At its foundation in the postmodern world, a thin and ultimately self serving individualism creates an “inversion of responsibility”- where the adolescent is saddled by the adult world with too much responsibility for managing their lives as they grow up.⁶⁷ In every culture, of course, becoming progressively able to take on responsibility is an important facet of growing up. Today however, it is observed that this reassigning of

⁶³ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁴ This is not meant to take the position that this arrangement – the needs of children weighed more heavily than that of the parents – was somehow the ideal. There was certainly fallout from this arrangement as well. See especially, David Elkind, *Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁶⁵ David Elkind, *All Grown up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1998), xiii. See also Elkind’s expansion on this reversal of family-child priority in: Elkind, *Ties That Stress*.

⁶⁶ Currie, *The Road to Whatever*, 49.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 49-50.

responsibility happens too early and too drastically. It is not an intentional process where adults gradually relinquish some responsibility as adolescents learn to take it on, but a kind of a withdrawal in which the adolescent is burdened down and then simply set adrift.⁶⁸ The result is that young people across the socioeconomic divide experience childhood and adolescence not as a time when they were “brought up” in any meaningful sense by competent and admirable parents but as a time when they had to figure out how to navigate life toward a core sense of identity on their own.⁶⁹ This is simply inconsistent with most of psychosocial thought on identity – it is not a solo task.

By the time most children reach adolescence they understand that they are not praised for “who they are” but only for doing well according to rigid norms of “contingent performance”.⁷⁰ These performance standards shift focus to particular abilities (narrow standards for academic, athletic and social performance) in the individual adolescent at the expense of otherwise admirable abilities, often leading quickly to definitive exclusion from the ranks of those who outperform them.⁷¹ The point here is not that competition is inherently bad. It is the degree to which the performance measures are narrow and arbitrary, only allowing some to compete on certain terms that exclude many more otherwise gifted and valuable adolescents.

At the same time, there is no limit to the number of adolescents who can be loyal, honest, caring or otherwise virtuous that a less constricted culture might deem important

⁶⁸ Currie, *The Road to Whatever*, 45.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 48-49

⁷⁰ Chap Clark, class lecture from “YFC 724 - Psychosocial Development of Adolescents,” Fuller Seminary, October 31, 2007.

⁷¹ Currie, *The Road to Whatever*, 79.

and worthy of respect. A culture that values this contingent performance fails to truly recognize these virtues as significant, not only for individual adolescents, but for society as well. More poignantly, a culture that values contingent performance fails to recognize that not everyone can be “at the top” at the same time - only a few can win at any given time. This is not to say that performance is always wrong, but if there is no other meaning giving system apart from performance, those who fail to make it to the top in this system will have no sense of personal worth. As a result, where personal worth is necessarily a scarce commodity, there will inevitably be a great many people who think of themselves as relatively worthless.⁷² This is the systemic abandonment that adolescents face today.

Institutional Abandonment: Schools and Education

Not only has abandonment occurred at the family systems level, it has occurred at the institutional level. Institutions that were originally designed to nurture children and adolescents have lost their missional mandate.⁷³ Education is not the only contemporary institution that has lost its way, having a profound impact on adolescent identity, but it serves as a “representative” institution that illustrates the argument that adolescents are not thriving in the current setting. In the modern era, schools were considered a special place for adolescents. It was an arena where they could devote their energies to the task of personal, social and occupational growth without pressure from the outside world to grow up too quickly – it was “the one institution where it was all right to be young.”⁷⁴

⁷² Currie, *The Road to Whatever*, 68.

⁷³ Clark, *Hurt*, 38.

⁷⁴ Elkind, *All Grown up and No Place to Go*, 165.

However, in some ways compulsory high schooling played a role in fostering the modern adolescent experience.⁷⁵ The compulsory school system, as an inflexible institution, legitimized a rigid grouping together of adolescents, but at the expense of segmenting them from important trans-generational relationships and access to other “capital” within the surrounding social scaffolding.⁷⁶ Since the early days of compulsory education, progress at school was generally measured on the basis of intellectual achievement. With the exclusive premium on intellectual and verbal performance, the schools began a trajectory that is well ingrained today of paying only scant or tacit attention to physiological and social factors that are significant in adolescent identity development.⁷⁷ Again, in this environment, adolescents are not praised for “who they are” (or who they are becoming) but according to rigid norms of academic performance.⁷⁸

In the postmodern era, schools have failed to address broader social functions and have instead narrowed their emphases to academic reform.⁷⁹ The result is that most students today are aware at some level that they are the product of a sort of education assembly line. Their lives have been formed by an intricate network of achievement – enhancement devices and they have simply learned how to jump through the proper hoops such as grade point average (even if academic honesty “has” to be compromised),

⁷⁵ Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 10.

⁷⁶ Peter Blos, *The Adolescent Personality: a Study of Individual Behavior for the Commission on Secondary School Curriculum* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1941), 256.

⁷⁷ Elkind, *All Grown up and No Place to Go*, 165.

⁷⁸ Currie, *The Road to Whatever*, 79.

⁷⁹ Elkind, *All Grown up and No Place to Go*, 164.

service hours and standardized test scores.⁸⁰ These hoops and measures do not require or facilitate a commitment to a core self. In fact they could even facilitate just the opposite – building only the communicative and interactional skills that equip them to navigate the situational challenges presented by the school environment, on a case by case, individualistic basis.⁸¹ Simply put schools today provide an inhospitable environment for young people who are struggling to construct a sense self and identity.⁸²

Summary

Most theorists assume the foundational task in the period of adolescence is identity formation. However, consensus on what identity is assumed to be in our current setting, where those assumptions come from and how those assumptions have been impacted by significant socio-cultural changes remain elusive. Additionally, many theoretical understandings of adolescent identity do not bear up well when compared to real live adolescents. If adolescents were thriving, if adolescence were not lengthening, if there was no evidence for the systemic abandonment of adolescents, if institutions responded to the particular and genuine needs of developing adolescents, there would be room for contentment. This, however, is not the case. Nor is it the end of the story. A more in depth and historical understanding of the “self” is needed to push past the theoretical understanding of identity in adolescence that tends to reflect thought, theory and research of only the last fifty years or so.

⁸⁰ Clark, *Hurt*, 88.

⁸¹ Sebald, *Adolescence*, 55-57.

⁸² Elkind, *All Grown up and No Place to Go*, 165-167.

CHAPTER 2

IDENTITY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE: AN ARCHEOLOGY OF THE SELF¹

To say to Katie that day at the OK Café, “be yourself” did not provoke a strong reaction because the “self” was conceptually a foreign idea to her. She did not respond, “I don’t know what that is!” She said, “I don’t know who that is?” The idea of the self is so common and widespread, especially in western contemporary culture, it is essentially assumed to be a given of existence.² Intuitively Katie sensed she was on a quest to settle the question “who am I?” because, at some level, this quest is essentially bequeathed to everyone. In other words, the term self, together with the idea that every human being is a self, belongs to the standard vocabulary of contemporary society.³ It is, in the common vernacular, becoming “yourself.”⁴

¹ I’ve borrowed the term “archeology of the self” from theologian Stanley Grenz as the guiding metaphor for this chapter.

² This chapter will refer to the concept of the self, as most of the historical resources cited do, but the term self here is used interchangeably with the concept of identity formation.

³ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 58.

⁴ Ausubel, Montemayor, and Svajian, *Theory and Problems of Adolescent Development*, 17.

Perceptions of the Self

There are some periods in individual lives that are more crucial than others for the structural change that identity formation requires. For adolescents this is especially true. Because so many profound developmental and psychosocial changes are happening more or less simultaneously, in addition to forming an identity, this task can indeed be at times overwhelming.⁵ Tumultuous life changes, combined with an intense process of identity formation marked out on a new, unexplored pathway with a vague sense of the end of this task – plus the fact that identity is understood with such abstraction and fluidity – it may not be surprising the task can feel bewildering. Katie’s response illustrates well the internal friction, prompted by the admonition “be yourself,” she was experiencing in the midst of moving down a lonely solitary pathway that leads away from the certainties of childhood and toward the mysterious end, an uncertain future.⁶

As challenging as this process may be, no concept has been more important for understanding the assumptions of Western intellectual history regarding the human person than that of the self.⁷ The idea of the self and the universal task of becoming one’s “self” have attained such commonplace status that they are accepted as normative in contemporary society. While this is the case, rarely is the deeper origin and historical conception of the self ever questioned. It is typically assumed the self as we know it today is an immutable given, having always existed, when in fact the self is a modern

⁵ James Marcia, "Identity in Adolescence," 160.

⁶ Ibid., 160.

⁷ Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self," 71.

invention that stands at the apex of a long, historical as well as intellectual process.⁸

Philosopher Charles Taylor explains this distinctively modern understanding of the self:

It is probable that in every language there are resources for self-reference and descriptions of reflexive thought, action, attitude... but this is not at all the same as making 'self' into a noun, proceeded by a definite article, speaking of the 'the' self, or 'a' self. This reflects something important which is peculiar to our modern sense of agency.⁹

Because the self as it forms in adolescence is understood primarily from the past sixty years of literature and research, and that navigating the transition from adolescence into adulthood remains a difficult and ever-lengthening journey, there needs to be a more adequate perspective for the fullest comprehension of what it means to be a self, particularly a historical perspective. While it is true that a historical account is also limited, history can still come close to grasping human reality as it is experienced.¹⁰

The mission of modern science and scholarship has centered on the search for the core or the very center of the thing, assuming this is the way to know it best. Contemporary scholarship regarding adolescent identity has emphasized a similar thing, assuming one discovers the "true self" by peeling away, like the layers of an onion, social ties or any other potentially imposed demands, in order to reveal the unique, individual core self.¹¹ Looking at history, however, the argument can be made that in spite of contemporary assumptions about the self as a unique individual core, previous cultures

⁸ Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self," 71.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 113.

¹⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 485.

¹¹ Rodney Clapp, *Border Crossings: Christian Trespasses on Popular Culture and Public Affairs* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 67.

knew nothing of selves as essentially independent, isolated units, but rather as “overlapping members” one of another.¹² The promotion in modernity of a socially disengaged self contrasts sharply, for example, with the embedding of an ancient Israelite within the family.¹³ This does not mean that no individual life is recognized, but that simply in a number of realms in which today an individualistic understanding is considered a given, ancient thought envisaged a whole group in which one was a part.¹⁴

For much of human history, the self has not been understood apart from a particular social framework. For example, people saw their identity as defined in part by some moral or spiritual commitment, say as a Christian or even a pagan. Or they defined it in part by the nation or tradition they belonged to, as a Jew or a Roman. What they were saying is that they are not just strongly attached to some spiritual view or background; rather it is that this provides them the frame within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value. Put counterfactually, they are saying that to lose this commitment or identification, they would be at sea, as it were, they wouldn't know anymore, for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was for them.¹⁵ No one can

¹² Wayne Booth, "Individualism and the Mystery of the Social Self," in *Freedom and Interpretation: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures*, ed. Barbara Johnson (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 78.

¹³ Robert A. Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1999): 225.

¹⁴ H. Wheeler Robinson, "Hebrew Psychology," in *The People and the Book: Essays on the Old Testament*, ed. Arthur S. Peake (Oxford: University Press, 1925). 326

¹⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

simply escape or be extracted from the human condition at every level.¹⁶ Again, only in modern times has the view that connects the self with a sense of possessing a unique identity even existed, apart from a particular social, moral or spiritual framework.¹⁷

The Self in Ancient Israel

The challenge of understanding conceptions of identity in ancient Israel is complex, because the concept is widely influenced by the tacitly held contemporary assumption that identity is best understood as dissociated from particular social commitments. By contrast, in most historical accounts, the social, moral and religious frameworks of the day accounted for individuals in a collective responsibility, such that consciousness of the “I” was mostly uncertain or, at best, weakly developed.¹⁸

The life of an individual in ancient Israel was always firmly integrated in the bonds of one’s family and thus of one’s people. Wherever one was set apart or isolated, something unusual (e.g. the calling of Saul to be king), if not something threatening (the death of Achan and his clan), was happening.¹⁹ Identity was better understood, in one sense, as a reflection of the metanarrative culled from the repertoire of stories and symbolic representations of the family or the community, shared and handed down. Identity was seen, in another sense, to be intelligible if one’s social action reflected and

¹⁶ Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 87.

¹⁷ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self* 59.

¹⁸ Walther Eichrodt, *Man in the Old Testament: Studies in Biblical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1951), 9.

¹⁹ Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 214.

was guided by their “embeddedness” in relationships and by their stories with which they identified. Actions in this time period are rarely guided by individual motives.²⁰ This understanding of identity as a reflection of the metanarrative or as an expression of collective responsibility was not something imposed on otherwise individualized selves. From the contemporary perspective the modern sense of “inwardness,” the conviction that every person has “inner depths,” is what marks that person as unique.²¹

From the perspective of ancient Israel, one did not look within one’s self to discover who he or she is; one came to this knowledge by learning concretely roles one has to play in society and the stories that go along with them.²² Much of the language and conceptuality of contemporary discourse on the self, with its insistence on self-responsibility, autonomy, and personal freedom, simply does not apply to the Israel depicted in the Old Testament.²³

The Self in Greco-Roman Times

Apart from elite philosophical thought, in the Greco-Roman world of New Testament times, it is difficult to find a widespread conception of the self as personal identity. The period for childhood was short for the majority lower classes, as most children went to work early in their lives to join the family support system, typically

²⁰ James Richard Linville, *Israel in the Book of Kings: The Past as a Project of Social Identity* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 101.

²¹ Di Vito, *Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity*, 231.

²² *Ibid.*, 232. For example of this concept in O.T. Scripture, see Proverbs. 19:20, 8:32-36 and 12:1 all advise one to listen to advice and receive instruction, of to give instruction to the wise that they may be wiser yet – the point being self-knowledge is best seen as bestowed from the outside, from the community.)

²³ *Ibid.*, 225.

farming.²⁴ In the Roman Empire, with the upper classes making up only a tiny fraction of the population and upward mobility frowned upon, a rather rigid and impermeable class system determined social status and made the notion of individual identity apart from social belonging rather pointless.²⁵

While it is true that the Greeks famously formulated the injunction *gnōthi seauton* – “know thyself” – they did not normally speak of the human agent as *ho autos* – (the self) where they used the term in a context which would be translated with the indefinite article.²⁶ This began to change to some degree with the writings of Plato in the 4th century, B.C. In his famous work *Republic*, Plato established the idea of a higher moral state that is rooted in the dominance of reason. Through this idea of a higher moral state that is ruled by reason, a precursor to the notion of the self emerges, the concept of self-mastery. According to Plato, what one gains through thought or reason is self-mastery and the “good man” is “master of himself.”²⁷

To be master of oneself is to have what is conceived as the higher part of the soul, which is dominated by reason, rule over the lower part of the soul, which is dominated by desires.²⁸ When reason rules a kind of order reigns in the soul. By contrast, Plato argued the realm of desire is that of chaos. So the mastery of the self, through reason, brings a

²⁴ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 248.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

²⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 113.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

kind of unity. The centering or unification of the moral self served as a precondition for the concept of an internalized self. Without Plato the modern notion of interiority could never have developed.²⁹

It is Augustine, though, who is routinely credited with launching the modern understanding of the self with its more developed connection to individuality and personal identity unified through inwardness.³⁰ Augustine's outlook was influenced by Plato's duality, as this doctrine played a crucial role in his spiritual development. Indeed much Christian theology incorporated Platonic thought, but the Christian emphasis on the radical conversion of the will could not be fully accommodated by the commitment to reason as the highest order or unifying force. Reason in and of itself was not moral and it had no power or authority within itself to convert the will. Augustine, and others, including later Luther, made the case that reason by itself could just as well, "be the servant of the devil."³¹ Parting with Plato, then, Augustine began to see Plato's higher realm as more than just the domain of reason but as that of the eternal against the merely temporal and as that of the immutable in contrast to the ever changing.³² To Augustine, the higher order was ultimately what he saw to be the "inward man" (i.e. the soul), ordered with a capacity for comprehension of the eternal in addition to being oriented toward reason.³³ But the eternal was comprehensible because the eternal God can be

²⁹ Ibid., 116, 120.

³⁰ Ibid., 121.

³¹ Ibid., 116.

³² Ibid., 127.

³³ Ibid., 129.

known through the order and coherence he reveals in his creation. The “outward man” can only perceive the sensuous objects (able to be perceived by the senses) apart from him. So while God is found generally in perceiving objective creation through the outward senses, he is found particularly inward because he is also “nearer, more closely related to us and therefore more easily known” as the divine object of the soul.³⁴

Augustine thus urged above all else a journey inward because God “did not create and then depart; the things derived from Him have their being in Him.”³⁵ Reason is not an autonomous authority, but particularly on issues of human life, is inextricably bound with those affections and feelings that reveal to us our proper place in creation. However, as a Christian thinker – and this is crucial to Augustine – this was no single, self-directed inward journey whereby the individual moved inward to discover the means to self-integration, or self-mastery. This was a double movement – inward and then upward toward God.³⁶ This inward move was a pilgrimage that marked the soul’s inherent quest for God; as the mind turned inward it was drawn ever more surely to God.³⁷

In the times in which Augustine was living, he rightly perceived the cultural fragmentation that led to an understanding of the emerging concept of the human self, but

³⁴ David Cernic and Linda Longmire, *Know Thyself: Collected Readings on Identity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 335.

³⁵ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 65.

³⁶ Ellen T. Charry, "Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist," *Theology Today* 58, no. 2 (2001).

³⁷ Wilken, "Biblical Humanism," 19.

he was also motivated by a profound sense of his own disintegrated self.³⁸ He was convinced that without God providing its unity, the self could only remain scattered.³⁹ In Augustine's view the inward call was God's own voice inviting the human person to cling to the unity of the Godhead, and thereby to find the unity of one's own life restored in God.⁴⁰ Augustine, in essence, invented the first-person standpoint from which the self comes to have an independent identity and in which one belongs to oneself.⁴¹ However, for Augustine, finding God and finding the self are one and the same quest.

The Self from Augustine to the Renaissance

Augustine's inward turn launched the process that led to the concept of the self as the stable, abiding reality that constitutes the individual human being.⁴² Later, Medieval Christian theology emphasized a type of duality where it was speculated that the soul (inward reality) and the body (outward reality) were independent, distinct substances.⁴³ Thomas Aquinas, for example, begins the "Treatise on Humankind," in his *Summa Theologica*, by referring to human beings as "composed of a spiritual and corporeal substance."⁴⁴ This two substance view of humans prompted theologians to then ponder the nature or ontology of these two different substances while preserving the preeminence

³⁸ Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self," 72.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Phillip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 91-93.

⁴² Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self," 72.

⁴³ Paul King Jewett and Marguerite Shuster, *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human: A Neo-Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 36.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 36.

of the ongoing inward turn initiated by Augustine. This duality also allowed for the creation of a new, unique understanding of human development. On the one hand, this duality preserved the foundational identity of the human self as created in the image of God, rooted in the inward reality of humanity, but, on the other, it emphasized the presence of original sin as entrenched in the corrupt “flesh,” rooted in the outward reality of humanity.⁴⁵ Human beings were seen as having innate tendencies toward ungodliness and sinfulness, with the badness becoming stronger during the developmental years if not counteracted by stern discipline.⁴⁶

Also, at the end of the Middle Ages, the rise of “nominalist theology” had the unintended consequence of creating the philosophical space for early humanism. The earliest concept of *physis* (Greek: nature) conceived of a physical world, with an anthropic and divine component as a harmonious, integrated whole.⁴⁷ In an effort to preserve God as theologically autonomous and free from the bounds of contingency, nominalist thought essentially relegated the divine to a supernatural sphere separate from “nature” where it retained no more than a causal, external link. This dissolution of the transcendent from the “cosmos,” or the created order of things, fundamentally affected the conveyance of meaning from nature to humanity.⁴⁸ Whereas Augustine’s view saw a necessary link between the inward and the upward (i.e. transcendence) in comprehending the coherence of the self, nominalist thought of the late medieval period opened the door

⁴⁵ Muuss, *Theories of Adolescence*, 15.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Louis Dupre, *Passage to Modernity: Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

to the early humanism of the Renaissance, shifting the burden of coherence in the universe (and the self) to the human mind.

The Renaissance is considered a period of intellectual rebirth and revitalization with strong philosophical and scientific underpinnings. It could also be considered the beginning of a reaction against some of the authoritative traditions found in institutions such as church, education and in society more generally. With the revival of Greek and Roman thought, the development of new artistic techniques and the creation of new methods of scientific inquiry the innate badness of humans came into question. This paved the way for the self to be slowly relinquished from institutional restrictions and influence.⁴⁹ Again, whereas the trajectory of the self since the time of Augustine had been always inward and upward toward God, now the trajectory was becoming reoriented so that the purpose or ends of human life would no longer need to be defined in relation to a cosmic order, but now, so they believed, could be (and in fact had to be) discovered.⁵⁰

The Self in the Emerging Modern Period

As the Enlightenment emerged the locus of the human person became re-linked to the power of reason. Reason of course, in and of itself was not a new idea or concept. Augustine, in his own formulations of the inward turn toward the self saw reason as a crucial discipline that aimed at fitting persons to understand “the order of things in general” and also ultimately to discovering the vision of God, who is “the very fount

⁴⁹ Muuss, *Theories of Adolescence*, 17.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 200.

whence flows everything that is true, being himself the Father of Truth.”⁵¹ The Enlightenment understanding of reason, however, represented a fundamental shift in trajectory for the self.

Rather than understanding reason as the ability to see the presence of the eternal within the material that typified historical philosophy up to this point, the thinkers in the Age of Reason saw reason as the means to objectify the mechanistic world, to discover the inner workings of the universe, therefore gaining a sort of world-mastery, exercising instrumental control over it.⁵² This simultaneous elevation of the primacy of reason along with the emerging individualized self continued the slow decoupling of the self from the divine unity of the triune God. In the optimistic exuberance characteristic of the Enlightenment, this new rational self assumed the role of the active agent in the task of world-mastery simply through the exercise of instrumental reason.⁵³

The Enlightenment, by insisting on reason’s autonomous authority independent of the sensibilities of the heart as well as God, for all intents and purposes, finalized the separation begun in the Renaissance between reason and its proper transcendent ends.⁵⁴ This, however, was not a conspiratorial assault with a particular agenda to decouple the conception of the self from anything religious or metaphysical in nature. It turns out that in the early period of the Enlightenment there was something of a convergence of streams

⁵¹ Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self*, 93.

⁵² Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self," 72-73.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁴ James R. Peters, *The Logic of the Heart: Augustine, Pascal, and the Rationality of Faith* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 16.

of thought in the realms of moral philosophy, science, and theology that together were complicit in quietly but decisively eroding the notion that the concept of the self was necessarily dependent on the unifying, purposeful power of God.

For example, the stream of moral philosophy held a sentimental notion that even if severed from its erstwhile dependence on God, the new independent self would still be oriented toward the greater good of society. 17th century Anglican theologian Richard Hooker assured, “Reason is the director of man’s will discovering in action what is good. For the laws of well-doing are the dictates of right reason.”⁵⁵ Later, in the early 19th century, this philosophical stream assured that there was something inherent “in the nature of humanity that interests him[sic] in the fortune of others” that creates something of a necessary obligation to the good of others, if for no other reason than, “the pleasure of seeing it.”⁵⁶ It was still assumed, in other words, humanity had an essential nature that was oriented to the good of humankind and that there was an inherent goodness in others.

The next stream of this confluence came from the scientific revolution that shifted the goal of science from contemplation to productive efficacy. Influenced by the likes of Francis Bacon, this concept of science and the scientific method of inquiry established an instrumental purpose to science combined with a commitment to a proper, moral end to things in the world. In the words of Bacon, “Scientific probing is part of the pious man’s efforts to use things according to God’s purposes.”⁵⁷ This stream was a phenomenon of

⁵⁵ Richard Hooker, *On the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72.

⁵⁶ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Philadelphia: A. Finley Publishing, 1817), 3.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 230.

this time only. Science, in its ongoing narrative in the Enlightenment certainly came to believe about itself that it alone held the key to understanding the secrets of the world, bodies and minds based on “objective observation” and that an “unfettered” science, free from any prior teleological commitment, is the only hope for true enlightenment.⁵⁸

The third stream, a change in Protestant theology, flowed quite naturally with the new science stream. The emerging Protestant theology of the seventeenth and early 18th century, specifically Calvinists but also Puritans, had a concern for instrumentality – particularly in the form of personal discipline and the resulting social order based on such disciplined people. Although unregenerate humans could do nothing on their own to bring reconciliation with God about, the new theology assumed that the persons reconciled to God would feel the imperative to repair the disorder of things and make them right again in God’s plan.⁵⁹ This had the effect of elevating the individual’s responsibility, through personal discipline and commitment, to the “careful and sober use of the things which surround us as God intended them to be used.”⁶⁰ Whereas the new science offered a belief that the world could be properly understood and used as it was meant to be, the new theology offered humans, in a similar way, the sense that they could control the order of the world around them in, living “the spiritually correct way to be.”⁶¹

Together, the assurances of moral philosophy, the shift in the goal of science along with the movements of Protestant theology toward an individual effort to bring

⁵⁸ Smith, *Moral, Believing Animal*, 71.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 229.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 231.

order and control to the world, were seemingly motivated in similar directions. Thus the new science, with its fledgling notion of an instrumental stance toward the world, girded by the reassurance of moral philosophy that humanity would be bent toward the greater good, took hold, not forcefully, but cooperatively with the new theology, providing it with spiritual purpose. Together, this confluence elevated the self as the central agent in self-mastery, which at least initially, was viewed as a religious vocation.⁶²

Through the confluence of these streams emerged the notion that perhaps reason, as the powerful instrument of epistemology, could, through the avenues of spiritual devotion and piety, also explain the mechanisms of the individual human being. This promise of possibility led to the elevation of the self as the agent in the task of self-mastery.⁶³ What therefore initially emerged, from the Reformers and Puritans all the way to the Great Awakening revivalists, as a vocation of religious piety and devotion became a significant shift in the religious stream that in essence spiritualized the notion of mastery endemic to the Enlightenment, namely, the attempt to gain control over the self.⁶⁴ Later, under the influence of John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards, the “converted self” of the Great Awakening evangelical movement became the primary agent of assurance of genuine conversion.⁶⁵ Accordingly, the Christian life was seen as beginning with an assurance-mediating conversion experience and continuing through the ongoing

⁶² Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self," 73.

⁶³ Ibid. This is in some respects actually a recapitulation of the Platonic theory of self mastery, the higher moral state of humanity, achieved through the dominance of reason

⁶⁴ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 78-86.

⁶⁵ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 85.

process of increasing holiness (of the individual), so the believing soul not only gains mastery over self but thereby also tests and knows with certainty the status of being the recipient of God's salvation.⁶⁶

As the self became central in understanding the objectified world, it was not long before the self became central not just in active knowing through the senses but of assigning meaning to that which was observed.⁶⁷ For example, in Immanuel Kant's estimation, the world is not merely an object for human scientific exploration but a stage on which humans act; that is, it is a realm of moral value.⁶⁸ However, to Kant, morality is not fixed and transcendent but is a dynamic relationship between the autonomous active agent and the "universal law," which the self perceives through "practical reason."⁶⁹

This, in effect, reverses the basic direction of ethics, such that the morality of an act is now embedded in the intention of the acting subject. The individual acts, essentially as an autonomous moral agent, according to his or her duty, as that individual's reason determines what that duty is in the given situation.⁷⁰ Of course the unexamined and perhaps unintended consequence of this effect is that the ethical burden now rested squarely on the shoulders of the autonomous, individual self.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 85.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 74

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 76. According to Kant, *practical reason* was distinguished from theoretical reason (which is the knowledge of "what is") as the representation of what "ought to be."

⁷⁰ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 76

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

The Self in the 20th Century

In the 20th century the discipline of “self-psychology” emerged.⁷² The contributions of William James are of great importance here, as he devised the distinction between two fundamental aspects of the self, the “I-self” as subject or knower and the “Me-self” as object or known.⁷³ It is the available cognitive capacities of the I-self, as constituted by self-awareness (appreciation of one’s inward being), self-agency (the sense of one’s autonomy), self-continuity (the sense that one remains the same person over time), and self-coherence (a stable sense of the self as a single, coherent, bounded entity) that are able to perceive, assess and construct “an empirical aggregate” of the Me-self with its various components: the material me, the social me and the spiritual me.”⁷⁴ It is in fact the Me-self, although differing terminology has been employed over time, with its social, material and spiritual components that took center stage of most theoretical treatments of the self, coming to be labeled the self-concept.⁷⁵

With the idea of a constructible, objective self-concept as underlying the notion of individual identity, psychology grew in its influence to a place of preeminence in affirming the primacy of the self. In fact, Gordon Allport, James’ protégé, brimmed confidently, “the existence of the self is the one fact of which every mortal person, every

⁷² Harter and Fischer, *The Construction of the Self*, 14.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

psychologist included, is perfectly convinced.”⁷⁶ Following in the wake of the new self-concept, the assumption came that there needed to be a therapeutic cast to the self for determining what comprises a “normal, sound, healthy personality.”⁷⁷ Erik Erikson typified this trend in psychology to devise typologies of the development of the “healthy personality” and to see identity as a task to be completed rather than a preexistent given.⁷⁸

The impulse toward personal responsibility for establishing identity soon opened the door to the self-sufficient, self-constructing self of modern psychology. The work of Abraham Maslow has been influential here. Maslow, convinced he had discovered a morally neutral, essential human nature in his growth and self-actualization psychology, spoke of the human ideal as “self actualization” or “full-humanness.”⁷⁹ Eventually this understanding of the self led to the view that the self is the arbiter and focal point of meaning, values and even existence itself.

The highest value that the self can posit is freedom, which, when understood as the flipside of self-consciousness or self-awareness, involves the capacity either to mold or to actualize oneself.⁸⁰ As optimistic and confident as the now preeminent discipline of psychology seemed to be, this intensely individualized, therapeutic cast for identity formation actually marked the demise of the self as understood in terms of a foundational, stabilized, integrated unity.

⁷⁶ Gordon W. Allport, "The Ego in Contemporary Psychology," *Psychological review* 50, no. 5 (1943).

⁷⁷ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 93.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 93

⁷⁹ Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self," 73.

⁸⁰ Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self," 74.

Erikson's work, for example, was influenced by Sigmund Freud, and it was Freud's work that effectively displaced questions of the unity of personal identity development in favor of "process." In other words, the *telos* of self discovery was not oriented toward a foundational permanence, continuity or cohesion but lost in a free-floating self without any semblance of a fixed identity. The self is merely "an endless, unpredictable interplay of conscious and unconscious identities."⁸¹

This, in effect, is the post-modern understanding of the self.⁸² The deconstructed, free floating self is now awash in a de-institutionalized society, prompting some to suggest that the chances of achieving a true identity is effectively lost.⁸³ Having broken with institutional credibilities from which guidance and moral energy derived necessary or identity formation, new credibilities are not yet operationally effective and perhaps cannot become so in a culture constantly probing for and yet rejecting any particular, fixed direction for identity formation.⁸⁴ Today, influenced predominantly by postmodernity, the self is a series of free floating actors, with no universals or center, just preferences as the arbiter and focal point of meaning.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Ibid., 76

⁸² Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 99.

⁸³ Roy F. Baumeister, "How the Self Became a Problem: A Psychological Review of Historical Research," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 1 (1987): 8.

⁸⁴ Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 19.

⁸⁵ Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self," 74.

Summary

As attractive as the unanchored, liberated and flexible self of today may be in concept, no one can simply escape or be extracted from the human condition at every level.⁸⁶ People still see their identity as defined in part by some moral or spiritual commitment or they may define it in part some other tradition they belong to in order to provide them the frame within which they can determine where they stand. To lose these commitments or associations completely would leave them adrift without any marker to provide and interpret the significance of things for them.⁸⁷ Again, only in modern times has the widely held view that the self existed, apart from a particular social, moral or spiritual framework.⁸⁸

The notion of what theologians described as “corporate personality” in ancient times or identity dependent on significant anchors in social groupings can offend our modern day, individualistic sensibilities.⁸⁹ Ironically, this concept of belonging does not diminish the individual in anyway. It simply underscores the community as the reason for the individual’s existence rather than vice versa.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 87.

⁸⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

⁸⁸ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 59.

⁸⁹ Robinson, "Hebrew Psychology," 376-377. The contrast between early 20th century conceptions of the self and that of the ancient world was so starkly different that theologians felt the need to speak of the concept of a “corporate personality” to express the difference. This concept was refined later in the 20th century, but the element most important in this discussion remains relatively intact; that the conception of one as an individual self was not preeminent over belonging to a particular social group., see John W. Rogerson, "Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: A Re-Examination," *Journal of Theological Studies* 21, no. 1 (1970): 5.

⁹⁰ Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity," 225.

From a theological vantage point, it is almost intuitive to say that human beings are created, not to float freely with no anchor, roots or belonging, but for and by the narratives and other influences of a particular social structure.⁹¹ Nonetheless, the preeminence of the flexible, multi-position self has profoundly influenced the understanding of identity to the degree that although most would argue that “discovering one’s self” as an adolescent is a universal task, there remains great uncertainty about the process or even the sustainability of that understanding of the self. More needs to be said about where the adolescent self resides in the current social landscape.

⁹¹ Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 87.

CHAPTER 3

THE LANDSCAPE OF CONTEMPORARY ADOLESCENT IDENTITY

A formalized understanding of adolescence as a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, rooted in psychology, physiology and biology gained prominence in the very early 20th century.¹ It was assumed that adolescent identity was dependent on two main factors, the internal developmental drive (the personal, psychological level of identity) and society (the social or civilizational level).² In order to steer that drive of the self away from “the destructive illusions of uniqueness and separateness,” social institutions were responsible for providing the social roles that were internalized to shape identity and ground the self in purposeful belonging.³

Early on in adolescent theory, the prevailing developmental psychologists, sociologists and psycho-sociologists of this time assumed that adolescent identity was essentially an inevitable, internal developmental process, shaped externally as guided by supportive social structures. From the perspective of Erikson, adolescents are in an

¹ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Hamilton Cravens, "G. Stanley Hall's Adolescence: A Centennial Reappraisal Introduction," *History of Psychology* 9, no. 3 (2006): 167.

² Sebald, *Adolescence*, 51.

³ Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 3.

“identity crisis.” For Erikson, the term identity is “a persistent sameness within oneself (self-sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others.”⁴ The term “crisis” does not suggest impending disaster, but instead refers to a crucial moment, when development must move one way or the other, designating a necessary marshaling of resources for growth, recovery and further differentiation.⁵

This necessary movement one way or the other is part of what Blois called the second individuation of adolescence –the unconscious internal processes that propel the adolescent toward identity formation.⁶ According to Blois, there is a significant internal, progressive development in adolescence and it takes place with the formation and buttressing influence of internalized social roles and social institutions.⁷ However, this advance, Blois says, “comes with a heavy price if it is not guided or complemented by a sense of purpose and of fitting in, which jointly secure a solid anchorage in the human community.”⁸ In the latter part of the 20th century the concept of a fluid, free floating self disembedded from social roles that were deemed restrictive and perhaps oppressive began to emerge. At the same time, access to various forms of “social capital” from traditional sources such as Institutions, community and family seemingly began to erode. Whether it is the loss of social capital that has caused the self to be more autonomous or

⁴ Gerald R. Adams, "Revised Classification Criteria for the Extended Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status: A Rejoinder," *Journal of Adolescence* 17, no. 6 (1994): 3.

⁵ Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 16.

⁶ Ann Phoenix and Ali Rattansi, "Proliferating Theories: Self and Identity in Post-Eriksonian Context: A Rejoinder to Berzonsky, Kroger, Levine, Phinney, Schachter, and Weigert and Gecas," *Identity* 5, no. 2 (2005): 208.

⁷ Blois, *The Adolescent Passage*, 141.

⁸ Ibid.

the increasing autonomy of the self that has caused the disconnection from social capital is unclear. However, if identity is not anchored in anything more than a fluid, free floating sense of self understood primarily in terms of the individual and, at the same time, free from any institutional or ideational influence, this leaves individuals to their own devices, wholly dependent on self-determination and ingenuity but little else, to find their place in the social order for identity.⁹

Up until recently, the normative assumption about identity was that the self developed in the crucible of interaction with others and those significant interactions become internalized over time. If there is a dearth of nurturance, encouragement and approval it will cause a “tarnished image of self.”¹⁰ What early theorists assumed to be the norm for adolescent identity development then– the progressive, internal drive taking place within the context of internalized social roles and social institutions – does not exist as it once did.¹¹

Ideally, identity is dependent on the stability of the social environment and the uniformity of controlling values or what has been described as qualities found in what Hans Sebald called one’s “Primary Groups.” A primary group is characterized by intimate, face to face interaction and spontaneous cooperation that generates stable boundaries, rules and values, and contributes to the social nature of the individual.¹²

⁹ Leroy T. Howe, *The Image of God: A Theology for Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 38.

¹⁰ Harter and Fischer, *The Construction of the Self*, 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² Sebald, *Adolescence*, 170.

“Secondary Groups,” on the other hand, are associations that stand in contrast to primary characteristics: impermanence, casual contact and a lesser degree of derivation of basic values.¹³ As Figure 3.1 below illustrates, the most compelling primary associations for an adolescent have been the family, peer group and to a slightly lesser extent, the neighborhood or community. When such associations are consistent in their “primariness” they have the effect of blending individuals into a social entity in which one’s self becomes an integral part of the common life because they offer universalizing value orientation and belonging.¹⁴

Figure 3.1

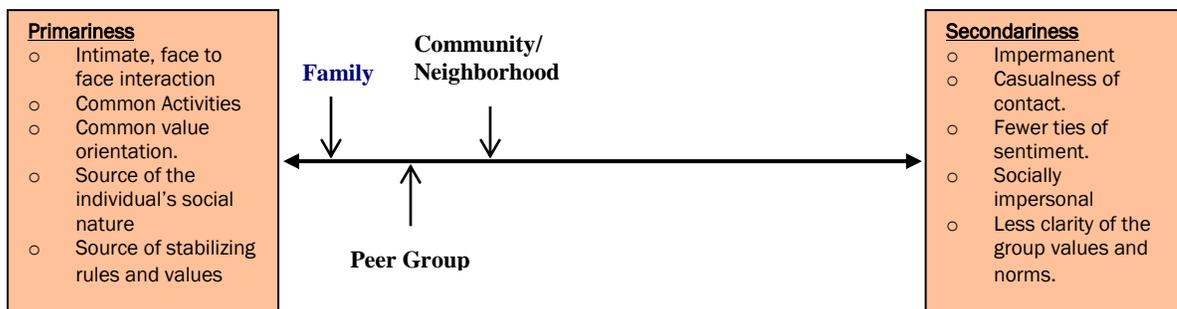


Figure 3.1 indicates the family and community have high primary characteristics and where the peer group, while subordinate to the family in degree of primariness, is still compatible with the values of the community and family structures.

In reality, groups do not come neatly divided into either primary or secondary types, rather groups differ from one another not categorically, but in the degree to which the interacting behavior of the participants reflects primariness. Over the past half century, ways of perceiving, valuing and feeling about ourselves have significantly

¹³ Sebald, *Adolescence*, 171.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 170-171.

altered many aspects of American society, especially the family. The primary “modern nuclear family” has been replaced by the more secondary “postmodern permeable family” – reflecting the openness, complexity and diversity of contemporary lifestyles.¹⁵ Communities and neighborhoods, once a source of stabilizing values, are now less relevant in terms of degree of primariness. In most Western societies, market-oriented policies and consumption-based lifestyles have more influence in shaping the community ethos than community-oriented policies and production-based lifestyles that value the collective good of its members.¹⁶

As a result, adolescents are marginalized as they experience continuous conflict among different attitudes, values, ideologies, and lifestyles. Therefore they experience a lack of social anchorage, except in relationship to the peer group (Figure 3.2).¹⁷ The adolescent is in a state of “social locomotion,” moving into an unstructured social and psychological field.¹⁸ Values and ideologies are no longer clear, the paths to them are ambiguous and adolescents may not be certain they even lead to any appreciable goals.¹⁹

¹⁵ Elkind, *Ties That Stress*, 1.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, James E. Côté, Seth J. Schwartz, "Identity and Agency in Emerging Adulthood: Two Developmental Routes in the Individualization Process " *Youth Society* 37, no. (2005): 203.

¹⁷ Muuss, *Theories of Adolescence*, 150.

¹⁸ The psychological field is also known as a “life space,” as put forth by psychologist Kurt Lewin. See “Kurt Lewin’s Field Theory of Adolescence” in Rolf E. Muuss, *Theories of Adolescence*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies, 1988)

¹⁹ Muuss, *Theories of Adolescence*, 147.

Figure 3.2

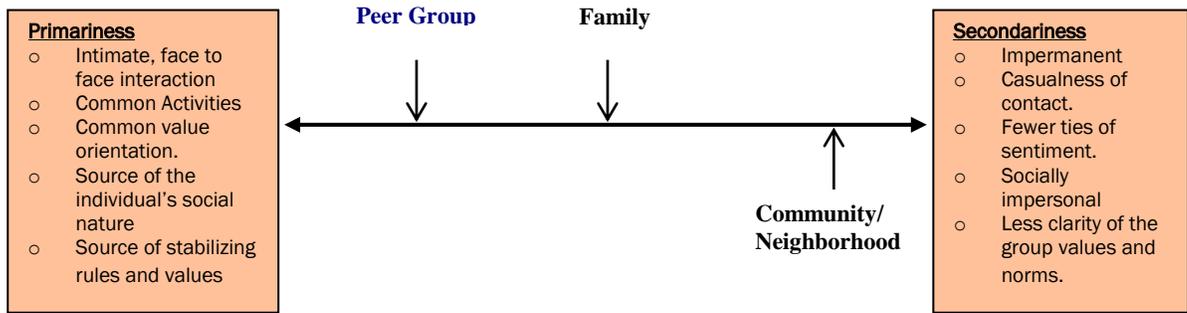


Figure 3.2 indicates a shift, where the peer group assumes more primary characteristics than the family, and where the disintegrating community or neighborhood where the adolescent lives moves significantly toward secondary characteristics.

These two graphs emphasize the changing landscape that impacts adolescent identity – the discontinuity of social-structural conditions that allow for internalization of identity roles and the loss of cultural ideation that extends belonging and anchoring into the larger society for the adolescent. Rather than see this changing landscape as pathogenic, theorists have integrated a postmodern understanding of identity as a progressive, free-floating process that is marginally influenced by the surrounding social structures – if they exist at all – into a “normalized” view of understanding identity.

Postmodern View of Identity

As modernity fades into postmodernity, the relative impact society used to have on adolescent identity has become even more amorphous while the construct of adolescence has progressed into a psychosocial force. In the postmodern era, paradigms for understanding adolescent identity have been revised to reflect the tenor of the day. Postmodernism is a nebulous term with multiple meanings and applications. The various understandings of “postmodern” that are most relevant for understanding contemporary

adolescent identity formation may be summed up this way. First, it is “an era or age characterized by rapid technological innovations, consumerism, and ever-proliferating options for lifestyle arrangements.”²⁰ Secondly, it is “an epistemological stance or type of thinking that rejects the notion of an objectively given, directly observable reality.”²¹ Indeed, unprecedented rapid social, economic and cultural change is seen as one of the key features of lived reality in Western societies in the contemporary period.²²

Ever-proliferating lifestyles in what has already been described as a democratic identity process combined with a rejection of an epistemology rooted in any givens has had the effect of influencing adolescents to understand becoming “who I am” as more akin to creating multiple personae who are opportunists, supersensitive to every ephemeral demand on the multistage social environment than the older notion of taking in attitudes and convictions by role playing, role taking and internalization.²³ Indeed, the social scientific interest in the question of identities is linked to the “disembedding” of what was previously assumed to be settled identities, at a personal and social level in the postmodern, cultural context.²⁴ Reflecting this *ethos* is psychologist Michael Berzonsky’s model for understanding adolescent identity. Berzonsky has developed a “process-oriented paradigm” of identity formation called “Identity Styles,” denoting three cognitive orientations that are essentially styles of personal problem solving and decision

²⁰ Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 99.

²¹ Steinar Kvale, *Psychology and Postmodernism: Inquiries in Social Construction* (London: Sage, 1992), 30.

²² Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 99.

²³ Sebald, *Adolescence*, 50.

²⁴ Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 99.

making that correlate with James Marcia's four identity statuses.²⁵ Based on a constructivist theoretical perspective, this paradigm suggests individuals construct both a sense of who they think they are and the reality within which they act.²⁶ An Informational style involves actively searching for, elaborating, and evaluating issue-relevant information to investigate multiple options before committing to any particular one.²⁷ This style is linked to Marcia's Achievement and Moratorium statuses in that each involve a process of active exploration.²⁸

The Normative style represents growth by conforming to social and familial expectations and a high degree of commitment to authority and to the exercise of judgment. This style is closely linked to Marcia's Foreclosure status as both involve the forming of identity commitments without the consideration of alternative options.²⁹ The Diffuse/Avoidant style is marked by the tendency to avoid or procrastinate until the affective cues in a given situation dictate behavioral reactions, usually on a situation by situation basis.³⁰ This is similar to Marcia's Diffusion status, as both entail the absence of identity commitments and the apparent lack of concern with their development.³¹

²⁵ Michael D. Berzonsky, "Identity Style: Conceptualization and Measurement," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 4, no. 3 (1989).

²⁶ Seth J. Schwartz, Ronald L. Mullis, Alan S. Waterman, and Richard M. Dunham, "Ego Identity Status, Identity Style, and Personal Expressiveness: An Empirical Investigation of Three Convergent Constructs," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 15, no. 4 (2000): 506.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 506.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 507.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 507.

³⁰ Berzonsky, "Identity style," 129.

³¹ Schwartz et al, 507.

Berzonsky's paradigm reflects a more pragmatic postmodern approach to identity than Marcia's status approach because it assumes that identity is based on the individual's preference of self concept, that postmodern society will remain in flux due to ongoing social, political, economic and technological change and that identity will exist in an ongoing dialectic between the processes of identity structures and social-context accommodative processes to revise that structure.³²

This example of a contemporary understanding of adolescent identity, in a postmodern context, illustrates the challenge of locating adolescent identity in something stable and definitive, while preserving commitments to the postmodern *ethos*. Because of rapid and ongoing cultural, political, technological and economic changes, it is assumed there is no absolute, universal standpoint that can be adopted and relied on amidst the flux and impermanency.³³ Berzonsky does not see identity achievement to be a process by which youth discover who they are or what they want. Rather, he sees it as a process of constructing a sense of "who they think they are" and "what they think they want" and then making a sincere commitment to trying to actualize those hypothetical possibilities.³⁴

The postmodern understanding of adolescent identity seeks to broaden the understanding of identity by minimizing the limits of "settled identities" in order to create the possibility of "multiple positionings" by borrowing, mixing or matching elements

³² Michael D. Berzonsky, "Ego Identity: A Personal Standpoint in a Postmodern World," *Identity* 5, no. 2 (2005): 133-134.

³³ *Ibid.*, 134.

³⁴ Berzonsky, "Ego Identity," 134.

from a range of ethnic and gender identities previously excluded from the conversation.³⁵ Although though there may be value in this sort of exposure to identity possibilities, in a landscape of disintegrating social structure, it does not make the process of identity integration any smoother.³⁶ Due to the proliferating ways for social connectedness, Kenneth Gergen described the concept of a “saturated” self thrust into a dizzying array of demands in relationships. To manage the demand, saturated selves create “multiple role-related selves” that may not be compatible, leading to the “conflict of the different Me’s.”³⁷ Gergen warns that as more and disparate voices are added to one’s life, committed identity becomes an increasingly arduous achievement.”³⁸

Today adolescents cope with the demands of these disparate voices often by turning to mediating technologies such as Facebook that creates unique space for “objective self analysis” (OSA). OSA theory, developed in the 1970’s, assumes that humans experience the self as both subject and object. For example, the self as subject is found in daily experiences of life (e.g., waiting for the bus, doing homework, watching TV) in which the self is an active participant in life but is not self-conscious. However, people become the “object of their own consciousness” when they focus attention on the self through common stimuli such as a mirror, photos of the self, audio feedback, or

³⁵ Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 105.

³⁶ Ibid., 105.

³⁷ Harter and Fischer, *The Construction of the Self*, 22. See also, Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 73.

³⁸ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 73.

having a video camera pointed at them.³⁹ Although OSA can have both positive and negative effects, when self-awareness is heightened, positive affect and self-esteem typically decrease.⁴⁰ Facebook allows adolescents (and other users) to selectively self-present themselves in asynchronous media. They can take their time when posting information about themselves, carefully selecting what aspects they would like to emphasize. Researchers now suggest that online self-presentations can become integrated into how one views themselves, especially when the presentations take place in a public, digital space. This phenomenon, known as “identity shift,” demonstrates that self-presentations enacted in online space can impact users’ self-concepts.⁴¹ In other words, social networking sites provide new means for manipulating the flexible self, not to a core identity, but only to the level of self-esteem or self-concept. In fact, there is no suggestion, in this sort of research, that the self should be anything more.

Summary

A commitment to adolescent identity as the formation and discovery of an integrated core self, while anchored in meaning giving social structures is crucial. Adolescents do not possess the cognitive or developmental capacities to discover one’s “self” any other way. Postmodernity has served to normalize a fluid, flexible self and the absence of absolutes in which to anchor identity. This reality does not liberate

³⁹ Amy L. Gonzales and Jeffrey T. Hancock, "Mirror, Mirror on My Facebook Wall: Effects of Exposure to Facebook on Self-Esteem," *CyberPsychology, Behavior & Social Networking* 14, no. 1/2 (2011): 80.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80

adolescents to discover some hidden or oppressed identity. Instead it leaves them adrift in a perfect storm of sorts. Adolescence has emerged at precisely this moment in history, when the understanding of the self in proper perspective is obscured and the necessary social context that provides a central creed or controlling narrative is least available. In this present landscape, conversations about adolescent identity bounce between a several options.

The first is nostalgic – a return of observable trustworthy roles and role models that can be internalized by adolescents into stable unified identities that are consistent across various social situations.⁴² The next is pragmatic – the assumption that the social demands are so great that identity in adolescence is best understood in terms of acquired skills and habits in order to fit in as an adult.⁴³ The final is resignation – adolescent identity is not about a formed integrated self at all, but about inhabiting multiple personae on a thousand stage plays, learning the scripts, the audience, the ethics – the communicative and interactive skills needed – to give distinct performances for every situational vignette of life.⁴⁴ Ministry to adolescents can offer more than the nostalgic, the pragmatic or simply resignation. However, the Church in and its ministry to adolescents needs to be understood in its historical context in order to properly respond to the reality of this changing landscape of adolescent identity.

⁴² Blos, *The Adolescent Personality*, 242.

⁴³ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson, *Being Adolescent: Conflict and Growth in the Teenage Years* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 8. The authors contend, “The simplest task of adolescence is to learn the patterns of action required for participation in society. Teenagers must acquire habits to live by. They must learn that there are times for sleeping and eating, for working and studying, for relaxing and playing. If they do not learn to concentrate on these tasks at the prescribed time and in the prescribed ways, they will not be able to function as adults.”

⁴⁴ Sebald, *Adolescence*, 51-56.

CHAPTER 4

IDENTITY AND YOUTH MINISTRY IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

So far, the case has been made that a primary task of adolescence is resolving the question “who am I?” becoming “a self.” This process is deeply influenced by the contemporary assumption that one’s identity is highly individual and ideally should be flexible and fluid. Although this unfettered self has been more than fifteen hundred years in the making, the manifestation of the hyper-individual self is relatively recent. Whereas for most of human history, identity differentiation was concurrent with anchorage in social structures and roles of the human community, this is no longer the case. For millennia our human ancestors would huddle around fires listening to elders tell the imaginative stories that became not only the means to interpret the world around them but a believed-in metanarrative that provided meaning, purpose and order to the social order.¹ Cultures valued their children in the past by including them in the sharing of the

¹ Social orders ultimately are held together and set into motion by particular ideas and ideals about themselves that comprise their collective identities. It is these collective identities that give the larger social orders their essential locations, orientations and significance in the larger world. And the center of any collective identity is not instrumental functionality but believed-in ideas and images that are sacred. Narratives operate at many levels in building, guiding and sustaining those collective ideals in order to help construct more specific and personal accounts of meaning, purpose and explanation in life. See: Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 75.

metanarrative because they recognized them as the key means to pass it on. With new epistemologies that began to emerge, first in the Renaissance and then the Enlightenment, the controlling narrative was gradually replaced with science, rationality and technology.² No longer was it important to center the culture on the metanarrative. No longer were the stories, symbols, songs and dances of the metanarrative considered satisfactory. Because these new epistemologies were so sophisticated and required complex understanding, children were no longer able to be participants. Likewise, the idea of handing down the collective identity of the culture to children no longer seemed as important to the culture as it once did.

Throughout much of recorded history, certainly “generation gaps” have existed in differing forms, requiring some sort of transition from childhood into adulthood, but these were usually resolved by various forms of training and rites of passage for which the larger society took responsibility.³ As more sociological shifts occurred, however, young people had fewer opportunities to contribute to the larger society. Colonialism and militarism emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, leading to the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most of which excluded the young. These epistemological and societal changes essentially shifted the burden for assimilating into adulthood away from adult society as a whole and onto the children. It is in this context, the margins of the human community, that the developmental phenomenon of adolescence and the internal psychodynamic question, “Who am I?” begins to emerge.

² Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 63.

³ Dean Borgman, "A History of American Youth Ministry," in *The Complete Book of Youth Ministry*, ed. Warren S. Benson and Mark H. Senter III (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 62.

Ministry to Adolescents in Historical Perspective

Although the developmental stage of adolescence had not yet entered the academic lexicon, ministry to “young people”⁴ began to emerge in the middle of the 19th century as the church began to recognize and address what it considered to be the “youth problem” – the spiritual needs of young people.⁵ That ministry could hardly be expected to take into consideration of developmental reality of the adolescent self from a theological and praxiological perspective, for adolescence, the self and practical theology in ministry did not exist as it does today.

At the same time, youth ministry has a history and a trajectory that influences contemporary forms of ministry to adolescents today and understanding that influence is essential in developing ministry praxis that addresses the “youth problem” of today – the spiritual as well as the identity needs of young people.⁶ Prior to the 20th century, adolescence as an extended, transitional stage in the lifespan was not a category people used to understand their children. The transition to adulthood more or less began in puberty and ended in economic independence - young people were thought to be adults

⁴ Youth ministry, admittedly, is not an entirely accurate phrase when considered historically, but it will only be used out of expedience. The assumption today is that youth ministry proper is ministry to adolescents, those in the developmental life stage of adolescence. ‘Adolescence’ is not always the same as the frequently used term ‘youth’ in history but often, these words are used interchangeably, giving the improper impression that adolescent ministry has existed in some form or another for several hundred years. For example, Jonathan Edwards referred to “young people” in his writings about the revivals, but this is not the same as adolescents to whom contemporary youth ministry it targeted today. As is the case often in 18th century terminology, young people can mean a range of ages from as young as 13 to as old as 30. See, for example, George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 300.

⁵ Mark H. Senter, III, "Horace Bushnell, Theodore Cuyler, and Francis Clark: A Study of How Youth Ministry Began," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 2, no. 2 (2004): 31.

⁶Mark W. Cannister, "Youth Ministry's Historical Context: The Education and Evangelism of Young People," in *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*, ed. Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 77.

when they were able “to do a man’s or woman’s work” – and this was not a long transition.⁷ There is no doubt that evangelists and ministers of early evangelical Protestantism earnestly desired to impact and shape the lives of youth , and they perhaps did recognize, at an elementary level, the need to contextualize ministry in such a way that it would appeal to a particular age grouping.⁸ This is not the same as saying ministry to adolescents dates back to the 19th century. Those “youth ministries” are often considered (incorrectly) to be synonyms for ministry to adolescents. In fact, it is difficult to assert accurately that true youth ministry even existed prior to the late 19th century.⁹

The First Phase of Ministry to Adolescents: Missional

For practical purposes, the history of youth ministry can be divided into three phases, each with its own unique ministry priority, in response to its particular social context. The first phase of ministry begins in the early 19th century, with its roots in the various revival movements of the Second Great Awakening, as these movements placed a growing emphasis on younger converts.¹⁰ This emphasis of the revivals shaped the expectation that the normative conversion experience was to be oriented toward radical change more so than self-analysis and antecedent conviction.¹¹ This established the

⁷ Andrew Root, "Reexamining Relational Youth Ministry: Implications from the Theology of Bonhoeffer," *Word & World* 26, no. 3 (2006): 270.

⁸ Senter, "Horace Bushnell, Theodore Cuyler, and Francis Clark," 48.

⁹ Cannister, "Youth ministry's historical context," 82.

¹⁰ Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 64. Interestingly, the 1st Great Awakening did not target teenagers. The Puritans, for example, saw this as a burden for which they were not ready to bear alone, preferring conversions occurring in maturity.

priority for ministry to young people of the day as “missional.” However, because it emphasized “immediate regeneration” and deemphasized gradual spiritual growth, this priority was not without criticism.¹² Some, such as Horace Bushnell, reacted to what he called the “excesses” of revivalism, particularly the reliance on generating emotion-laden conversions at the expense of the role of the family and the loving care of the church as the center of religious influence.¹³ Bushnell did not oppose revivals. He saw them as periodic works of God to correct a Christian church grown cold. His concern focused on the expectation that the revivals created, which excluded what he felt was a normal process of incremental spiritual growth nurtured by the Christian family.

In 1836, he wrote *Christian Nurture*, urging an emphasis of the importance of the environment in shaping the Christian life. However, raising children as if they had always been Christian ran counter to the prevailing missional priority. The Sunday school movement, for instance, and their evangelistic curriculum popularized by those such as D.L. Moody, viewed children as “little adults” in need of conversion.¹⁴ Thus, among his contemporaries, Bushnell’s influence was minimal. It was not until later, in the early 20th century with the explosive growth of The Society for Christian Endeavor, that his emphasis on Christian nurture began to have influence.

¹¹ Cannister, "Youth Ministry's Historical Context," 77.

¹² Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 64.

¹³ Senter, "Horace Bushnell, Theodore Cuyler, and Francis Clark," 40.

¹⁴ Cannister, "Youth Ministry's Historical Context," 79.

The Second Phase of Ministry to Adolescents: Nurture/Education

In the latter part of the 19th century, Francis Clark, the pastor of Williston Church in Portland, Maine, sensed a growing lack of spiritual vitality among young people in his congregation and as well as other youth societies.¹⁵ Clark had long felt that Christian youth societies and revivals in the earlier part of the century relied on a rugged theology that conceived of God as King and Judge at the expense of God as loving father and that expected conversions to be of a more dramatic nature than that of nurturance and shepherding.¹⁶ So Clark devised a commitment or pledge element to his prayer meetings and formed the “Young People’s Society for Christian Endeavor.”

This youth mission, formed to “promote an earnest Christian life among its members, to increase their mutual acquaintance and to make them more useful in the service to God,” became one of the most influential and largest youth movements of the first half of the 20th century.¹⁷ While the Christian Endeavor Society maintained a “missional undercurrent” (by creating a safe, relational “associate membership” for those outside the faith to explore Christianity) Clark’s writings reveal the influence of Bushnell and his bent toward Christian nurture as the central priority. As Clark later wrote, the controlling idea was, “growth from within, rather than conquest from without.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Senter, "Horace Bushnell, Theodore Cuyler, and Francis Clark," 44-45.

¹⁶ Borgman, "A History of American Youth Ministry," 64.

¹⁷ Cannister, "Youth Ministry's Historical Context," 83. Although, for the first time in history, adolescence existed phenomenologically, it should be noted that the Society for Christian Endeavor was not a ministry to adolescents, per se, but a ministry for “young people” (membership was open to those 13-30 years old), similar to the understanding of young people from the earlier revivals of the 19th century.

¹⁸ Francis E. Clark, *World Wide Endeavor: The Story of the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor from the Beginning and in All Lands* (Philadelphia: Kelley, 1895), 136.

With the success of the Christian Endeavor Society, the idea of a pledging youth society spread like wildfire. By the 1920s most denominations had created their own youth societies, complete with curriculum and summer camps, effectively dominating the shape of youth ministry during this time period.¹⁹ Thus it was clear Clark as well as Bushnell were influential in moving spiritual accountability from event (emotional conversion experience) to process (endeavoring to know God), and expanding Christian nurture from a family responsibility to a normal function of the faith community.²⁰ Denominational governance pushed the priority of youth ministry even further, though, moving it from its missional undercurrent to an educational one, shifting the emphasis toward nurturing those within the church through education and accountability, rather than evangelizing those outside of it.²¹

The Third Phase of Ministry to Adolescents: Neo-Missional/Fellowship

The social upheavals of the Great Depression and World War II solidified adolescence as a sociological phenomenon and set the stage for the current phase of ministry to adolescents. During World War II, with the young men off to war, teenagers were the “biggest men in town,” bolstering their place on the sociological landscape. Out of the Depression and into the booming wartime and then postwar economy, adolescents gained unprecedented economic power. This caught the attention of merchants and marketers and soon teen oriented magazines, music, clothing and music were

¹⁹ Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 38.

²⁰ Senter, "Horace Bushnell, Theodore Cuyler, and Francis Clark," 48.

²¹ Cannister, "Youth Ministry's Historical Context," 81.

ubiquitous.²² With mandatory education, the high school was becoming the institutional locus of American youth. All of these strengthened the burgeoning, but now distinct youth culture. However, the mainline denominations, focused primarily on nurturing “their own,” did not recognize this reality as a mission field.²³ Likewise, the defensive, withdrawn and separatist strategy of the conservative and fundamentalist subculture churches fostered a suspicion of worldly culture and its institutions (such as public schools that, ironically, their students attended).²⁴ These too, failed to take seriously young people, especially those outside the church.

It was new “parachurch” ministries that recognized and specifically targeted adolescents outside the church. Formed outside of denominational governance and agendas that were heavily weighted toward nurture/education, these ministries began a revival of the missional priority. In 1931, Percy Crawford began broadcasting the “Young People’s Church in the Air” from Philadelphia; Lloyd Bryant held rallies in Times Square and formed the Association of Christian Youth in America in 1932; Evelyn McCluskey established the Miracle Book Club in Portland, Oregon in 1933, all focused on “winning adolescent converts.”²⁵ In the mid-1940s, emerging from the austerity and soberness of the Depression and World War II, the nation was starved for public gatherings.²⁶ Youth for Christ was formed and capitalized on this hunger, holding large evangelistic rallies for

²² Borgman, "A History of American Youth Ministry," 68.

²³ Cannister, "Youth Ministry's Historical Context," 86.

²⁴ Christian Smith and Michael Emerson, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 10;

²⁵ Cannister, "Youth Ministry's Historical Context," 87.

²⁶ Mark Senter, *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry* (Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 1992), 42.

young people across the country. While Youth for Christ played a significant role in establishing the theological roots of adolescent evangelism, its rally/large event strategy also began to steer ministry to adolescents away from its educational priority and toward a new, fellowship priority. Rallies were based on the idea of bringing Christian teenagers together (and their non-believing friends) not only to evangelize but also to emphasize “radiant, victorious Christian living.”²⁷ Soon ministries such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and denominational youth groups such as Methodist Youth Fellowship formed in the fellowship priority, oriented to providing Christian adolescents discipleship and accountability through fellowship with other teenagers and adult sponsors.²⁸

Even though the newly cast fellowship priority and the more established nurture/education priority were prominent in ministry to adolescents during this time, the historic, missional priority of ministry to young people began a resurgence. The most influential ministry representing this missional priority to adolescents was Young Life.²⁹ Early in his ministry, founder Jim Rayburn was deeply influenced by his assignment by the Presbyterian Mission Board to rural New Mexico and Arizona. The youthful Rayburn was naturally drawn to the teenagers in these poor communities, but was conflicted by what he discerned to be the reality these youth had little chance to encounter the Gospel unless someone intentionally took it to them. Although the “Young Life Campaign” initially began with large tent rallies in Dallas, Texas, Rayburn discovered that his true

²⁷ Cannister, "Youth Ministry's Historical Context," 88.

²⁸ Chap Clark, class lecture from “Developing a Practical Theology of Youth and Family Ministry,” Fuller Theological Seminary, 12 October, 2006.

²⁹ Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 54.

niche in youth ministry was to redefine the missional priority altogether, emphasizing an intentional, incarnational ministry of presence to adolescents, going to where they were to “earn the right to be heard,” in order to speak of and model, belonging to Christ.³⁰ Soon, youth ministry was influenced profoundly by this neo-missional priority. This brought criticism though, especially by traditional mainline and liberal denominations, that these ministries lacked the depth that nurture and education provided.

Over the last seventy years, youth ministry certainly shifted, reformed, innovated and reinvented itself to many iterations and adaptations, both inside the church and outside in parachurch ministries, but it has not entered into a significant new phase. Church youth groups are a normal part of the fabric of most churches. Parachurch ministries continue to thrive. Styles have changed. Ministries have become “attractional,” seeker friendly, outreach oriented, celebrity-driven, presence-centered, mission focused or some sort of combination of all the above. Fundamentally, however, all these various forms of ministry to adolescents has been a variation or some sort of amalgamation of a fellowship or neo-missional priority.

It could be said that ministry to youth, particularly the new ministries of the third phase, made such an impact because the pioneers of these ministries “understood the times” and, after theological reflection, responded with cutting edge, contextual and innovative ministry. This may be true at many levels. Still, it may be worth considering that ministry to adolescence gave the “appearance” it was impactful simply because the, as of yet undetected driving needs of adolescence primed such an appearance.

³⁰ Borgman, "A History of American Youth Ministry," 69.

For the first time in history, and all at the same time, adolescents were now driven by the amorphous task of discovering one's identity, answering the developmental felt-need question "who am I?" They were segmented off from the adult world by mandatory schooling and a lack of vocational opportunities, and found temporary orientation in a full blown youth culture, but one that only offered consumption and entertainment as pseudo-solutions. They were emerging from the shadow of World War II into the dark cloud of the atomic age and the proliferation of soul-less technology that began to erode the influence of family, tradition (religious and ethnic) and communities with the promise they could discover meaning and belonging through "self-chosen relationships."³¹

The combined effect of these developmental phenomena and sociological shifts left adolescents both famished and searching for someone, especially adults, to speak to them in their own language, about their issues and in a way that was not condescending or judgmental.³² Through friendships, belonging and exhilarating gatherings that is exactly what these new ministries offered. And adolescents responded! The bottom line, large and exciting numbers of young people were flocking to the clubs of Young Life, the rallies of Youth for Christ, and the emerging youth group movement, and there was no end in sight.

³¹ Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 42. In a modernized world that undercuts tradition by allowing individuals to choose their own destinies, preexisting social units (like families, communities, tribes, ethnic groups, etc.) no longer have the power to determine social interactions and therefore provide intimacy. In the gap, the phenomenon of "self-chosen relationships" emerged. Self-chosen relationships are those chosen by the individual for its own sake, for what can be derived from it in terms of meaning and identity as determined by *the individual*. This could be considered an early form of adolescent abandonment – young people were left on their own with a seemingly empowering yet empty promise to choose their own destinies by selecting relationships that seemed to offer the most potential meaning and worth.

³² Mark Oestreicher, *Youth Ministry 3.0: A Manifesto of Where We've Been, Where We Are and Where We Need to Go* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2008), 46-47.

Adolescent Ministry: Unprecedented and Underestimated

Large numbers – and with “numbers” as the mark of success – did not demand that most youthworkers do any serious inquiry or reflection on the deeper, developmental needs and tasks of adolescents or whether or not ministry methods met those needs. In defense of youth ministry innovators of the third phase, adolescence was a relatively new cultural phenomenon and because many may have assumed it had even existed for centuries, or that ministry to young people had been around for decades, it could have been easy to underestimate the yet undetected needs of this population. Theorists and academics were offering significant, early clues, even as far back as late 1930s and early 1940s. Blos wrote in 1941 in *The Adolescent Personality*, “The adolescent is facing the necessity of making choices and decisions of far-reaching importance for his future. These have always been difficult decisions. But today they are unusually difficult, for young people have no well-defined social customs and expectations to guide them.”³³

Later, Blos wrote about the need to take seriously the imperative to “secure for adolescents a solid anchorage in the human community.”³⁴ It is doubtful that Jim Rayburn, Torrey Johnson or any other ministry pioneer were reading Blos and wondering whether their ministries truly reflected or met the imperative to provide customs, expectations and adult guides to lead adolescents into anchorage into the adult world. Who could blame them – they were overwhelmingly busy with the thousands of teenagers at their rallies and clubs!

³³ Blos, *The Adolescent Personality*, 242.

³⁴ Blos, *The Adolescent Passage*, 141.

A key and very significant observation needs to be made here. The first and second phases of ministry to young people were oriented toward both young people and young adults, not to adolescents alone. Even in the second phase, when adolescence as a life stage was first recognizable, the Society for Christian Endeavor made membership available to those aged thirteen to thirty.³⁵ This could happen because young people were transitioning into adulthood relatively easily and in a relatively short period of time. Youth, young people, young adults all needed spiritual guidance and advocacy to transition into membership in the Body of Christ and ministries oriented toward them served in some form or another to that end. But there also remained enough social scaffolding, meaningful rites of passage, expectations and even vocational opportunities to facilitate the transition into full anchorage into the adult community, resolving the question, “who am I?”

This transition was not a significant concern in the praxis of the first two phases of ministry because it did not have to be. Relatively speaking, adulthood and identity would simply happen and this would coincide with integration into the body of Christ. In the third, current phase of ministry to young people the target, adolescence proper, is much narrower and substantially different from the first two phases. At the same time, most, if not all of the social scaffolding, meaningful rites of passage, expectations or even vocational opportunities that existed during much of the first two phases have eroded, making the transition to adulthood and a core sense of self extremely challenging.³⁶ But

³⁵ Cannister, "Youth Ministry's Historical Context," 86.

³⁶ Chap Clark, "The Changing Face of Adolescence: A Theological View of Human Development," in *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*, ed. Kenda Creasy Dean Chap Clark, Dave Rahn (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 51.

because ministry to adolescents in this phase flourished, in that large numbers of adolescents were participating in these ministries, no one had to think deeply about the implications of the very different target (adolescents) and very different social landscape. This is not to say that ministries to adolescents did not take seriously the unique challenges of being an adolescent. They certainly did, but only to a certain extent.

Summary: A New Priority through a New Paradigm

Today, youth ministry is more cognizant of the psychosocial realities of adolescence, but not to the degree that this shapes praxis with respect to adolescent identity. Ministry practice still seems to be shaped more by commitments to historic methods or the hope of a new model of ministry (that tend to be reiterations and combinations of the missional, nurture/education, fellowship/neo-missional priorities) than by a deep understanding of the complex needs of adolescent identity. As long as lots of adolescents are attending the youth group, the camps or the mission trips in increasing numbers, few are compelled to consider more than that rudimentary level for ministry praxis. In the 1990s a debate began to take place as to whether youth ministry should remain within the domain of Christian Education , where it typically resided in church based ministry, or take on the character of pastoral theology.³⁷

Although opening the conversation toward a theological approach to youth ministry is a step in the right direction, it must include more than a (re)emphasis of

³⁷ Mark H. Senter, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 293. It should be noted that this dominant domain of youth ministry tended to foster a fellowship or possibly a nurture/education priority in ministry praxis

doctrine or reintroducing older forms of ministry such as catechesis.³⁸ The more significant point is for youth ministry to be rooted in practical theology, so that youth ministers can take serious, not only theological convictions and historic truths of the faith, but the psychology and sociology of adolescent development beyond just a rudimentary level. To most adolescents, practically speaking, the task of identity is often associated with achieving things such as financial, educational/vocational and household independence from their parents. As adolescents move from early to middle and begin to transition into late adolescence, religious practices or significant religious involvement are, in their estimation, less relevant to the process of identity discovery and exists merely in the background.³⁹

This observation is cause for concern among those involved with adolescents in the context of youth ministry, especially in the transition from high school to college or career. The anecdotal observation is that a large number of young people who previously were active participants in a local church body and/or youth group, and indeed were professing followers of Jesus, abandon their faith in this transition. However, there is some longitudinal, ethnographic research that counters the idea that adolescents abandon their faith or moral upbringing to experiment with new philosophies or alternative lifestyles in their first year out of high school. The conclusion is that adolescents who do this “are only making public how they previously determined to live as early

³⁸ This is not a criticism of teaching doctrine or catechesis. These are important elements to spiritual formation and have definite value in ministry to adolescents, particularly middle adolescents and older who have the cognitive capacity to grasp abstract theological concepts.

³⁹ Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 145.

adolescents.”⁴⁰ This is not to say that there is not a genuine issue with transitioning from a high school youth group setting to college or work. It is to suggest that perhaps youth ministries are not shaping integrated, core selves as followers of Jesus as much as they are producing personas who are excellent at following the “script” of youth ministry expectations. In other words, adolescents may be committed to serious faith “activities” when in reality those activities are not actually integrated into their core identity, nor are these activities considered intrinsically crucial to it either.⁴¹

This should refocus the debate so that the priority in ministry praxis is the theological bedrock of identity – the image of God – and to put psychosocial assumptions into proper perspective so that faith practices are not peripheral to identity differentiation but are essential and vital. Being created in the image of God is the foundation for identity because it is the source that roots identity in a stable, organic anchor and simultaneously in a fluid dynamic of identity discovery. So, more than just an abstract theological concept, the image of God can serve as a paradigm for ministry praxis that secures identity in the human being’s relational capacity with God and the ongoing dynamic of “living out” the *telos* of the image of God into the world.

⁴⁰ Timothy T. Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School*, Morality and Society Series (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 14. Clydesdale goes on to say that “the vast majority of teens focus on during their first year out is *daily life management*... in other words, the upper-middle class young woman who attends a private, four year liberal arts college and the working class young man who attends a local community college are both focused on day to day life management, what differentiates them is not the colleges they attend, but rather their family faith and community starting points. 15

⁴¹ Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 76.

PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 5

A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO THE IMAGE OF GOD

The concept of the image of God as the “first word” in identity has been alluded to often so far. The next two chapters will add an abundance of detail, theological reflection and even contextualization for the image of God as the paradigm for ministry that shapes identity in adolescents. Psychology and the social sciences see humanity only in terms of its relationship with various dimensions of the material world.¹ The fundamental affirmation of Christian anthropology is that human beings can never understand themselves in isolation because they are not autonomous, not the measure of all things, but are instead created in and for fellowship with God. This simply runs contrary to both modern and postmodern conceptions of identity that understands humanity apart from all metaphysical or religious consideration.

This self-understanding, characterized by the free-floating self disconnected from all social structure, is ultimately a monologue, a talking to the self about the self.² Although theological notions throughout history of what it means to be created in the

¹ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 518.

² Jewett and Shuster, *Who We Are*, 19.

image of God vary by conception, form and function, at the very least they agree that humanity needs to be understood in its relationship with God rather than apart from it.³ The broader context of the creation story makes it clear that we are uniquely designed and destined for that relationship.⁴ This makes a decisive assertion about human beings – Human beings are uniquely honored, respected and enjoyed by the One who calls them to be and this gives human persons their inalienable identity.⁵ That relationship, rooted in the image of God, has two dimensions; a static, organic dimension and a fluid, dynamic dimension which together provide a paradigm for identity formation and discovery.

The Organic Dimension to the Image of God

The organic dimension is taken from the first mention of the image of God, in Genesis 1:26-27. Being created in the image of God brings the undeniable presence of something unique in humanity that exists nowhere else in all of creation and this is reflected the relational nature of the Trinity. The Three-in -One have distinct identities by means of their interrelationality, co-existence and cooperation.⁶ This relational nature of being in the Trinity extends to human persons a particular trajectory as to what it means to be created in that image.⁷ The organic nature of the image of God imbues in humans a

³ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 518.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 518.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: In Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Boulder, CO: NetLibrary Incorporated, 1982), 31.

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans., J.W. Edwards et al, vol. III/1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958), 185.

⁷ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 9.

unique “response-ability” to relationship and a unique capacity of relationality.⁸ First, it gives a special capacity to human beings to respond to him. All other creatures come from God’s hand complete; their natures are minted and stamped on them like the coinage of the realm. The human self, by contrast, because humans alone are created in the image of God, determines itself in its response to the Creator’s love – in other words self determination is given by the uniquely endowed, divine ability to respond.⁹

The response is either the obedient yes of reciprocated love or the disobedient no of a would-be-autonomy. No matter the degree to which the Fall damages the image of God in humans the capacity and accountability for response-ability is never completely diminished.¹⁰ Second, being created in the image of God means that human existence is distinctive from all of creation because humans alone have been created with the capacity for subject to subject relationality, or what is called the “I-Thou relationship” with God.¹¹ This distinctive in relationships reveals a historically conditioned social order for humanity and the inculcation of the particularities of this order reveals “givenness” or a

⁸ The term ‘organic’ is meant to reflect the intrinsic and essential dimension of the image of God. This is not necessarily an argument for something in the substance or structure of human beings as a result of the image of God that possesses this unique capacity of relationality due to (as some such as Millard Erickson argue for) See, for example: Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 498-516.

⁹ Jewett and Shuster, *Who We Are*, 62.

¹⁰ Each particular theological view of the image of God fails to fully resolve the tension regarding the degree to which the image is damaged after the Fall . The distinction here borrows from some in the Reformed tradition. The image of God in the Formal sense is that humans are subject (rational creatures, and this rationality they hold in common with God) in comparison to the rest of creation. Humans have a capacity for relationships, in as much as sinful humans do not cease to have the ability to speak and be spoken to. Therefore humans have response-ability. This does not encroach on the Material sense of the image of God, which is completely lost at the Fall and with it the possibility of doing or even of willing to do good in the sight of God. See Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" By Karl Barth* (London: The Centenary Press, 1946), 22-24.

¹¹ Martin Buber and Walter Arnold Kaufmann, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, 1970), 55-65.

natural cosmic order to identity-giving relationships to God and others.¹² It is the image of God that grounds the “I-Thou” relationship with God (and with one another) that awakens thoughts of wonder at the majesty and mystery of God’s purpose for humans to enjoy a privileged fellowship with Him.¹³ The response-ability and the relationality of the image of God in humans, come from the “organic,” constitutional distinction of that image that is intrinsic, formed and fixed.”¹⁴ The organic dimension is the irreducible component to being that stands against the modern scientific tendency toward reductionism that ultimately denies the possibility of intrinsic worth.¹⁵

When scholars speak of identity formation as “the task of identity formation [that] requires establishing an inner guide”¹⁶ or “the idea of a “core self” that is an essential organizer of the subject’s relations with the social world”¹⁷ they are appealing, in some sense, to a more stable or fixed self. In sociology, this concept is generally known as “agency.”¹⁸ In psychology this is known as the internal drive of individuation.”¹⁹ They are also describing, intentionally or not, the relationality and response-ability of the organic dimension to the image of God.

¹² Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 118.

¹³ Jewett and Shuster, *Who We Are*, 29.

¹⁴ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 165.

¹⁵ Christian Smith, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 28-32.

¹⁶ Jersild, *The Psychology of Adolescence*, 7-8.

¹⁷ Rattansi and Phoenix, "Rethinking Youth Identities," 104.

¹⁸ Charles Levine, "What Happened to Agency? Some Observations Concerning the Postmodern Perspective on Identity," *Identity* 5, no. 2 (2005): 177.

¹⁹ Blos, *The Adolescent Passage*, 144.

The Dynamic Dimension to the Image of God

Most theologies regarding the image of God have tended to emphasize the sphere of being rather than the sphere of doing; what one is, not what one does.²⁰ To ignore what one does as it relates to the image of God can effectively diminish the image of God to a theological abstraction. The commitment to a core, integrated self is not just as a process of internal development but also a process of interacting with the outer world, requiring a thicker theological aspect of the image of God. Social science scholars call the interaction of natural and social environments that provide the causal capacities that lead to human personhood “emergence.”²¹ From the perspective of practical theology, integrating the psychosocial and the theological, this “to be determined” aspect (emergence), allows for the “discovery” of identity.

At the risk of oversimplifying the dynamic dimension of the image of God, one is not simply created in the image of God alone; one also does the image of God. If it is the organic nature of the image of God that provides the anchor or starting point of humanness in relationality, it is the dynamic nature of the image of God that sets the trajectory for identity discovery, determining means and ends through the inherent order of creation.²² The second account of creation in Genesis 2:4-25 provides a conception of identity rooted in the image of God that is dynamic, active and especially interactive with this created order. In

²⁰ Brian Horne, "Divine and Human Creativity," in *The Doctrine of Creation: Essays in Dogmatics, History and Philosophy*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 123.

²¹ To be more specific, the sociological theory of emergence refers to the process of constituting a new entity (in this case, personhood or identity) with its own particular characteristics through the interactive combination of other, different entities that are necessary to create the new entity but that do not contain the characteristics present in the new entity. See Smith, *What Is a Person*, 25-26.

²² Harold Kuhn, "Creation," in *The Living God: Readings in Christian Theology*, ed. Millard J. Erickson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 479.

contrast to the Genesis 1 account, Genesis 2:4-25 is a rugged and physical account with action and movement that belies a more dynamic process of shaping identity.²³ Thus, Genesis 2 gives depth and vitality to the fixed, organic nature of the image of God by giving way to an expressive, dynamic identity discovered as the created order is lived out. This serves as a clue that Creation in general and humans specifically were meant to go somewhere, to enjoy a process of discovery and adventure into the fullness of life, devoid of exploitation and abuse, as bounded by the created order.²⁴

In other words, to be human is to find and fulfill one's nature and destiny – one's unique personhood – beyond just (but not apart from) the organic, bestowed sense of being created in the image of God, into a dynamic, symbiotic relationship with the created world according to its intended created order.²⁵ To say that identity is discovered or formed is not automatically an argument for subjectivism or the rule of passion. To the contrary, subjective experience and passion are held in check by the intended, created order in the same way that the walls of the Grand Canyon hold the Colorado River in its place, providing the means for it to flow in the fullness of its power and splendor.²⁶

From the Genesis 2 account, there are at least three “Dynamic Designs” in the created order - Worship, Authority and Complementary Relationships – within which

²³ For example, in this account God is a craftsman *fashioning* his world (*yāṣar*, “fashion” instead of *bāra*’, “create,” as used in Genesis 1), *blowing* life breath into nostrils, *building* a woman from a rib, etc. See, Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 20. This ‘fashioning’ concept represents an absolute origination consistent with the *ex nihilo* nature of creation. See for example, Kuhn, “Creation,” 481.

²⁴ Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 118.

²⁵ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 170.

²⁶ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans., John Saward (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 2000), 146.

humanity was created to exist and flourish, and which provide the basis for a full discovery of the self. These dynamic designs reflect God's created order and were given to humanity as a means to re-humanize life in dynamic discovery to make life all it was intended to be within his Kingdom trajectory.²⁷ Figure 5.1 below provides a visual graphic of the image of God that places the three Dynamic Designs into interdependent interaction with one another, and also in relationship to the fixed, organic relational/response-able dimension.

The inherent, intrinsic and organic nature of the image of God leads outward into the dynamic experiential elements of the created order. Worship is allegiance, giving ourselves fully to that which can give us our true worth. Giving ourselves to anything less is idolatry and makes us less (worth-less) than what we were intended to be. Authority is the power appropriated in us by God, his authorization, as it were, to make things right in the world. Misappropriating that power in the world leads to various forms of oppression and ultimately to dehumanization. Complementary Relationships are the starting point for true community. Humans are made for community because it is part of God's design to infuse them with unique, intrinsic dignity. Human relations oriented toward selfish satisfaction is a kind of exploitation, a taking from another what is not one's to possess.

²⁷ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 34. Although not speaking specifically of human identity, Plantinga describes God's intent for creation as *shalom* and that *shalom* has a trajectory of wholeness, flourishing and delight – fully consistent with the basis for identity discovery.

Figure 5.1

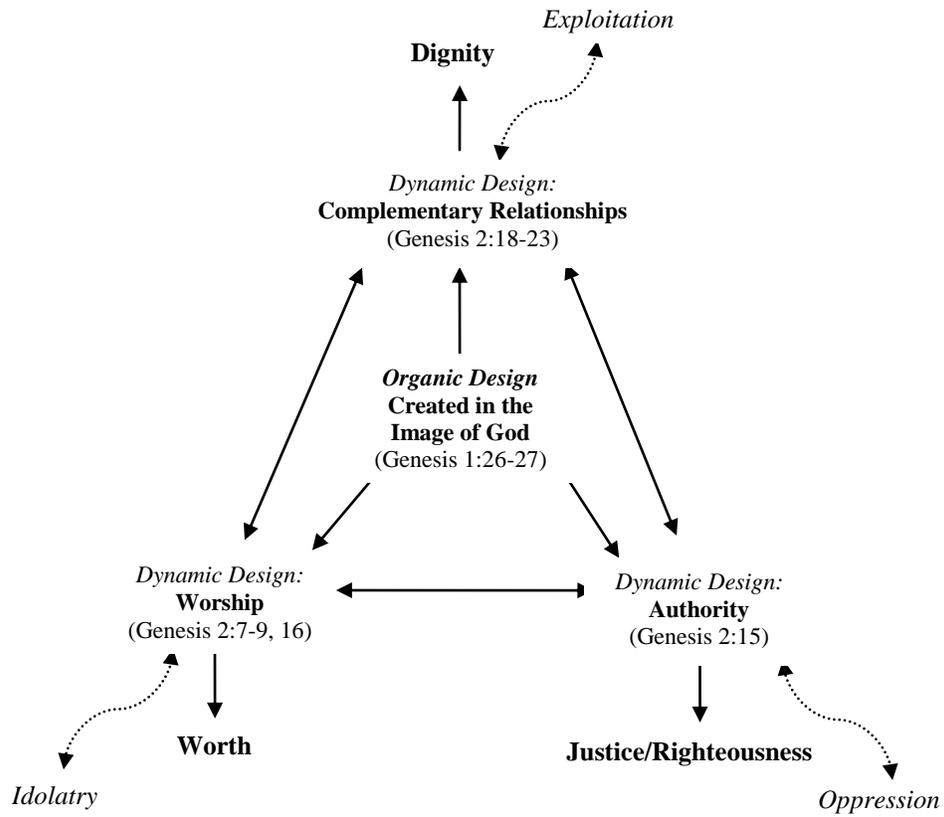


Figure 5.1. A Visual Representation of Identity as *Organic* and *Dynamic* through the Image of God as described in Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 2:3-23. The Image of God is represented in the center by a fixed “organic” dimension and expressed out into the world through three interdependent “dynamic designs” actively lived out in resonance with the created order.

The trajectory of these dynamic designs is set in motion by the organic relationality of the image of God embedded in all humans. In this sense, they reflect out into the world the way life was meant to be lived in the first place.²⁸ Lived according to their design, worship rightly understood produces a proper sense of worth, living out God-given authority aimed at justice leads to living “rightly”, experiencing relationships in their “completing” sense generates dignity – and these are the “re-humanizing” virtues

²⁸ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 143-217.

projected outward to the world that reflect the inward reality of God's image. At the same time, each of these dynamic designs stand opposed to the dehumanizing practices of the broken world. Worship and worth minimize idolatry, completing relationships and dignity curtail exploitation and authority used toward justice takes a stand against oppression in its various forms. These three are interdependent in this sense: Worship, or true allegiance to God, keeps our relationships in the right perspective as well as our efforts to make things right in the world. Our authority gives us the power to stand against the temptations to idolatry as well as to take a stand against the exploitation that takes place on in relationships. Complementary relationships provide the context and experience of community in which we can properly worship and in which we can collectively stand for justice and righteousness.

These dynamic designs reflect the active, experiential realities of the image of God that lead to identity that flourishes within the created order. They are not merely ideals or human potential wrapped up in theological abstraction. This does not take seriously the reality that humans are wrecked and disoriented by sin, locked in at the level of the will toward destructive behaviors (idolatry, exploitation and oppression) that dehumanize all of life at every level.²⁹ It is the redemptive work of Christ that repairs and reinvigorates the organic dimension of our being, restoring and fulfilling our relational capacity with God, and inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit, reorienting the will into the possibility of a "re-humanizing" life encountered in the dynamic, lived-out dimension of our being.

²⁹ This assumption here is that humanity enjoys the common grace of God and retains the 'response-ability' (Emil Brunner) to hear what are effectively now the "echoes of a voice" (N.T. Wright). A.W. Tozer described the reality of common grace this way, "Every good and beautiful thing which man has produced in the world has been the result of his faulty and sin-blocked response to the creative Voice sounding over the earth. See, A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God: The Human Thirst for the Divine* (Camp Hill PA: Christian Publications, 1993), 79.

Worship

The Dynamic Design of Worship comes from Genesis 2:7-9, 16, where God is established as the One who creates, provides and prohibits, and thus as the One worthy of allegiance. Worship is first, literally acknowledging the worth of something or someone. Second, it is revealing the place or the perspective of all created things.³⁰ The implications are significant. At a mysterious level, human identity is dependent on that to which one gives allegiance and human worth is contingent on its place within creation.³¹ Jeremiah 2:5-11 says humans are more alive to the full weight of their humanity as they give their allegiance to God in all his glory (Hebrew: *kabod*- splendor, weightiness), the one who brought them out of Egypt and into the fertile land of his inheritance.³² Consequently, misplaced worship, or idolatry, diminishes this weightiness. “They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves” (Jeremiah. 2:5). Allegiance to an idol (Hebrew: *hebel* – vain, worthless or empty) makes one literally worth-less.³³

Figure 5.2

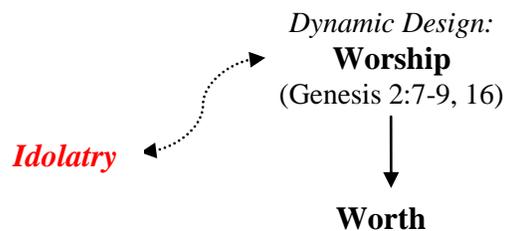


Figure 5.2 The Dynamic design of Worship, leading to worth or, distorted by sin, leading to idolatry.

³⁰ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 144-145.

³¹ Charles L. Feinberg, "Jeremiah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Isaiah - Ezekiel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1986), 388.

³² Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology Volume 1* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 239.

³³ Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, 388.

In the Garden (Genesis 3:1-6), the Serpent tempted the first humans to disregard their place in creation and to redirect their allegiance from God – the “weighty one” who gives proper worth – and to begin seeking worth through the act of consuming the forbidden fruit, something of considerably less “weight.” Immediately, in a diminished, “less weighty” form, Adam and Eve sensed their alienation from God, from one another, and their worth-less state (Gen. 3:7-8). To ameliorate this alienation and worthlessness, they entered into a cycle of consuming more “less weighty” things – initially creating clothing from leaves – and from that point forward, oriented humanity with a predilection to “fill the void,” to replace the glory once beheld, with cheap substitutes.³⁴

This exchange of allegiance is, in essence, an exchange of glory, not for something of substance, but for something vain and empty (i.e. an idol), an allegiance to promises that will remain unfulfilled. The results are a diminished humanity with no true or trustworthy sense of worth. Throughout history, misdirected loyalty or allegiance – the essence of idolatry – has reduced humanity to the level of tribalism, positioning or partisanship but never to restoration or contentment. These latter tasks reside in the realm of the transcendent, the glorious, and are inaccessible to the life that is turned inward on itself. What one worships is the standard by which identity, and ultimately one’s worth, is measured. Kierkegaard says, “The measure for the self always is that in the face of which it is a self.”³⁵ In other words, one cannot transcend that to which it gives its allegiance, and if that thing is anything less than God, it is *hebel*, an idol – vain, worthless or empty.

³⁴ Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 114.

³⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008), 66.

It cannot offer an accurate appraisal and one is left, at best, with self-appraisal. That is why idolatry, even taking good things but making them into ends, has disastrous consequences. Idolatry destroys the finite beauty of created things because it demands more of them than it can give.³⁶ However, Kierkegaard continues, “What an infinite accent falls upon the self by getting God as a measure. That which is qualitatively its measure becomes ethically its goal.”³⁷ One in allegiance to God gets God – the one who can properly assess and confer place and worth – as their measure and this orients human life (ethics) in the direction for which it was meant.

Worship, as it is conceived here, is not limited to individual acts of piety, as the word most often conveys today. Instead, it is a way of life that orients us toward a proper appraisal of all things – God and creation, not just ourselves – that locates human worth within the proper place in the created order. The loyalty demanded of true worship is not a loyalty for the holding of a position or a place, but for “allowing oneself to be held” by the one who possesses within himself our weightiness, that we might discover true worth.³⁸ Worship is a lived allegiance. Allegiance shapes and directs the ‘self’ through the “paradox of abiding” – that is, something done for us by the redeeming, image restoring work of Jesus on the cross and something which needs to be constantly reaffirmed by us in a continually renewed action of the will (the acts of worship).³⁹ Worship and allegiance allows us to

³⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 234.

³⁷ Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, 66.

³⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the 4th Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 198.

³⁹ Newbigin, *The Light has Come*, 199.

realize all of humanity is the same at the most fundamental level: equally dependent on God, having origin solely in God and deriving purpose from God alone.⁴⁰ In terms of identity discovery, this is the way that worship as allegiance, creates an encounter with worth in the truest sense of the word. This was demonstrated fully in the life of Jesus' abiding in the Father through the dynamic of love and obedience. Abiding cultivated through love, perpetuated through obedience, diminished the appetite for vaporous substitutes for status or place. Jesus had no program of his own; he sought no identity for himself, no "image." He simply responded, in loving obedience, in allegiance, to the will of the Father.⁴¹

Worship is an inherent human activity – all humans are created to worship. It is not a question of whether one will worship – humans are *homo adorans*, humans who adore – the question is what or whom will humans worship.⁴² Worship as a way of life instills proper worth – not a shaky worth that comes from self-appraising behavior modification or sin management – and stands against the dehumanizing activity of idolatry.⁴³ Allegiance of this sort equalizes all, not to the end, however, that all are diminished, but to the end that all are free to be fully alive to a new horizon, to a new standard that transcends all other standards.⁴⁴ Worship takes our whole selves, body, mind and soul, indeed the pinnacle of all

⁴⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 69.

⁴¹ Newbigin, *The Light has Come*, 200.

⁴² Robert McAfee Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation: Overcoming the Great Fallacy* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988), 88.

⁴³ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 41.

⁴⁴ Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 154.

created things, and neutralizes the unnecessary layers of superiority or inferiority created and imposed by humans. Doing so allows for participation in the Body of Christ, gathered for sharing and depending on the gifts God has given the community.

When we find ourselves beneath the cross of Christ, we mutually discover ourselves as brothers and sisters, as the hungry in shared poverty, as people imprisoned in shared sin. We have nothing to offer God except the burden of guilt and the emptiness of our hearts. The closer we come to the cross of Christ, in true worship, giving ourselves in allegiance to him, the closer we come to one another.⁴⁵ Differences dissolve under the outstretched arms of God on his suffering cross. It is not when we withdraw into the shallows of self-appraisal that we find God; it is when we go out of ourselves. It is not in the “I” that God is hidden, it is in the “Thou.”⁴⁶ This is where the self has its greatest worth.⁴⁷

Authority

In Genesis 2:15 God puts humans into the garden, not only a place of peace, rest and fellowship, but also in order that they might be its rightful stewards, to maintain his wise

⁴⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society: The Public Relevance of Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 204.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁷ The question of Work is not addressed here specifically, but it resides primarily in the dynamic design of Worship (and also to a degree in the dynamic of Authority). What we do as a vocation, that which provides the means to support ourselves and our families should be of the kind that it also produces a certain kind of worth in us. Further, Luther was the one who carried the term ‘calling’ (vocation) out of the religious sphere into the secular world and called all honest work performed by a man and a woman their divine ‘calling.’ for Luther, every job of work performed honestly us an act of worship. All work in human society is work for the Kingdom of God. See for example: Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*. 196-97. Dallas Willard says that the work one does to make a living is one of the clearest ways possible to focus upon apprenticeship to Jesus. “To be a disciple of Jesus is, crucially, to be learning from Jesus how to do your job as Jesus himself would do it. Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 285. In a similar tone, but in a different perspective, Miroslav Volf sees work as “cooperating with God.” See: Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001

order.⁴⁸ To be created in the image of God and to be charged with the task of working in and cultivating, preserving and protecting the creation, is to possess power.⁴⁹ Human beings are created thus to be *homo potens* – powerful humans, created toward those ends.⁵⁰ From the beginning, Creation was good, but it always had a forward look; created with an intentional transience that served as a God-given signpost pointing to the world as it is meant to be one day.⁵¹ Thus humans were created with an authority by God to be His agent to insure that all of creation is guided to a destiny of fullness and rightness.⁵²

Figure 5.3

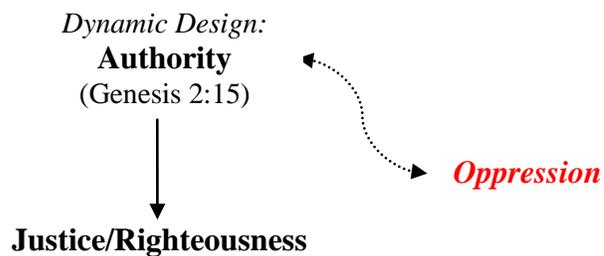


Figure 5.3 The Dynamic Design of Authority, leading to justice, or, distorted by sin, leading to oppression

Humans, therefore, were created to be blessed by God’s authorizing, enabling promise in order to move forward within the bounds of his creative designs to exercise a kind of lordship.⁵³ This lordship in the human person, within the context of the dynamic

⁴⁸ John Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Series: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers.*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 45.

⁴⁹ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 183.

⁵⁰ Gianfranco Poggi, *Forms of Power* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 3.

⁵¹ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 95.

⁵² Jewett and Shuster, *Who We Are*, 29.

⁵³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 188.

image of God, is a mandate of power and responsibility, but it is a power exercised as God exercises power.⁵⁴ Human beings attests to the “Godness of God” by exercising freedom with and authority over all the other creatures entrusted to its care consistent with the way that God exercises freedom and power, anchored in love.

History is filled with the stories of those that misappropriated this authority - tyrants, and dictators as well as unfair economic systems that abuse this authority and oppress peoples. Worldly power, whether held by individuals, social groups, communities, institutions, or social structures naturally tend toward manipulation, domination, and oppression.⁵⁵ This is because contemporary notions of power are influenced by modernity’s tendency to dichotomize power and love, to the degree that power or authority is assumed to be in opposition to beneficence or goodness.⁵⁶ What God intends is the farthest thing from coercive or tyrannical power, for Himself or for humankind.⁵⁷ Instead, this is a power that “authorizes” humans to a sort of right living in harmony with the creational intent of stewarding and extending God’s loving, created order, taking a stand against the acts and forces that are unjust and oppressive.⁵⁸ Humanity only flourishes in power when that power

⁵⁴ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 32.

⁵⁵ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 188.

⁵⁶ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 67.

⁵⁷ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 32.

⁵⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 188-89.

is used in harmony with God's creational intent, to maintain the bond of beneficence with authority for the sake of rightness for all of creation.⁵⁹

Because power exists in relationships it is not a substance or a property that can be escaped.⁶⁰ The question then is not will one have power, but toward what end, will one's power be aimed? Since all are created in the image of God, using power for "world-making" as it were – from one's relationship to another human being to the realm of the national and political – is an expression of our divine nature. The task of world-making has a validity of its own because it is work that God ordained to humankind at creation and it is work that remains consistent with the purposes of the created order.⁶¹ This is not to say that what is produced with power (human relationships, cultural goods, communities, economic and political systems) does not have the potential to be directed toward selfish or oppressive ends. It is, instead to say that because all power is authorized by God, tempered by his love, with His creational order as the end, it always possesses the potential to serve the good of all.⁶²

To misuse power is to disjoin it from love. To use it in a manner for which it was not authorized according to the creational, dynamic design of God is to act in a way that is oppressive or unjust toward another person or toward nature. Such injustice done toward persons is not merely a violation of a platonic principle or ideal but a fundamental act

⁵⁹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 72.

⁶⁰ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 179.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 233.

against humanity. Injustice and oppression are human, not merely ethical problems. They are a human disorder; a breakdown of the essential structure of humanity; they are a problem of sin, not merely a problem of evil.⁶³ Power exists in relationships, so to be truly *homo potens* as God intended, is to be with and for the other within the enabling power of the human community. This essential humanity, divinely ordained of God through divine love – expressed chiefly in the Incarnation – and experienced as the enabling power of “co-humanity” is authorized to push back the dehumanizing effects of such sin.⁶⁴

Jesus reconstituted the trajectory of human power when he said to his disciples “In the same way the Father has sent me, I send you” (John 20:21) – and that way is away from oppression and toward righteousness.⁶⁵ The Greek word δικαιοσύνη (translated into English as “righteousness”) carries with it, not simply an expectation of a moralistic personal sort of piety (although there is certainly a personal dimension to righteousness) but also of seeking “justice” for those who do not have it in this world.⁶⁶ Humans formed in the image of God were created to live in accord with this fuller sense, living rightly in and for the world. Jesus taught that righteousness refers to a sort of right living consistent with

⁶³ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 313.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁶⁵ Any manifestation of power, in order to keep it from devolving into manipulation or oppression, is inherently dependent upon intimacy with and submission to the Father – the same manner that Jesus derived his power. Hunter, *To Change the World*, 188. (see for example John 12:48-50; John 5:19, 30; John 8:28, 38; John 14:10, Heb. 5:7-8; Matt. 28:18)

⁶⁶ Craig Blomberg and Jennifer Foutz Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 38.

God's created order – especially in places where injustice or wrongs exist.⁶⁷ The New Testament

continues this view of righteousness and encourages us to imagine and anticipate a new world as a beautiful, healing community, vibrant with life and free from decay and corruption in the eventual redeemed world order.⁶⁸ This aspect of humanity made in the image of God means humans are authorized, even empowered, to take a stand against all forms of dehumanization.⁶⁹

Authority sets itself against the social injustices which result from oppression and longs to liberate them into the enjoyment of their God-intended freedom. It protests against every authoritarian regime that denies people their civil rights, discriminates against minorities or forbids the free expression of opinions. In economics, it protests against the exploitation of the poor and against the “new social servitude” – slavery to rampant consumerism. In relationships, it protests against the marginalization of those deemed less worthy by society's standards of worth, beauty, attraction and fame. It is in this sort of appropriate rebellion against oppressive structures that Christians are authorized and should be in the vanguard.⁷⁰ To live according to the image of God is to abandon the worldly, diminished understanding of power and live as a whole being in grateful trust and love to

⁶⁷ See especially Matthew 5:6, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (δικαιοσύνη), for they shall be filled” in Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 1: The Christbook Matthew 1-12 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 167-172. See also Chap Clark and Kara E. Powell, *Deep Justice in a Broken World: Helping Your Kids Serve Others and Right the Wrongs around Them* (Downers Grove, IL: Zondervan, 2007), 89.

⁶⁸ N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 118.

⁶⁹ John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 51-52.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

the God disclosed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: to become willing agents in a costly confrontation with every form of evil and unjust suffering in the world. This faith involves “embracing the pain and confusion of others, and being willing to live with uncertainty ourselves while moving towards a future that is already at work in us.”⁷¹

Complementary Relationships

The concept of authority is an important dynamic of the image of God, but authority can devolve into a sinister kind of dominion that distorts our understanding of the first human to human relationship as played out in Genesis 2:18-23, where the first man, Adam, is given a ‘ezer k^e negdô (“helper suitable,” NIV). ‘Ēzer is a Hebrew word that is a combination of two roots, one meaning “to rescue,” or “to save” and the other meaning “to be strong.”⁷² K^e negdô is only used once in Scripture and means “according to the opposite of him.”⁷³ Translating the phrase accurately to English and preserving the significance of its meaning has remained difficult as most English translations tend to diminish the Hebrew notion of a “strong rescuer according to that which one lacks.”

Often, the image is assumed to be an “analogy of domination,” and thus theologians, especially Aquinas and to a lesser degree Augustine, have interpreted this event through the lens of subordination.⁷⁴ Other theologians assumed the context for understanding ‘ezer

⁷¹ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods That Fail: Modern Idolatry & Christian Mission* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 41-42.

⁷² R. David Freedman, "Woman, a Power Equal to Man," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 9, no. 1 (1983): 56.

⁷³ C. John Collins, *Genesis 1-4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing., 2006), 107.

⁷⁴ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 240. See also, for example, John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume 1: Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 21.

k'negdô as Genesis 1:28, to “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. So the purpose of the creation of woman as the “helper suitable” was narrowed to that of procreation, of bearing children.⁷⁵ These interpretive lenses exclude seeing this dimension of the image of God as the foundation for fellowship and community. If the whole human being is designated in the image of God, then true human community, beginning with the community of the sexes and extending out through the community of the generations, should be understood as a dynamic design of creation.⁷⁶ Humans were created for complementary relationships, as the original human relationship led to a completing of what it meant to be fully male and fully female.⁷⁷

Figure 5.4

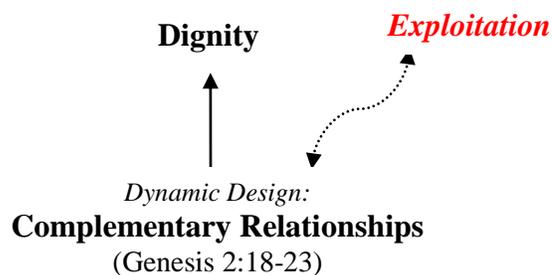


Figure 5.4 The Dynamic Design of Complementary Relationships, leading to dignity, or, distorted by sin, leading to exploitation.

This creational design begins in sexual differentiation and is the foundational relationship of human community that releases intrinsic, God-intended human dignity. Human beings are unique as products of the divine act of creation, created for worship and

⁷⁵Sailhamer, *Genesis*, 46.

⁷⁶ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 241.

⁷⁷ Carl Friedrich Keil, Franz Delitzsch, and James Martin, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, the Pentateuch*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 42.

imbued with authority, but there is a distinct, relational dynamic to being fully human.⁷⁸

Being created gendered has implications for humans as part of that process of discovering personal identity, of being fully human, as well.⁷⁹

The male-female distinction, according to Barth, is the original concrete form of social relationships that properly reflects the Trinity's communal relationship.⁸⁰ In the same way that there is genuine "self-encounter and self-discovery" within the Trinity there is meant to be a cooperative counterpart, a cooperative confrontation among human relations that leads to self-discovery.⁸¹ Who humans are is discovered and matured through the experience of living life in response to God and to others.⁸² In other words, individuality as a form of the self is a result of the differentiation that occurs in relationship to another – and it is through dissonance, not consonance, oppositeness not sameness, that we become alive to the new.⁸³ The individual self is a consequence of social existence, not the cause of it.⁸⁴

The complementary aspect of the image of God is not simply a reciprocal flow of human sameness which takes no regard of creaturely sexuality.⁸⁵ It is instead a reflection of "ordered ontology" where every human being has an essential created structure that is

⁷⁸ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 66.

⁷⁹ Sailhamer, *Genesis*, 37.

⁸⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 184-86.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁸² Jewett and Shuster, *Who We Are*, 30.

⁸³ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 144.

⁸⁴ Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 46-47.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

grounded sexually and personally and differentiated as male and female.⁸⁶ In other words, one cannot know themselves as an “I” apart from a “You” (the I-Thou relationship) and that “You” is further and intentionally distinguished as a “he” or she.”⁸⁷ At a mysterious level, this dynamic relationship with others, and especially cross sex relationships, is intended to have a “completing” quality to it. This is the building block for human community that stands against exploitation and stands for human dignity.

Dignity is not an extra benefit conferred upon persons by social contract or positive law. Dignity is a real, objective feature of human personhood, a result of the ontological order brought into its fullness by human community built on complementary relationships.⁸⁸ When this creational design is obstructed by sin, the complementary reality of co-humanity no longer integrates sexual differentiation into human communion and relationships become consumers of the sexual rather than producers of the dignifying. The longing for human relationships remains – because ultimately a longing to be fully human remains – but a barrier to community and dignity exists that prevents a relationship from being a creative encounter with the other.⁸⁹

As a result, humans are no longer free to respond to the other person as the counterpart to one’s own personhood.⁹⁰ Instead, the purpose of relationships is distorted and reoriented, so that what once were means become normalized as ends. In other

⁸⁶ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 274.

⁸⁷ Anderson, *On Being Human*, 114.

⁸⁸ Smith, *What Is a Person*, 434.

⁸⁹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 67.

⁹⁰ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 166.

words, sexuality is an end in and of itself, rather than a means to deeper human communion. Unmediated by contemporary societal forces, eventually sexuality becomes the preeminent human trait, reducing humans to “sexual beings” rather than elevating them to complementary beings. Sexuality as its own end can only lead to some form of exploitation – whether it is in its more abhorrent form such as child pornography or sexual trafficking or in more acceptable (but none the less dehumanizing) acts of self-satisfying sexual preferences at the expense of others.

Ironically, the dehumanizing practices of sexuality are often defended as an attempt to level culturally imposed moral boundaries and distinctions through arguments against differences of power or rhetoric, while ignoring issues of essence or ontological order. The absence of boundaries, however, creates “non-order”, and non-order is not the beginning of freedom but the end of life.⁹¹ It does not release dignity, it drains it. The complementary reality of co-humanity integrates biological sexual differentiation as the essential differentiation of the communion of persons, shapes identity and stands against the temptation to exploit others while fostering intrinsic dignity.⁹²

This function of the created order orients relationships away from merely inward, self-fulfillment and out toward a stand against the dignity robbing effects of sin.⁹³ Complementary relationships are designed not only to release, but also to preserve the dignity of human beings inherent in the image of God. Dignity is a different thing than worth (which can devolve inwardly to one’s own, but distorted, sense of worth), although

⁹¹ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 63.

⁹² Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 165.

⁹³ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 44.

there are parallels. Dignity is sustained in relation to others. Others not only bring dignity about but are also compelled to respect it as an intrinsic quality.⁹⁴ In the end, real humanity is found in fellow humanity. We simply cannot be ourselves fully by ourselves.

Summary

Human beings are created in the image of God and retain the “response-ability” to the voice of God in creation. This organic dimension to humanity has implications for the order of human life as a lived out reality. The three creational designs (Worship, Authority, and Complementary Relationships) represent dynamic, interdependent, existential dimensions to the reality of humanity created in God’s image. Complementary Relationships provide the context for true Worship - a trusting, loving community. True Worship roots allegiance and sets the aim of Authority toward its proper *telos*; not an abuse of power, but a stand against injustice and oppression and a stand for human life that flourishes as it was meant to be.

The authority to make living rightly normative empowers the relational community to take a stand against the temptations toward exploitative relationships. The insidious power of sin severely distorts the organic dimension of the image of God (although never quite extinguishing it) working its way outward, such that the creational designs are reoriented toward destructive ends. Worship is oriented toward idolatry in its various forms, Authority is oriented toward oppressive ways of life and relationships are a means to exploit the other for selfish gain. Only by the reconstituting work of Christ, who restores, not only the organic “response-ability” dimension to us, but reorients the dynamic designs of the

⁹⁴ Gilbert Meilaender, *Neither Beast nor God: The Dignity of the Human Person*, (New York: Encounter Books, 2009), 75.

image, can we hope to live life toward its proper end – Gods people living in wholeness, flourishing and delight.

This entire chapter has been dedicated to articulating a particular understanding of the image of God because being created in that image has implications for human identity. We are made in the image of God and we were made to do the image of God; we cannot be fully who we were made to be unless this is the paradigm that shapes the way we live. The process of becoming a “core self,” of resolving the question “Who am I?” is a central developmental task fully of adolescents. Until now, developmental psychology and sociology have had the preeminent word in defining the means and ends of that task. Again, it is not the last word. If ministry to adolescents intends to take seriously the adolescent task of identity formation and discovery, then it must respond theologically, using the image of God as the paradigm for shaping ministry praxis.

CHAPTER 6

YOUTH MINISTRY AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

Throughout most of history, questions of identity were not paramount because the concept of an individual “self” was either embedded within a tribe or extended family or hardly conceived of at all. God has always been concerned with questions of identity, however, whether humans have consciously wrestled with those questions or not. This was evident, for example as God met the Hebrews who emerged from four hundred years of slavery in Egypt wondering, in light of all this, “Who are we now?” Oppression in all forms, but particularly slavery, distorts and erases identity. God gave Genesis to this people through Moses, at least in part, to restore that which had been taken away during their captivity.¹

This was not just a story of origins then, but a radical declaration of the inherent worth and dignity of each person, revealed through the divine image as the foundation of personhood. As time moved forward, social fragmentation and isolation, and weakened social structures that both perpetrate and permit oppression (racial, economic, political

¹ Ray S. Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry: Forming Leaders for God's People*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 39.

control, marital or family abuse, etc.) have simultaneously distorted the understanding of identity while erasing the connection of identity to its “foundation of personhood.”² In our times, questions of identity have become commonplace but also extremely burdensome. It is not that persons did not possess a unitary and integrated sense of self in times past. They did, but the “self” did not subjugate metanarratives and belonging as the defining feature of a culture. Today, by contrast, in the absence of meaningful metanarratives, the fragmentation of belonging and the dissolution of belief systems, the self, or one’s personalized, individualized identity has assumed front and center as a given of contemporary culture. In fact, the modern phenomenon of adolescence exists today in, and in many ways because of, an unstable social environment that does not extend belonging, belief or worth.³ Adolescents must bear the burdensome task of resolving the question “Who am I?” essentially on their own.

This dilemma, however, is as much a theological issue as it is a psychosocial one. The normative, hyper-individualized self of contemporary culture becomes the “infinite basis and reference point for all objects, thus usurping the place of God.”⁴ For adolescents, the weight of such a position is crushing, not so much because this usurping is a conscious revolt against God (although this certainly might be true for some), but because it leads to “an anxiety of the self about the self.”⁵ This anxiety is discernable, for

² Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry*, 39.

³ Sebald, *Adolescence*, 37.

⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Vol 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 261.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

example, particularly in the challenge to develop competence in what sociologist Tim Clydesdale details as “daily life management.”⁶ Additionally, adolescent life is invaded by a proliferation of technologies that send a constant barrage of communications that demand responses and self expressions such as cell phones, text messaging and internet social networking sites. These technologies normalize what Gergen calls “multiphrenia,” the multiplicity of self-investments into all the ever expanding relational possibilities of one’s life. Thus begins a troublesome cycle: one’s potential relationships are expanded through the use of these technologies, creating a relentless need for multiple and corresponding self-expressions for each relational possibility. So, one then increases the use of these technologies to mediate the relational demands, thereby increasing one’s potential relationships.⁷ The resulting “multiple personae” may be normative for adolescent life, but it does nothing to resolve the anxiety of the self about the self.

It has been argued here that the task of identity in adolescence truly is the process of establishing an integrated self, a reliable anchor or core from which a person can engage their inner and outer world.⁸ However, the demands of identity within contemporary social structures create a burden too great for the individual adolescent to bear alone. Theology has a significant role to play in the understanding of identity, in

⁶ Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 15. This includes “managing semi-adult relationships, freedoms to use substances and be sexually active and expanded responsibilities for daily life, including food, money and clothes.”

⁷ Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 73-74.

⁸ Among many examples in literature that embrace the notion of a core identity or self, see for example, Zurbriggen et al, *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*. This stands in contrast to the radical, theoretical shift regarding identity that calls for a style of social interaction that no longer requires or even profits from a unitary identity. Sociologist Erving Goffman called for this sort of radical shift, beginning in the 1950s, see, Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

bearing that burden. It is found particularly in the relationship between the image of God paradigm, youth ministry praxis, psychosocial understanding of identity and theological reflection for the purpose of shaping identity. Adolescents are created in the image of God, for both divine and psychosocial purposes, and ministry shaped by the image of God paradigm allows them to arrive at the fulfillment of what they are intended to be.⁹

The Image of God Paradigm and Youth Ministry Praxis

Traditionally, youth ministry praxis has emphasized education, doctrine, belief, practices of the faith, fellowship, catechesis, evangelism or experience, but rarely is ministry focused on the processes and complexities of identity formation and discovery in its constituency. Yet, identity is a fundamental driving task in the life of an adolescent whether it is considered in ministry praxis or not. Perhaps the assumption in ministry is that if adolescents give the appearance of “owning their faith” by meeting the expectations of youth ministry practices and participation, they must be operating out of a core self.¹⁰ Adolescents, though, are “multiphrenic,” living in a multistage social environment, each with its own “script” to be mastered, that creates enormous pressure. With little support from social scaffolding, values and norms, adolescents compensate by creating the multiple personae to conform and adapt to the expectations of the various

⁹ Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 228.

¹⁰ If this unexamined assumption is true, it may be a significant reason that many in youth ministry readily accept the claim, based mostly on anecdotal observations, that a large majority of adolescents who graduate from a youth group “leave the faith” when they move to college or to a career. There is certainly reason for concern about the faith journey of adolescents entering into emerging adulthood or late adolescence (college, military service or work). The question I hope to raise and then speak to is, “Did these “spiritual dropouts” truly own their faith, or did they only appear to?” This is also the focus of research at the Fuller Youth Institute’s “Sticky Faith” project at <http://stickyfaith.org/>. For longitudinal studies of the transition from middle to late adolescents and their faith commitments, see Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*. See also Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*.

Figure 6.1

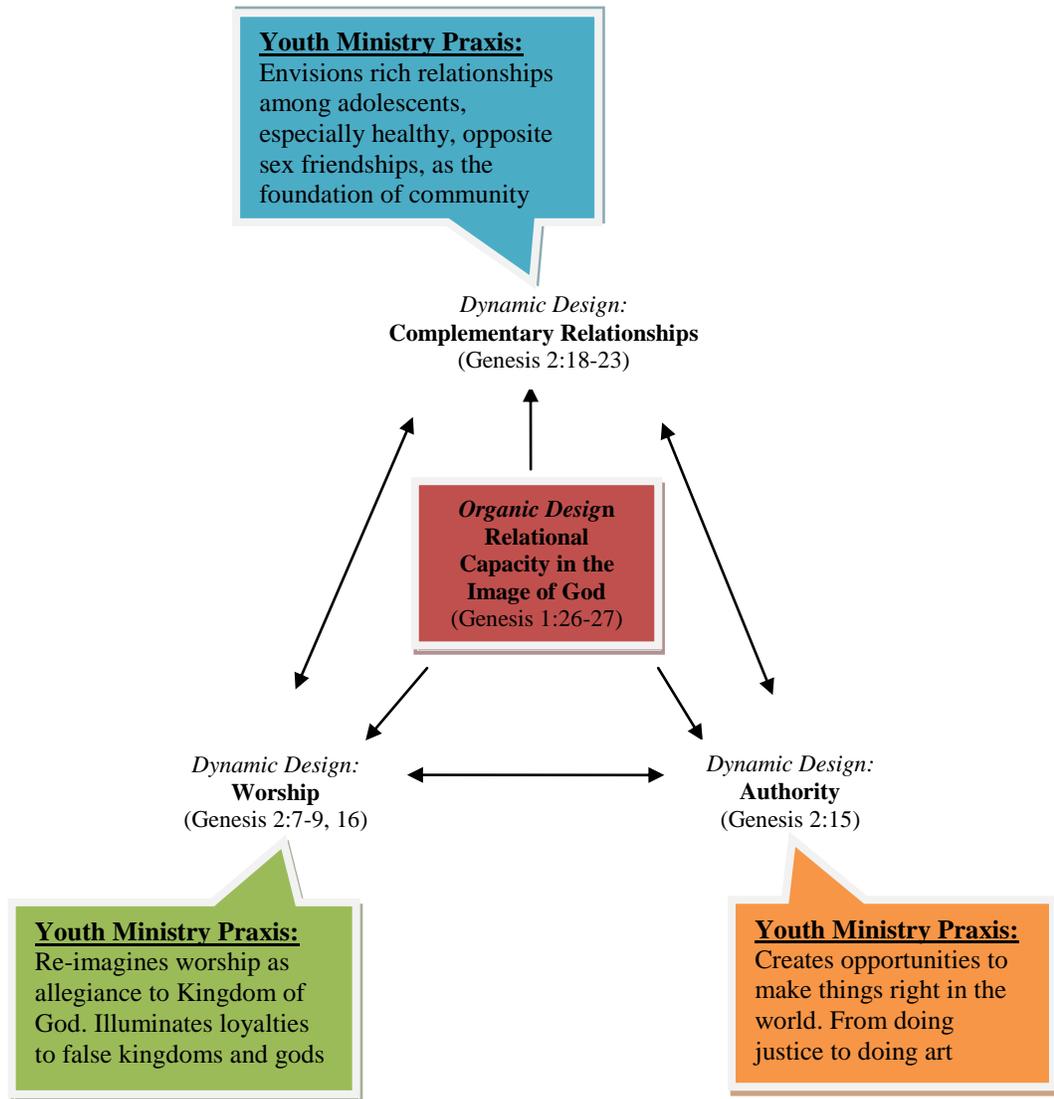


Figure 6.1 This version of the Image of God diagram is contextualized with respect to ministry to adolescents that shapes identity. As before, the Dynamic Designs of the image of God exist interdependently with the Organic Dimension. For adolescents, the key emphasis with the organic dimension is the relational capacity and the ability to respond to God. Each of the three Dynamic Designs have a particular key emphasis that serves as theological/psychosocial guide for shaping ministry praxis, all oriented toward facilitating identity formation and discovery in the adolescent.

scripts, but never actually developing a holistic identity.¹¹ It should at least be considered by those working in youth ministries that one of the scripts adolescents learn to conform to is that of the youth ministry or some other form of religious participation, and that mastery of a script is not necessarily equivalent to a core spiritual identity.

If youth ministry is anchored in the kind of theological reflection that takes the notion of adolescent identity seriously as a missional responsibility, it needs a paradigm that reflects God's "first word" in identity. Ministry praxis shaped by the paradigm of the image of God includes the same two essential dimensions; the organic and the dynamic. First, it properly anchors identity in a fixed, organic essence that possesses within itself the capacity for relationship with God. Second, it allows for a dynamic process of identity discovery, shaping the self as it resonates with the (re)-humanizing experiences of life lived according to the Kingdom of God's trajectory.¹² Both the relational, organic dimension and the experiential dynamic dimension, repaired, restored and reinvigorated by Christ's work on the Cross and sustained by the Holy Spirit, and then lived out accordingly bring identity to life in an adolescent.¹³

¹¹ Sebald, *Adoescence*, 50.

¹²The Kingdom of God is considered here as "a culture that takes form in the world culture. It uses existing cultural forms and corrects and adapts these forms to the content and reality of the Kingdom of God. The kingdom is not primarily a religious culture but a power that liberates and frees persons within their existing culture to experience the 'human' culture that belongs by right of God's creation to each person." Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 234-235.

¹³"The ordinances (or 'order') of creation, which represent the "will of God in creation," are obscured by sin and need to be made known again by Christ's regenerative work on the cross." See, Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 39.

Adolescent Identity and the Organic Dimension of the Image of God

Genesis 1:26-27 is again the starting point for the image of God in adolescent identity as organic and fixed. Identity is not “free floating” but is rooted in something of foundational significance that insures the purposeful discovery for which it was made.¹⁴ It establishes an “organic,” constitutional distinction of adolescent identity that is intrinsic and fixed through the means of relationship.¹⁵ God declares the essence of what it means to be human in this passage, so all creatures have value by virtue of the fact that God gives them value.¹⁶ This intrinsic value is not a commodity, purchased at “market value,” as much of adolescent life is, where one’s relative worth is dependent on the opinion of others or fluid, unpredictable and arbitrary metrics of status and standing.¹⁷

Being created in the image of God cannot be disembedded from being human. In the truest sense, being created in the image of God is fundamental. It gives one a name – that is, “Created in God’s Image” – that grounds the relationality of God in the personal and the particular. Abstractions about identity (“You are made in the image of God” or “Your identity is in Christ”) can be built on this particularity, but if the abstract comes without establishing the particular personal, they degenerate and diminish in vitality.¹⁸ This is why it is crucial to understand the implications of the organic dimension of the image of God with

¹⁴ Sailhamer, *Genesis*, 37.

¹⁵ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 165.

¹⁶ Grenz, *Created for Community*, 72.

¹⁷ Bruce A. Demarest and Gordon Russell Lewis, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1987), 172.

¹⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Jesus Way: A Conversation on the Ways That Jesus Is the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 71.

respect to adolescents and ministry praxis. Adolescents know intuitively they were made for more and not less in life.¹⁹ In their bones they know they were made for something “more” whether they can articulate it or not – made for each other, made to look after and shape this world and made to give their allegiance to the one in whose image they are made.²⁰ Cognitively, they may not yet be able to fully internalize such abstract truths, but as humans created in God’s image they have the capacity to hear “the echo of a voice,” the whispers of this relational God, who calls them to the fullness of who they were created to be.²¹

Yet while they know abstractly they were made for more and not less, they still need to know volitionally the immutable nature of being created in the image of God. The image of God may be so marred and distorted by sin that fellow humans lose sight of it they need to believe that God never does.²² So while adolescents may be both perpetrators of sin and victims of the sin, the image of God cannot be dislodged from them by either. They are never beyond hope for what they have done and they are never beyond healing for what has been done to them. Most of the ways that adolescents understand themselves is fluid and flexible and that is primarily due to the fact that the metric for adolescent appraisal is rooted

¹⁹ This is an anecdotal statement, of course, but it is not simply naiveté or adolescent optimism. The truth of the matter is that one would be hard pressed to find an adolescent, with whom some measure of relational trust has been built, who would not agree that they were made for more in this life and not less. Even the marginalized and abandoned adolescent, who may not *feel* as if there is more for them, still hopes at some deep level that this is true.

²⁰ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 183.

²¹ Wright, *Simply Christian*, 3-15.

²² Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 260-261.

in fluid and flexible standards of performance and conformity.²³ Ministry praxis that reinforces adolescent identity as rooted in the organic dimension of the image of God offers a stable sense of worth as an alternative to the otherwise fluid and unrealizable standards to which adolescents are compelled to conform.

Adolescent Identity and the Dynamic Dimension to the Image of God

The image of God is not actualized, in terms of adolescent identity, developmentally or theologically in its organic dimension alone. There is an interdependent relationality, a “sympathetic resonance” between the organic and the dynamic dimensions of the image of God. In music, when one strikes, for example, a single key on a piano, as in middle C, often times one can hear the sound of other strings (as in higher or lower C notes) vibrating as well. These same notes in different octaves resonate with the one note that was struck. In the same way, being created in the image of God is a type of “middle C,” creating a theological sympathetic resonance with the existential, experiential dimensions to human life. Adolescents are able to “live and move and have their being” according to the “frequency” of both God’s creative and redemptive intent.²⁴ This sympathetic resonance is a “freedom-with-restraint” within the created order that is the avenue to a fruitful, humanizing life.²⁵

²³ Chap Clark, class lecture from “YFC 724 - Psychosocial Development of Adolescents,” Fuller Seminary, October 29, 2007.

²⁴ Calvin argues from Paul that we are transformed into the image of God by the Gospel and that that spiritual regeneration is nothing else than the restoration of the original image c.r. Colossians 3:9b-10, “since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” and Eph. 4:23, “put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” See Calvin’s commentary on Genesis 1:26 in Calvin, *Genesis*, 94.

²⁵ Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 234-236.

Adolescents do not become themselves fully as a result of the developmental process of expanding cognitive abilities that allows them to grasp abstract concepts (although these capacities certainly aid in this process) but also by dynamic discovery as they interact with the outside world.²⁶ Cognitive assent to an abstract theological concept is not the same as the Greek concept of belief (*πιστις*) that is internalized and elicits conduct through “inspired surrender” as the word implies.²⁷ Dallas Willard contends humans live and act on what they have internalized deeply, adding, “Nothing else is possible. It is the nature of belief.”²⁸

To say to an adolescent, in some ministry setting, for example, “You are created in the image of God” or similarly “Your identity is in Christ” and to then expect conformity to certain behavioral expectations without creating the safe space, over time, for actively engaging in and internalizing that reality is to saddle an adolescent with a burden they do not have the developmental or theological capacity to process. In order for beliefs to be internalized in an adolescent, to become integrated with “who they are,” they must be validated, affirmed, repeated and shared within the context of congruent experiences and a living, active and believing community that sustains the beliefs in action.²⁹

²⁶ Harter and Fischer, *The Construction of the Self*, 12.

²⁷ W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words: Complete and Unabridged* (Westwood NJ: Barbour, 1985), 71. According to Vine *πιστις* and its corresponding verb *πιστευο* is used in the New Testament always of faith in God or Christ or things spiritual. The main elements of faith in relation to the invisible God are (1) a firm conviction producing a full acknowledgement of God's revelation of truth, (2) Personal surrender to Him and (3) A conduct inspired by such surrender. From this perspective, assent to a truth is not the same as belief in a truth because belief (*πιστις*) is far more demanding.

²⁸ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 307.

²⁹ Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 78.

This is where ministry practices that reflect the dynamic dimension to the image of God are crucial for adolescent identity. The active, physical account of creation in Genesis 2:4-25 is the biblical backdrop for this dimension of adolescent identity, generating the relational and experiential friction that shapes identity as opposed to the solitary burden of identity that creates “personas.” Because the practices of this dimension of the paradigm are not imposed; they resonate with the internal and organic dimension to allow adolescent identity to come “from the inside out.”³⁰ The participatory dimension to the image of God reflects the reality that these particular things done in ministry, if aligned with the dynamics of the image of God, are the mysterious means through which adolescents encounter and receive the fullness of who God is, and thus the fullness of who they are.³¹ Lastly, the dynamic dimension of the image of God has a trajectory or *telos*, a “praxis of advocacy,” that sustains and supports identity lived out over time, providing a basis for an ongoing “maturity of wholeness.”³²

To make more sense of the dynamic dimension of the image of God as a paradigm that shapes ministry praxis to adolescents and also shapes identity in adolescence, a tour through the three distinct, interrelated creational “dynamic designs” will follow, in the same pattern as in Chapter 5. Each dynamic design will borrow from the theological foundation laid in the previous chapter and expand and contextualize them to adolescent identity development and ministry praxis.

³⁰ Chap Clark, class lecture from “YFC 724 - Psychosocial Development of Adolescents,” Fuller Seminary, October 30, 2007.

³¹ Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 24-30.

³² Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 240.

Worship

The word worship is understood in a variety of ways, from a regularly scheduled church service to choruses of praise songs sung at a gathering to simply something that “religious people” do. What is intended here by the term “worship” in the context of the creational design of the image of God is observable in the way an adolescent might “worship” Dave Matthews for his musical talent or Lady Gaga for her provocative style – either pop-culture icons generate fierce “allegiance” among fans. Adolescents are indeed created to worship, but to give their allegiance to the One supremely worthy of that loyalty.

Figure 6.2

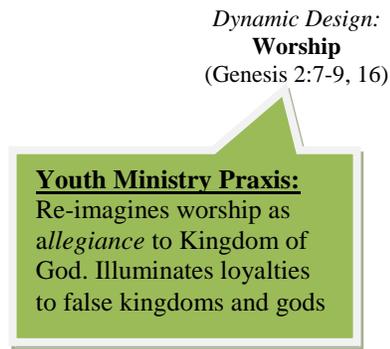


Figure 6.2 Youth Ministry Praxis faithful to the Dynamic Design of Worship, shapes adolescent through encounters with Kingdom of God Allegiance, as opposed to lesser, dehumanizing practices.

What one worships one becomes more like and this is true especially for adolescents. All adolescents are familiar with worship, whether they use that term or not. What they do not understand well is the consequences of their allegiances. Precisely because adolescents are deeply invested in the task of identity formation and discovery but because they lack much of a coherent, organizing core sense of self as a frame of reference, they are particularly vulnerable to the diminishing and dehumanizing effects of allegiances to the multitudes of cheap substitutes that present themselves on a daily basis in their lives.

Rituals and the Practice of Worship

“Worship” in youth ministry often conjures images of gatherings of adolescents around guitars and candles with closed eyes or raised hands and praise music more than a commitment to a way of life.³³ The idea here is a commitment to renewing acts of the will that bear witness to the abiding reality of the ongoing, image restoring work of Christ, sustained by fellowship in the larger body of Christ and directed away from a dehumanizing, idolatrous way of life.³⁴ This sort of worship is a type of “conversion,” a turning from one way of life, one culture, to another. It is an “enculturation” into the way of life practiced in the Kingdom of God trajectory.”³⁵

This is not to imply that rituals of the church are not relevant in adolescent identity. These particular practices offer “choreography” for adolescents that train the body and soul. “Patterned by rituals of worship, [adolescents] begin to see life before God as kneeling to confess, as standing to hear, as singing and clapping in praise, as sitting to eat and drink. Worship trains one in the steps for walking, for dancing rightly through life in the presence of God,” and thereby, one’s identity is tuned toward life as it was meant to be lived.³⁶

³³ This is not a critique of any particular *style* of worship among adolescents as much as it is a critique of diminished expectations for worship. Over the past decade an effort to recover historic spiritual disciplines, practices and liturgies in youth ministries has gained notoriety. These historic practices are extremely valuable because they create space for adolescents to connect to acts of allegiance, thereby the possibility of cultivating an internalized belief that shapes the will and the heart. However, and this is crucial, “contemplative youth ministry” will remain another layer on top of a fellowship model of youth ministry (referred to in chapter 4) if it does not take seriously adolescent identity from a theological as well as a psychosocial perspective. See, for example: Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006). Also: Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).

³⁴ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 233.

³⁵ Peter J. Leithart, *Against Christianity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

Teaching about and joining in participation of meaningful rituals such as the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, for example, empowers adolescents by giving them access to the relationship and acceptance people have in the community – a foundational purpose for which the Lord established this ritual in the first place.³⁷ Rituals and practices such as these invite adolescents into a belonging that reinforces their primary identity as followers of Jesus.³⁸

While these rituals and spiritual practices are crucial, there is a deeper dimension to worship that must be addressed in ministry praxis. As adolescents are growing developmentally, they are discovering new cognitive capacities that allow them to grow in their conception of allegiance to the kingdom of God, but not necessarily to grow in their allegiance to it. They also need “cultural immersion,” being truly part of this new culture to understand it in its uniqueness, to embrace it and give themselves over to it. The dominant contemporary culture and its mass media narratives, is the “first culture” of most adolescents. Fostering allegiance in adolescence is a matter of introducing them to an alternative Kingdom of God culture, so that they become “bilingual,” transferring their allegiance from their former first culture to their new first culture, the one for which they were made.³⁹

A unique moment in Israel's history recorded in II Kings 18-19 serves as an illustration. The Assyrians have laid siege to Jerusalem. The Assyrian envoys stand at the wall of the city and in Aramaic, the language of the culture that seems destined to

³⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Recovering the Real Lost Gospel: Reclaiming the Gospel as Good News* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010), 25.

³⁸ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

overwhelm the Jews, shout demands of surrender and taunts at God. While these negotiations are conducted in the language of the Assyrians, on the other side of the wall, in Hebrew, the language of the kingdom culture, Israel's leaders speak openly in worship, grief, and fear as well as remembrances of God's faithfulness in times past. These are sustaining conversations from within their culture that reflect their "primal narrative" and true allegiance in the face of dehumanizing opposition.⁴⁰

Today, adolescents' primal narrative is typically the language of the "pagan" culture and not the language of the Kingdom culture. In other words, even for adolescents who are religiously active, their "first culture" is not necessarily their faith context, but the dominant culture "out there" in which they live. Some adolescents in a pluralistic, postmodern world might be somewhat bilingual but the majority of them are "monolingual" speaking primarily the language of the culture "outside the wall." They need immersion in the true "first culture," the one for which they were made as God's image bearers. They need to be led into the "space behind the wall," to become bilingual so they can give themselves to and be embraced by the sustaining primal narrative of the kingdom.⁴¹

Allegiance and Worth

As 21st century technologies, economic growth and a host of other social factors led to the slow decay of community and kinship structures, a new social phenomenon emerged, the "self-chosen relationship," as the means to provide individual feelings of

⁴⁰ Nancy Tatom Ammerman and Arthur Emery Farnsley, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 360.

⁴¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 64.

intimacy.⁴² Freely chosen friendships increasingly took the place of the predetermined family, reducing the bond of commitment to that of the person one relates to most.⁴³ In adolescence, this social change has elevated self-chosen friendships to a primary place, at the expense of what were previously the primary and sustaining forms of relationships. Although friendships are extremely important in adolescence they cannot ultimately sustain a deep sense of worth beyond their relatively transient bonds.

Worship takes one's whole self, body, mind and soul, recalibrating its worth through the proper appraisal of the Creator instead of transient, self chosen relational bonds. This appraisal neutralizes the unnecessary layers of superiority or inferiority created and imposed by humans. Doing so allows for participation in the Body of Christ, gathered for sharing and depending on the gifts God has given the community. Allegiance of this sort equalizes all, not to the end, however, that all are diminished, but to the end that all are free to be fully alive to a new standard that transcends all other standards.⁴⁴ Ministry praxis that guides adolescents into re-imagining worship in this sense leads them to experience life giving worth that flexible, relational bonds cannot.

Idolatry

This storyline of worth, if internalized, can be life changing in one important sense; it can empower adolescents to uncover and take a stand against the dehumanizing practices of idolatry. Idolatry is often subtle, but it is definitely ubiquitous. Idolatry is itself a kind of

⁴² Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation*, 42.

⁴³ Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 86.

⁴⁴ Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 154.

allegiance, a giving of oneself over to lesser loyalties that, as a rule, makes one less. For adolescents the narratives of public life that give images of identity and shape their sense of self are more likely to come through things such as advertising and consumerism than religion.⁴⁵ Advertising brilliantly appeals to a deep adolescent vulnerability; the desperation to feel some sort of uniqueness, to find some sort of orientation to their own worth, as part of the crowd and set apart from the crowd at the same time.⁴⁶ The disorienting effects of the resulting consumerism foster the assumption that adolescents must continuously reconstruct themselves. Gergen puts identity into such consumeristic terms when he says, “identities are essentially forms of social construction and one can be anything at any time so long as the roles, costumes and settings have been commodiously arranged.”⁴⁷

Consumerism is only one example of the kind of identity diminishing idolatries that compete for the loyalties of adolescents in today’s society. For adolescents to learn how to thoughtfully discern the idolatrous and dehumanizing practices of life is done most effectively in the context of a loving community that lives according to a different “normal.” This new normal is habits of life in resonance with the Kingdom of God and “out of sync” with the lesser kingdoms of “isms” (consumerism, materialism, etc.).

This kind of community affirms adolescents’ worth by orienting them away from lesser, dehumanizing choices and toward a meaning-giving way of life grounded in

⁴⁵ Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture, Engaging Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 65.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁷ Kenneth Gergen, quoted in, J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 53.

humanizing worship.⁴⁸ This is an extraordinary community commitment. In order for adolescents to fully live out the existential reality of the image of God, they need mentors and guides, who are “bilingual,” able to speak the language of the Kingdom as well as the dominant culture, who will lead them away from the “normalized” disorder and chaos of Western consumer-society so they may begin to comprehend, embrace and give themselves fully to the role for which they were created.⁴⁹

Combating consumerism is only a helpful example. The emphasis is on ministry praxis that creatively and reflectively fosters genuine allegiance to the Kingdom of God and harmonizes adolescent identity with the worth that comes from this dynamic design. Adolescents who are on the way toward internalizing this sort of allegiance into their “selves” become adept at discerning and choosing humanizing practices over dehumanizing ones.⁵⁰ Humanizing choices address the fundamental adolescent identity question, “Do I matter?” with a resounding “Yes!” Ultimately, the chief concern then is that the creational design of worship and allegiance in the image of God is allowed to shape ministry praxis.

Authority

To be created in the image of God and to be charged with the task of working in and cultivating, preserving and protecting the creation (Genesis 2:15), is to be imbued with authority. The quintessential power that exists in a culture is the capacity to define what is real in all the ways that reality presses against us, such as “What is truth?” “What is

⁴⁸ Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *Religion, Deviance, and Social Control* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 80.

⁴⁹ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 33.

⁵⁰ Oestreicher, *Youth Ministry 3.0*, 45.

legitimate knowledge?” “What are the goods worth having in life and the ideals worth sacrificing for?” To have that sort of power is “power of the first order.”⁵¹ Human beings were endowed in the Garden with this first order power, authorized and oriented toward stewarding and protecting God’s wise created order. The vestiges of this authorization remain today - every human possesses not only power but a will to use it to some end or another. Adolescents, by virtue of the fact they are created in God’s image, are ‘authorized’ to be His stewards. In contemporary culture, however, they tend to be effectively marginalized or disaffected.⁵² This marginalization brushes up against other fundamental questions of adolescent identity, namely, “Do my decisions really matter?” or “Do I have any power?”

Developmentally speaking, adolescents begin to discover their own particular power and autonomy as they individuate from their family of origin.⁵³ They need, however, both affirmation and direction for wielding their nascent power. Ministry to adolescents must take on the serious task of creating a trajectory and a context for that authority that resonates with the Kingdom purposes of righteousness; that is, making things right in the world. More fundamentally, ministry praxis must communicate to adolescents they are authorized to be *shalom*-bearers. Because of the Holy Spirit’s renewing work in the lives of adolescents, they indeed have the power to “bring salvation” to others. This does not mean merely salvation of the soul as individual rescue from the evil world (although it does not exclude this), but also to be bearers of *shalom* in the Old Testament sense, bringing to bear the hope of justice,

⁵¹ Hunter, *To Change the World*, 178.

⁵² Clark, *Hurt*, 67.

⁵³ Blos, *The Adolescent Passage*, 144.

the humanizing of others, the socializing of humanity, peace for all creation.⁵⁴ This is the “other side” of reconciliation with God that has often been given too little consideration in ministry. Yet, this is the side of reconciliation for which adolescents are perfectly suited, if the creational design of authority is supported in their lives.

Figure 6.3

Dynamic Design:
Authority
(Genesis 2:15)

Youth Ministry Praxis:
Creates opportunities to make things right in the world. From doing justice to doing art

Figure 6.3 Youth ministry praxis shaped by the Dynamic Design of Authority moves adolescents toward identity shaping experiences that make things “right” in the world.

Adolescents are often generalized in popular media as being self-centered, unconcerned with the affairs of the world and unrealistic in their vocational expectations but rarely or never as *shalom*-bearers or agents of rightness. This is not a totally unwarranted critique.⁵⁵ This apparent apathy, however, could be a sign of something deeper. In social science, “Status Theory” posits, in a perceived, relative lack of power (political or otherwise), people tend toward alternatives for meaning such as status. To acquire

⁵⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 330.

⁵⁵ The notion that adolescents are not concerned with the “affairs of the world” beyond their own micro-world is supported by the lack of involvement in causes or issues. Just 18.4% of 18 year olds report *any* volunteer work in the past 12 months. They have little sense of what their distinct, generational perspective might be on the wider world, or any significant sense that they might impact that world in one way or another. It may not be that adolescents do not care about or are indifferent to the world around them. It may be that there is an indirect correlation between increasing abandonment on the part of the adult world (their erstwhile guides into biblical/social causes) and decreasing sense that they can do anything about the wider world’s problems. Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 11, 67.

significant status usually requires money and the acquisition of the appropriate status symbols.⁵⁶ What is often critiqued as shallow and materialistic habits in adolescents could actually be a sign that they perceive themselves to be marginalized and relatively powerless.

For the most part, adolescents today are influenced to believe that the only power available to them is economic. Working to make money (or dreaming of being rich) to be consumers with no discernable ends other than maintaining a particular lifestyle is normative.⁵⁷ This is a hollowed out version of intrinsic power and authority that negatively shapes adolescent identity, severely distorting societal norms such as educational attainment and aspirations for the future.⁵⁸ The relative economic power they possess is simply not the same as the authority for which they were created, and in fact, is a cheap substitute for “power of the first order,” cultural power that can actually affect change in their world.⁵⁹

Tasks with a *Telos*

Adolescents need to be given “tasks with a *telos*,” tasks that matter, that give them the experience of using the authority for which they were made and a taste of shaping the

⁵⁶ Murray Milner, *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 56-58.

⁵⁷ Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 109-127.

⁵⁸ In short, adolescents on the higher ends of the economic scale tend to, perceptively, conform to the expectations of the standardized measures of the educational system. On the lower end of the economic spectrum, adolescents recognize perceptively that the ‘cultural capital’ of the lower classes is valued less than that of the higher classes, creating structural constraints that severely inhibit individual attitudes and aspirations. See the data from the study of adolescent boys in a public housing project in Jay MacLeod, *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1995), 147. From the perspective of different socioeconomic classes, see also, Denise Clark Pope, *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed-Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001)

⁵⁹ Crouch, *Culture Making*, 43.

world (or simply their world), which in turn shapes them.⁶⁰ Adolescents employing their authority, using their power in the context of tasks with the *telos*, of making things right in the world, according to God's wise purposes, shapes that power in them to reflect the same manner that God exercises power. Adolescents need to know they have a role to play as "agents" for justice in the face of injustice in a variety of settings. This can be as simple as standing in solidarity with the marginalized and ignored in the school cafeteria, or as complex as being led into solidarity with the poor through short term mission work, serving as tutors for inner-city youth, or raising resources to help provide micro-loans to small family businesses in economically oppressed cultures. They can be led into practices that create awareness of the ongoing need for true racial reconciliation, as well.⁶¹

Making things right in the world is more than missions and reconciliation, though. Adolescents can also make things right in the world by using their particular talents to create art that speaks of truth, beauty and goodness. Art has the unique capacity to illuminate the nature of life, of God, of God's actions, and of the fight between good and evil that sometimes even theologians, bound by the limitations theological systems impose, may preclude or obscure.⁶² To encourage this sort of power in artistic adolescents is to give them

⁶⁰ The idea here is a trajectory for these tasks toward a particular end. *τέλειον*, used in the perfect tense, as in Colossians 1:28 ("so that we may present everyone *perfect* in Christ") signifies aiming for and reaching its designated end, the purpose for which it was intended. See, Vine, *Expository Dictionary*, 173.

⁶¹ Gary Deddo explains, "Since humanity was created for being in a communion that reflects the triune communion, then racial reconciliation will be at the heart of God's eternal purposes where there is broken relationship. Resisting such reconciliation, because of the relational nature of the Trinity and human beings made in that image, is resisting the essence of who we are and who God is." See, Gary W. Deddo, "Persons in Racial Reconciliation: The Contributions of a Trinitarian Theological Anthropology," in *The Gospel in Black and White: Theological Responses for Racial Reconciliation*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 65.

⁶² William David Spencer and Aâida Besançon Spencer, *God through the Looking Glass: Glimpses from the Arts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 12.

“power of the first order.” We need not just reason but art, as Nietzsche himself recognized “anything that is transfiguring, refined, foolish or divine,” to make life worth living.⁶³

Ministry praxis should serve to support the idea that adolescents have been authorized to demonstrate that “life is worth living” to a larger world outside their own. In the early part of the 20th century, when many youth ministry programs started, many began as Victorian-era influenced purity programs designed to keep young people “pure” in terms of denomination or ethnicity and especially in terms of keeping them away from individual sin or vice.⁶⁴ This had the unintended effect of disconnecting Christian purity from practices of courage, justice and compassion in the Church’s teaching to youth.⁶⁵ In other words, this created a trajectory for ministry that focused on negation (avoiding “sin”) at the expense of authorization (the self-shaping acts of making things right in the world that resonate with the dynamic dimension of the image of God.

An ongoing renewal in ministry praxis is needed that fully embraces and supports the authority that adolescents possess by virtue of the fact they are made in God’s image. Avoiding sin certainly has its place and must be taken seriously in ministry, but adolescents, whether consciously or not, also long to discover the place of their “authorization.” Rather than fearfully flee from or carelessly conform to the world, they need the support of ministry praxis and caring adults who aid in their discovery of God’s authority within them as the

⁶³ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans., Helen Zimmern (Lisle, IL: Project Gutenberg, 2003), 188-189.

⁶⁴ Jon Pahl, *Youth Ministry in Modern America: 1930 to the Present* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

source of courage and compassion to engage the social disorder and dangers of the world (whether in the “Third World” or in the school lunchroom “world”).⁶⁶

If they are led into practices and habits of making things right in the world, standing for justice for those who are truly widows, orphans and foreigners or for perhaps their peers who are metaphorically widows (teen moms), orphans (the disabled) and foreigners (immigrants, minorities, economically destitute), these practices become their internalized, normative way of engaging the world. In this way, those practices have a bearing on the shape of their identity. Then they truly can believe, in their heart of hearts, they have been authorized to demonstrate that “life is worth living” to a larger world outside their own.

Oppression

Authority oriented toward any end other than the *telos* of the Kingdom of God is a form of oppression. Oppression comes in many forms; totalitarian regimes that oppress the freedoms of its people, unfair economic practices that keep down the poor, psychological abuse in a marriage that subjugates a spouse, and biting sarcasm at a middle school lunchroom table that excludes a vulnerable early adolescent. Oppression is a powerful misuse of God-given authority. Oppression, as with all forms of bondage (whether due to racial and economic factors, political control, marital or family abuse or adolescent derision that tears down a peer) has the pervasive effect of systematically eroding self-dignity and, ultimately undermining identity.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Pahl, *Youth Ministry in Modern America*, 15.

⁶⁷ Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry*, 39.

Whether intentional or not, adolescents possess the power to be perpetrators of oppression in ways that literally erode the personal being in another.⁶⁸ Great care must be taken here to make them aware of this through the ministry and community setting. Yet, while adolescents need to understand ways they can be perpetrators of oppression, there is a more nuanced dimension to oppression as well. Sinister forms of oppression such as “systemic abandonment” victimize adolescents in powerful but subtle ways.⁶⁹ In the void and in an effort to navigate the expectations of the multitude of social scripts they encounter, even highly religious teenagers act irreligiously at times.⁷⁰ They may not be rebelling as much as straining to bear the burden of sorting through expected behaviors of their various selves demanded by the plethora of competing scripts in their multi-dimensional world.⁷¹

Walking with adolescents for the purposes of lending a hand in bearing the oppressive burden of managing the unrelenting demands of multiphrenia to speak into their lives the reality of being created in the image of God will require unique praxiological commitments. Standing with them against the oppressive powers in their world that turn against them will require thoughtful reflection and action. Walking with them as they discover the reality of their own power, the fact that they have been authorized, and leading them toward tasks with a *telos* that stand against oppressive ways shapes them to be, in their selves, “owners” of authority oriented toward the kingdom trajectory.

⁶⁸ Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry*, 39-40.

⁶⁹ Clark, *Hurt*, 44.

⁷⁰ Mark Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 199.

⁷¹ Sebald, *Adolescence*, 51.

Complementary Relationships

If the creational design of Authority established that human beings were created with a mandate to exercise “responsible dominion” or stewardship over the rest of creation, the creational design of Complementary Relationships establishes that human beings were created distinctly as male and female and in the image of God to exercise “responsible community.”⁷² This is established in at least two ways. First, there is a distinct, relational dynamic to being fully human.⁷³ At a mysterious level, human beings exist in a reciprocal relationship as both “person” and “relationship.” Persons are not reduced simply to relationships; persons stand in relations that shape identity.⁷⁴

Second, in this relational-person dynamic, Genesis 1:28 and 2:18-23 establish that human beings exist in an irreducible duality of male and female, equal as bearers of God’s image and therefore equal in standing before God.⁷⁵ Miraslov Volf observes, “Though the content of masculinity and femininity may vary from culture to culture... maleness and femaleness are indelibly inscribed in human bodies. Gender difference is therefore an inalienable feature of human existence.”⁷⁶ These two: relationality and gender differentiation, form the core of complementary relationships that shape identity.

⁷² Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *My Brother's Keeper: What the Social Sciences Do (and Don't) Tell Us About Masculinity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 43.

⁷³ Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 174.

⁷⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 179-180.

⁷⁵ Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 88.

⁷⁶ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 183.

Figure 6.4

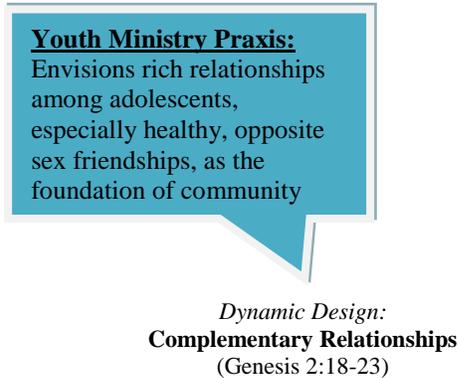


Figure 6.4 Youth ministry praxis that is shaped by relationships that are completing, as they are designed to be, lead adolescence into encounters with dignity and experiences with reconciliation.

Adolescents, created in the image of a social God, are intrinsically social and the fulfillment of their sociability and their identity depends on fellowship with the opposite sex.⁷⁷ For adolescents, this means that they are sexually differentiated beings with the potential for deep life-giving relationships. Contrary to popular opinion, it does not mean that they are "sexual beings" at the mercy of their sex drives. It means there is a social dimension to their sexuality, being created male and female in relationship, which has a tremendous bearing on adolescent identity. There is no doubt the importance of this dimension has been effectively eclipsed in contemporary culture.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender & Grace: Love, Work & Parenting in a Changing World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 41.

⁷⁸ Theologian Marva Dawn, among others, makes an important distinction in the understanding of sexuality by distinguishing between our "social sexuality" and what she calls "genital sexuality" (sexual expression such as sexual intercourse). The creational design of Complementary Relationships with regard to adolescent identity is dependent on this concept of social sexuality. Marva J. Dawn, *Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 11.

In the general literature, it is accepted that adolescents learn what it means to be male and female in relationship to one another through this social sexuality.⁷⁹ However, if adolescent social sexuality is not anchored in the meaning giving narrative of the ‘*ēzer k^l negdô*’ dynamic, social sexuality easily degenerates into either sexuality for selfish ends or sexuality that lurks to lead victims into sin. Both of these diminish and frustrate the “identity completing nature” of these relationships.

For several generations now, developmental psychology has enjoyed preeminence in the public arena in defining normalized adolescent sexual behavior (including social and romantic relationships) because science is depicted as objective and unbiased.⁸⁰ At the same time, theological and religiously based concepts have been disregarded as public language, because they are considered to be primarily subjective, appealing to the affective rather than the objective.⁸¹ As a result, adolescents have little notion of the theological dimension to their sexuality that play a crucial role in shaping identity.

For example, a study found that “other-sex friendships” in early adolescence correlate with adolescents being more likely to have romantic relationships when they enter middle adolescence.⁸² This sort data may serve as a predictor of future adolescent relationships, but because the subjective and the theological are excluded, it cannot offer reflection on what the nature and purpose of those early adolescent relationships should

⁷⁹ Gerald R. Adams, Thomas P. Gullotta, and Carol Markstrom-Adams, *Adolescent Life Experiences*, 3rd ed. (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1994), 318.

⁸⁰ James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good or Evil*, 1st ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 81-82.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

⁸² Candice Feiring, "Other-Sex Friendship Networks and the Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence," *The Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 28, no. 8 (1999): 499.

be in the first place. Reflecting the exclusivity of scientific research, the cultural cues tend to reduce the purpose of sex to techniques for things such as “safe” intercourse.⁸³

Void of purpose and meaning for opposite-sex relationships, the hyper-sexual becomes normalized, especially in popular culture that also has influence on adolescent sexuality.⁸⁴ Adolescent sexuality is far more than a raw force driven by physiology and hormones but is in fact inextricably linked to cultural scripts and cues that shape what is “sexual.”⁸⁵ Sexuality is not an “a-cultural” self-determining force. It resides within a cultural context that bears the responsibility to shape its practices and purposes.⁸⁶ Left alone without a rich cultural and theological narrative, however, sexuality is easily corrupted into utilitarian or exploitative ends.⁸⁷ Adolescent social sexuality as means to affirm dignity is particularly vulnerable to this sort of corruption.

The theological concept of *‘ezer k^enegdô* is that rich narrative, the anchor in the cultural context, shaping adolescent social sexual relationships into “meaning-giving relationships” with one another as God ordained them. Complementary Relationships gives the proper context to explore the deep, mysterious aspects of male-female as it

⁸³ Clark, *Hurt*, 134.

⁸⁴ Dawn, *Sexual Character*, 11.

⁸⁵ Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 60, 83.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸⁷ An example of a utilitarian approach to sex is an essay by philosopher Thomas Mappes titled “*Sexual Morality and the Concept of Using Another Person*.” For Mappes, the highest end is to avoid “using the other” and this is accomplished by relinquishing further commitment or expectations through “voluntary informed consent” prior to consensual sexual activity. See Thomas A. Mappes, “Sexual Morality and the Concept of Using One Another,” in *Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy*, ed. Thomas Mappes and Jane Zembaty (Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 169-183.

relates to being fully human while giving the freedom to express sexuality in positive and constructive social ways because they move toward identity's proper end – dignity.⁸⁸

Dignity and Identity

Social sexual relationships are “completing relationships” in the sense that they shape who we are but they also, in some mysterious way create a means to discover the intrinsic dignity we possess as human beings. Before the creation of woman in Genesis 2, man was a “male in simple potentiality.”⁸⁹ The man's identity (*'ādām*) was most notably associated with the ground (*'ādāmā*) from which he was created.⁹⁰ He was incomplete as a human being and in need of a dramatic rescue by one that was heretofore more like him than anything else in creation and yet one who was very much his opposite. The creation of that rescuer-opposite, the *'ēzer k'negdô*, is the dramatic moment of relationality where the woman is given as “the kind of help without whom a man cannot be a man.”⁹¹ This relationality brings forth the unique dignity of being human through the awareness of the indispensability of sexual distinction and the possibility of human fellowship.⁹²

Adolescent social sexual relationships, in the complementary sense, have the potential to shape identity and stand against the temptation to exploit others by fostering

⁸⁸ Stanley Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 21-22.

⁸⁹ Keil, Delitzsch, and Martin, *Genesis*, 88.

⁹⁰ Hemchand Gossai, "Divine Evaluation and the Quest for a Suitable Companion," *Cross Currents* 52, no. Winter (2004): 550.

⁹¹ Paul King Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), 124.

⁹² Grenz, *Sexual Ethics*, 248.

the virtue of dignity. Dignity is generated and sustained in relation to others.⁹³ True dignity, the fruit of complementary relationships, is not vulnerable to the comparative assessment of worth common in the rest of human life.⁹⁴ Others not only bring this kind of dignity about but also respond to its intrinsic value – in the face of it, the temptation to exploit another disappears.

Some psychosocial research corresponds quite nicely with the dynamic of complementary relationships. In one study, the quality of same-sex friendships in adolescents was compared to cross-sex friendships. Adolescent boys reported that their cross-sex friends provided more esteem support than did their same-sex friends.⁹⁵ Self-esteem assessment is not necessarily the same thing as intrinsic dignity. However, this research is at least consistent with the creational design of complementary relationships, as it indicates there is something deeply valuable for adolescent boys in their perception of themselves that comes from relationships with adolescent girls.

Another study among mid to late adolescents compared closeness of opposite-sex friendships to “identity commitment.”⁹⁶ Researchers found that adolescent males with greater closeness in friendships to adolescent females correlated with an overall identity

⁹³ Meilaender, *Neither Beast nor God*, 75.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁹⁵ Annette M. La Greca Ami Flam Kuttler, Mitchell J. Prinstein, "Friendship Qualities and Social-Emotional Functioning of Adolescents with Close, Cross-Sex Friendships," *The Journal of Research on Adolescence* 9, no. (1999): 344.

⁹⁶ This is the identity commitment concept of James Marcia. See Evelyn Brady, H. Durrell Johnson, Renae McNair, Darcy Congdon, Jamie Niznik and Samantha Anderson,, "Identity as a Moderator of Gender Differences in the Emotional Closeness of Emerging Adult's Same- and Cross-Sex Friendships," *Adolescence* 42, no. 165 (Spring) (2007): 1-23.

commitment in those males.⁹⁷ Put another way, adolescent males with significant friendships with adolescent females were further down the road in identity discovery in emerging adulthood than those who had primarily male friendships.⁹⁸

Adolescents are drawn to social sexual relationships primarily because this is what they were created to do, not because their sexuality mandates it or popular forms of entertainment glorifies the most debase elements of it. Adolescents were created, by virtue of the created order, with the capacity to use those relationships to shape identity and instill dignity. The problem is not sexuality but that the understanding of the ends of sexuality is severely distorted. In fact, many adolescents lack almost entirely any articulated, discernable sexual ethic.⁹⁹

For most adolescents, the competing messages they hear tend toward two extremes. On the one end, the message from popular culture, particular movies, often portrays sexual acts and behavior among teenagers as normative and universal.¹⁰⁰ On the other end, particularly among evangelicals and some other traditionalists, the focus is on preventing pre-marital sex through various strategies.¹⁰¹ While the latter is laudable because it stands against the potential for exploitation, neither

⁹⁷ Brady, et al, "Identity as a Moderator of Gender Differences," 1-23.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁹⁹ Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 105. This fact might not be entirely surprising if it were true only among non-religious adolescents, but even religious adolescents struggle to explain the purpose or ends of their sexuality. Among this group, "anticipated guilt" has a more powerful effect than any other motivation with regard to sexual decisions.

¹⁰⁰ Clark, *Hurt*, 130-131.

¹⁰¹ Some of these strategies include demystifying sex as "something dogs do," encouraging abstinence and purity pledges, and assuring adolescents that God created sex but that it is really only pleasurable in marriage. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 157.

of these extremes leads adolescents to discover important dimensions of their identity through complementary relationships.

Sexual decision making is strongly bound to social context and among adolescents, peers play a crucial role in determining what is considered normal sexual behavior.¹⁰² From the context of the larger, “adult” world, the messages that adolescents mostly receive vacillate between “have sex, safely, when you are emotionally ready” and “do not have sex until you are married.”¹⁰³ What adolescents need is someone to “stand in the middle” with them, giving them a richer vision of their social sexuality. What adolescents need is not another script for sexuality, but a transforming narrative that articulates the identity giving and dignity generating nature of social sexuality. This is the intent of the *ēzer k^ēnegdô* narrative.

Below is a visual picture of how this dynamic interrelationship plays itself out. As females, who possess this mysterious “oppositeness intended to rescue” give it away to males (as Eve’s presence did for Adam) in opposite sex relationships, males become more fully male (as Adam did in Eve’s presence). The response of males is then to affirm that unique and mysterious gift in females (as Adam did to Eve), thus validating them for their unique identity as female. This is the fundamental narrative for humanizing social sexual relationships. Through the *ēzer k^ēnegdô* dynamic, females communicate dignity and identity to males in a way that is not available any other way. Males reciprocate with affirmation, honor and care that is also not available any other way.

¹⁰² Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 196.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 106.

Figure 6.5

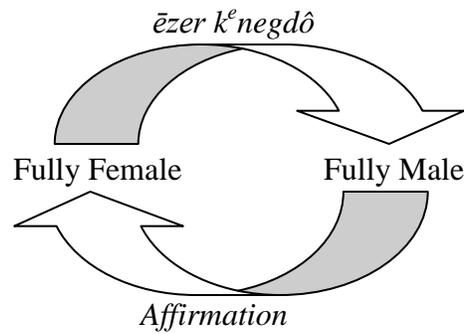


Figure 6.5 The dynamic interaction between males and females of the *ēzer k'negdô* that shapes identity.

If the social life of adolescent boys is shaped intentionally by the *ēzer k'negdô* narrative, so that they internalize the reality that a dimension of who they are comes only from one place, the mysterious dynamic of opposite sex relationships, it changes the nature and ends of those relationships. It leads them away from the temptation to settle for exploitative, self-gratifying choices in those relationships and toward affirming the great worth females are to them. In the same way, if the social life of adolescent girls is shaped in such a way that they internalize the reality that they are created as the *ēzer k'negdô*, that who they are as females is not to be sexual objects, but to speak identity into males, they are tempted less to choose psychologically damaging objectification and instead embrace the uniqueness of being created in God's image as female.¹⁰⁴

Sexual Purity and Youth Ministry

As a result of the Fall, the presence of the '*ēzer k'negdô* narrative has been eclipsed at the interpersonal and the communal-societal levels of human relationships.

¹⁰⁴ Objectification theory posits that girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves. This perspective on self can lead to habitual body monitoring, which, in turn can increase women's opportunities for shame and anxiety. See, Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21, no. (1997).

What was once an illuminating account of the *telos* of relationships is now obscured, casting a dark shadow on a significant avenue to human identity. In the place of the *ēzer k^ēnegdô* narrative in contemporary culture, are volumes of titillating scripts for alternate sexualities that substitute and celebrate exploitative personal gratification for dignity. This is an egregious substitution, one that has littered the pages of history with stories of exploitation and dehumanizing practices that have left scars and pain on the heart and soul of perhaps millions.

Contemporary popular culture has essentially settled for the lowest common denominator, portraying sex and sensuality as “one juvenile, narcissistic, sexual escapade after another” with no context and no purpose for males and females other than gratification .¹⁰⁵ In real life, this sexual ethic is anything but egalitarian, most often manifesting itself as sexual dominance and often synonymous with power and authority, usually at the expense of young women.¹⁰⁶ In the face of an overwhelming popular culture tide and society’s increasing tolerance for alternate scripts for sexuality, ministry responds reflexively but not necessarily theologically, often unintentionally compromising the power of the *ēzer k^ēnegdô* narrative. The reflexive response essentially elevates sexual purity onto its own pedestal, rather than seeing it as the fruit of true complementary relationships. Without the benefit of theological reflection, these efforts are simply another alternative script, one that substitutes “sexual purity” for identity and dignity. This should not be completely surprising. Within the context of youth ministry, sexually pure behavior was a prominent value almost from the beginning of the youth

¹⁰⁵ Clark, *Hurt*, 122.

¹⁰⁶ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002), 103.

ministry movement in the late 19th century.¹⁰⁷ It continues to be a distinctive of most youth-centered programs and youth ministries today.¹⁰⁸

While it may appear that the influence of the tide of blatantly hyper-sexual messages in advertising, film and music is unstoppable, research among adolescents shows religiosity still plays a significant role in sexual ethics.¹⁰⁹ In other words, ministry praxis that is theologically grounded and committed to shaping identity in response to the complementary relationship dimension to the image of God, and not just toward purity, abstinence and sexual sin management, can actually make an effective stand against that tide. Nonetheless, ministry practice has tended to rely essentially on socially constructed prohibitions against certain sexual behaviors cloaked in tradition rather than rooted in an understanding of the created order.¹¹⁰ Instilling that the opposite sex is a threat or creating boundaries to “protect” adolescents from sexual indiscretions as the norm or default position for ministry without serious theological reflection on the completing nature of opposite sex relationships is potentially damaging with respect to adolescent identity. Contemporary psychology has demonstrated that creating subcultures of males or females only (whether an enforced prison environment or freely chosen community) does not result in morally pure humans but results, in fact, in something less than human.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Pahl, *The History of Youth Ministry in Modern America*, 63-66.

¹⁰⁸ Lisa D. Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America's Adolescents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 28.

¹⁰⁹ Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 106.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹¹ Van Leeuwen, *Gender & Grace*, 41.

Adolescents long for relationships certainly because they have a newly emerging developmental capacity for them, but deeper than that, they long for relationships – especially opposite-sex relationships – because they long to discover who they are.¹¹²

Complementary relationships are integral to that discovery. To fail to address this longing thoughtfully and carefully, to fail to create safe space for opposite sex relationships in ministry praxis and to reflexively order ministry, repeatedly reminding adolescents what a threat their sexuality is to one another, denies this creational design. This is not the same thing as saying boundaries in adolescent social sexual relationships are not important. They are important, but they must have the correct ends in mind. Those ends cannot be simply behavior modification or sin management for their own sake.

Exploitation

To lift social sexual relationships out of the context of the *ēzer k^enegdô* narrative is to make them vulnerable to make exploitation the end of purpose. Exploitation, in the context of human sexuality, manifests itself in obvious and violent ways such as rape or sexual abuse but also in more nuanced ways, such as a professor demanding sexual favors from a student in exchange for a good grade or an adolescent boyfriend pressuring his girlfriend for sex. Some moral philosophers would argue that one operates morally within

¹¹² Interestingly, for a large majority of adolescents who labeled themselves youth group attenders, the second most important reason for attending was “relationships,” “friendships” and “the people there” (students name “the opportunity to learn about faith and God” as the main reason for their involvement). These results certainly are consistent with the notion that there is a strong longing for relationships. see Kara Eckmann Powell, "Focusing Youth Ministry through Community," in *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*, ed. Kenda Creasy Dean Chap Clark, Dave Rahn (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 197.

sexual relationships as long as one does not “use” another person.¹¹³ Others would contend that to reduce sexual intimacy simply to physical acts, somehow extracted from what one is as a human being, is a violation of integrity and ultimately dehumanizing.

Moral philosopher Vincent Punzo states such an attempt at separation is “morally deficient” because it lacks “existential integrity in that there is a total merging and union on a physical level, on the one hand, and a conscious decision not to unite any other dimension of themselves, on the other.” This sort of sexual union “involves a ‘depersonalization’ of the bodily existence, an attempt to cut off the most intimate physical expression of their respective selves from their very selfhood.”¹¹⁴ Ultimately, human sexuality cannot be understood outside of the context of the completing relationships and the *ēzer k^ēnegdô* narrative. Disconnected from its proper context, sexuality collapses into itself, becoming a debased human desire with an appetite that is only satiated by exploiting the other.¹¹⁵

Again, the context of complementary relationships is crucial. The ultimate question in ministry praxis is not simply how to influence adolescents to avoid bad behavior with regard to the opposite sex. The question is also not simply how to successfully promote abstinence or sexually purity in the context of opposite relationships.¹¹⁶ To be absolutely clear, avoiding any sort of exploitative behavior in adolescent opposite sex relationships is

¹¹³ Mappes, "Sexual Morality and the Concept of Using One Another," 169-183.

¹¹⁴ Vincent C. Punzo, "Morality and Human Sexuality," in *Social Ethics: Morality and Social Policy*, ed. Thomas Mappes and Jane Zembaty (Columbus, OH: McGraw Hill, 2006), 166.

¹¹⁵ This understanding of exploitation – the dehumanizing acts of self-satisfying sexual preferences at the expense of others would include pornography, as well as sex among non-married adolescents or adults.

¹¹⁶ While the talk of abstinence and purity pledges may be pleasing to many, especially parents of adolescents, young people trained to put up barriers against sex often cannot deconstruct them rapidly upon marriage where sex is finally OK. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 96.

certainly desirable, but what also must be taken into account is that there is far more at stake in these relationships than good behavior. The opposite sex cannot be reduced to an inconvenient enemy or a temptation and also preserve the richness of oppositeness.

Adolescents, like all humans, are meant to discover the unique value of their “self” in communion with others, especially as they engage in healthy cross sexual relationships. If this creational design is distorted in ministry praxis or in the cultural context at large and adolescents are not guided into healthy complementary relationships, the fundamental, irreducible quality of sexual differentiation is diminished in human communion. As a result, adolescents are no longer free to respond to the other person (of the opposite sex) as the completing counterpart to their own personhood.¹¹⁷ This leaves sexuality as a degraded end in and of itself, rather than a means to deeper human communion, identity and dignity.

If youth ministry takes seriously the call to lead adolescents into the fullness of being human, into discovering who they are, created in the image of God, it must embrace an even more difficult challenge than creating boundaries that reign in the sexual longings of adolescents. Ministry praxis must take on the hard task of embracing and fostering healthy, appropriate social sexual relationships to normalize in adolescents a sense that the “other person” in a cross sex relationship should be viewed as a “mystical incarnation of God.” It must also support God’s intent that each needs the other in order to be more fully human.¹¹⁸

If this sort of mutual necessity is the dominant narrative that informs ministry praxis two things happen. First, youth ministry can trade in the diminished, unbalanced

¹¹⁷ Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology*, 166.

¹¹⁸ Pahl, *The History of Youth Ministry in Modern America*, 164.

focus on purity as an end in and of itself for a richer understanding of the God-ordained purposes of opposite sex relationships – while gaining purity as the fruit of healthy, completing relationships. Second, and closely related, what might appear to be normative and immensely more attractive in contemporary culture (various expressions of self-gratifying sexual activity) will be exposed for what it is – exploitation. Ultimately, the creational ethic of the ‘ēzer *k^enegdô*, is restorative. It functions as a way to mold and shape adolescents so that they cooperate with the life giving, identity-affirming love of the Lord. This was his intent in giving this form of social relationship to one another.¹¹⁹

Conclusion

All three of these creational designs (Worship, Authority, and Complementary Relationships) in this theological approach to ministry are interdependent (refer to Figure 6.1). In one sense, they stand alone as three unique dynamic designs of the created order. At the same time, these three dynamic designs are absolutely dependent on one another other. Completing relationships provide the context for true worship and allegiance because these relationships are the building block of a trusting loving community – the only setting that worship and allegiance can be experienced. True worship sets the aim of authority and checks power toward its proper *telos*; not an abuse of power, but a stand against injustice and for beauty. The authority to make living rightly normative also empowers the relational community to take a stand against the temptations toward exploitative practices. These creational designs, lived out fully in interdependence, ultimately roots identity securely in the fixed, relational nature of the image of God and allows for the discovery of identity that

¹¹⁹ Collins, *Genesis*, 132.

reflects outward the reality of the image of God. When one of these creational designs is diminished or eclipsed, either of the others is more vulnerable to the dehumanizing practices of the broken world. Therefore all three must be taken together in shaping ministry praxis.

Ministry praxis that embraces each of these as the paradigm that shapes ministry will foster the discovery of identity in adolescents, one of the fundamental, driving tasks of adolescent life. This ministry praxis will also require another paradigm shift. Adolescents cannot be expected to discover who they are in the image of God – living rightly to take a stand against oppression, experiencing healthy, complementary relationships to discover real dignity and sustaining a life-giving allegiance to the Kingdom through true worship – without others who do the same.¹²⁰ It will take an entire body of believers, at multiple levels, to embrace the demands and costs of living out and walking alongside their adolescents into worship, authority and complementary relationships. The costs might well be substantial, not the least of which, doing “youth ministry” as it has never been done before. The price will seem inconsequential in comparison to the reward of insuring adolescents are fully integrated into the adult world with a healthy, formed identity.

¹²⁰ Pahl, *The History of Youth Ministry in Modern America*, 176.

PART THREE
MINISTRY STRATEGY

CHAPTER 7

PRACTICAL USE OF THE IMAGE OF GOD PARADIGM

To say that an adolescent is created in the image of God is to say something very profound. Every time a youth pastor greets a high school student in the youth room, every time a Young Life leader makes eye contact with the student sitting all alone in the school cafeteria, every time a caring adult stops to put a hand on the shoulder of the mentally disabled student on the fringes of the student section at the game, every time a parent says the name of a new middle school student in the congregation they are having an encounter with the image of God. These are not mundane moments. They are holy moments. But perhaps because the phrase “created in the image of God” is so familiar, its profundity is lost as an aspect of identity and a paradigm for ministry praxis.

When adolescents embrace embodied human practices that resonate with the image of God, they become more fully who they were meant to be. Living in this manner, creates a refining, forming force that gives shape to identity.¹ Stones in a swift moving river have, over time, a unique shape that is a function of the friction of water, sand and

¹ Embodied human practices of various kinds sustain and express who we are as persons and also establish the related social structures within which we live. Humans are not “angels or ethereal spirits” but instead have flesh and blood bodies – and much that is important about who we are derives from this fact. See Smith, *What Is a Person*, 323.

other particles. A woodworker turns rough lumber into beautifully shaped furniture by applying a planer or sander. The friction of the tools to the wood gives it a particular shape. In a similar way, an adolescent's personal identity – who they are – is shaped and matured through the experience of living their lives in the “friction” of their response to God and others.² Adolescents were made to relate to the image of God and to resonate with the image of God. Who they (inalienable in the ontological sense) are and what they are like (character, personality – the “self”) is inseparable. Our self is determined by God's decision to make us as persons in his image (the Organic Dimension) and it is also determined by day to day decisions as life is live out (the Dynamic Dimension).³

Throughout the history of the Church, the image of God has been understood in a number of ways. The image of God as a paradigm for ministry praxis is an attempt to preserve distinctive elements of two of those; the more traditional Structural View of the image of God and the more recent Functional View by linking together the “abstraction” of the structural with the “action” of the functional.⁴ In fact, the image of God paradigm for ministry praxis cannot function without these distinctives. The organic dimension of

² Jewett and Shuster, *Who We Are*, 30.

³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴ In the *Structural View* the image of God resides in the substance of human beings, such as reason, personality, free-will, self-consciousness or intelligence. This is essentially an argument of ontology, since a structural view, by definition, speaks of some property of human nature. In this view, humans share with God, in a derivative but not essential way, qualities such as personality, will and sentience. See, for example: Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary Ser. Vol. 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Incorporated, 1987), 30. Collins, 62; and David W. Baker and T. Desmond Alexander, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 443. The *Functional View* implies that humanity needs to be understood in the context of its relationship with God. The broader context of the creation story makes it clear humans are uniquely designed and destined for that relationship. In this sense, the image of God is the human spirit (soul) imprinted by the Creator with those endowments that enable us to “transcend the world of lesser creatures and live our lives in a unique relationship with God and with neighbor.” See for example: Sailhamer, *Genesis*, 37. Also Jewett and Shuster, *Who We Are*, 62-63.

the image of God is ontological in the sense that there is an inherent relational capacity “built into” human beings that reflects the relational nature of the Creator-relational God. This truth is inalienable and unalterable, preserved by the structural reality of the image of God. The dynamic dimension of the image of God takes root in the organic, but is meant to move out in relational action, in a trajectory that is in step with the purposes for which humanity was created. In other words, human beings were made in the image of God to “relate and resonate” and these two have a tremendous bearing on identity.

Relating and resonating are key analogies when thinking through the process of contextualizing Image of God praxis to a particular ministry setting. “Relating” is the guiding concept regarding the organic dimension of the image of God in ministry praxis. “Resonating” is the guiding concept regarding the dynamic dimension. The process of applying the relating and resonating of this paradigm in a youth ministry setting is the basic work of practical theology. It starts with reflective tasks that seek to identify the practices of Christian life and ministry and begins to ask constructive questions regarding some of the theological assumptions that guide those practices.⁵

In this case, the situation at hand is ministry to adolescents that shapes identity. The questions with respect to the organic dimension to the image of God and ministry revolve around this central idea, “Where is space created for adolescents to discover the reality of being made in the image of God? Where are adolescents able to explore the relational capacity they have with God and the ability to respond to his voice?” These

⁵ Kenda Creasy Dean, “The Tasks of Practical Theology: Reflecting on Present Practice,” in *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*, ed. Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 107.

questions begin the process of shaping praxis with respect to the ontological reality of the organic dimension of the image of God.

Questions with respect to the dynamic dimension of the image of God revolve around the assumption that one also “does” the image of God through the three dynamic designs. With respect to Worship/Allegiance, the questions could include, “In what ways are we giving adolescents the opportunity to learn and participate in the historic practices and sacraments of the Church?” as well as “How do we help our adolescents understand and choose against the idolatries in their particular lives that dehumanize them?” With respect to Authority, the questions could center on the places in our ministry that allow students to affect change toward rightness in the lives of others” or “In what ways are we making adolescents aware of the oppressive use of their power?” With regard to Complementary Relationships, the questions could focus on, “How are we teaching and modeling for adolescents healthy social sexual relationships?” as well as “In what ways are we helping adolescents identify the patterns of exploitation that are imbedded in everyday life that foster exploitative practices?” These are a few of the preliminary questions for reflection on “relating” and “resonating” as part of practical application of the image of God paradigm. There is certainly more that can be done in that process and the Appendix provides an in-depth, helpful and guiding “check list” to aid in this process.

Evangelism Based on the Image of God Paradigm

Ministry praxis shaped by the image of God is transformational in nature, because it produces change by shaping and forming identity in adolescents. Evangelism is also about transformation that produces change. In some ways, there seems to be a movement

within elements of evangelicalism that embrace a shift from salvation as rescue to salvation as transformation.⁶ In biblical theology, God's activity of restoring all the created order, especially people, is the work of evangelism.⁷ The redemptive, restorative work of Jesus can, therefore, be seen as repairing the distorted, wrecked image of God in people back to its original and proper orientation, freeing them from the identity erasing bondage of sin and freeing them into the rehumanizing life of that renewed image.

The image of God paradigm is designed to guide ministry praxis in a number of settings. It can also serve as a guide specifically for evangelism because the central issue of evangelism is also at the center of the image of God – a broken relationship between people and God. Sin is the culprit and though the image of God is not dislodged by it, adolescents' capacity to relate to God is broken beyond their ability or will to repair it. They may retain the ability to respond to the voice of God, but they have no means within themselves to do so. The means for an adolescent to discover healing that broken relationship need not be formulaic but instead may reside in three dynamic designs of the image of God – worship/allegiance, authority and complementary relationships. These things for which humans were made to “do” are located in every person and respecting individual stories, giving opportunities to encounter and explore these three creational designs, might serve as entry points into discovering the redemptive work of Jesus and the restoration of the image of God at that relational, organic level.

⁶ Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion and Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 82-84.

⁷ Terry McGonigal, "Focusing Youth Ministry through Evangelism," in *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically About Youth Ministry*, ed. Kenda Creasy Dean chap Clark, Dave Rahn (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 128.

Using those three dynamic designs as the key concepts, evangelism could begin in the context of a relationship of trust by addressing first, for example, questions of allegiance (generally speaking: “What is it that you are giving yourself to? Is that truly addressing the sense that you were made for more and not less?”) . Depending on the needs, experiences and interests of the person, one could move to another next dynamic design. Sharing in and reflecting on acts of justice or beauty could provide an encounter with the humanizing power of using God-given authority for making life right and standing against oppression. Continuing the pattern of the dynamic designs, this work might be done alongside a group of Christians who demonstrate tastes of other-directed community rooted in completing relationships. This is, of course, a brief sketch of evangelism using the image of God paradigm as a guide. The following are three “models” of evangelism, each beginning with one of the dynamic designs of the image of God paradigm and moving through to the remaining two. “Case studies” of each of these models will be included to add further clarity.

Worship/Allegiance Model

The Worship model of evangelism is not simply inviting adolescents to attend a worship type event (although it does not exclude this either). It begins by exploring and identifying an adolescent’s allegiances, articulating and demonstrating the trustworthiness of allegiance to the Kingdom sort of life and the dehumanizing consequences of allegiance cheap substitutes (idolatry) that are an ever-present norm of contemporary life. Allegiance opens the heart to toward either community and completing relationships or toward acts and habits of making things right in the world.

Figure 7.1

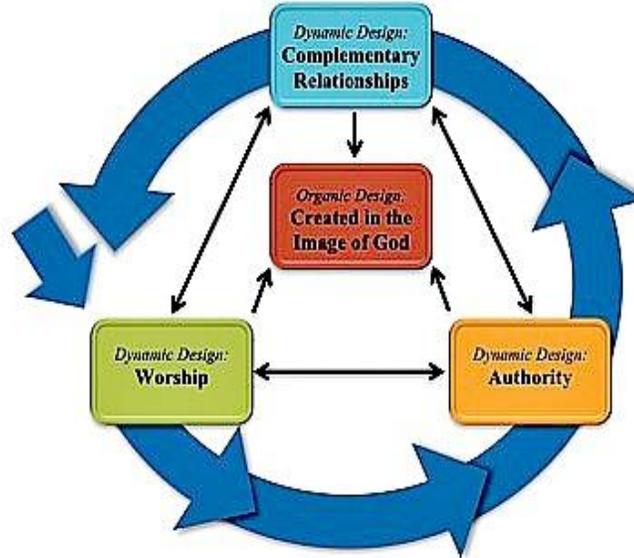


Figure 7.1 The Image of God Paradigm and evangelism with the entry point of Worship and Allegiance.

Allegiance/Worship Case Study

Thomas, a recent college graduate, serves as the first case study. He grew up with little exposure to Christianity and what little he knows about the faith was tarnished when a neighbor across the street, a good friend of Thomas' mother, slowly succumbed to cancer. Thomas was impacted by watching his mother's her anger toward God over losing her good friend. When Thomas was a senior in high school, he started attending Young Life Club. He went to a weekend camp with Young Life that same year, where he heard a series of talks explaining the Gospel. This was a new experience for Thomas, as his primary culture was "outside the wall." In many ways, what he heard and saw regarding Christianity through Young Life clubs, camps and his Young Life leader was very attractive but at the same time very "foreign," as it was "inside the wall" culture to him. The key issue for Thomas was one of trust – "Can I give myself to something that I'm still not sure I understand?"

With this key concern now identified, the journey of relational evangelism for Thomas is to address questions of allegiance (i.e. “Can he trust and give his allegiance to God’s Kingdom?). He will need “along the wall-type,” or “bilingual” conversations that bridge the gap between his first culture, outside the wall, and the Kingdom culture inside the wall. This could include basic apologetics to demonstrate the trustworthiness of God and his Word, but also discussions about the dehumanizing consequences of misplaced allegiance to various idols that are a part of the outside the wall culture.

Establishing a growing degree of trust and allegiance to God’s kingdom sort of life can open him to move toward the next dynamic design, in this case, Authority. Because Thomas is relatively unfamiliar with Christianity, he will likely have ask questions about “ethics”- what it is that Christianity says and does about issues such as poverty, the environment, sex and relationships. Thomas, like many, wants to “make a difference.” He knows he was made for more and not less. The dynamic design of Authority can give him a vision for just how his power, rightly oriented by Jesus, can affect that difference. It would be ideal for him to “do” authority, so this should also include some experiences “practicing righteousness” with other Christians. In the setting of Young Life, this could include volunteering to serve in the kitchen at a Young Life camp alongside Christian peers, during a weekend camp for high school students. Serving to make it possible for other students to have a life-changing weekend at camp, surrounded by Christian peers doing the same thing, can give him a taste of what it means to make a difference.

A taste of fellowship, in the midst of “doing authority,” takes Thomas to questions of the purpose of relationships and even a longing to experience the completing dimension to those relationships. Positive encounters with relationships and new friendships that are oriented toward affirming dignity and away from self-serving exploitation would stand in contrast to the normal relationships he may have encountered up to this point. Giving Thomas the opportunity to observe true joy and experience true dignity through an encounter with Christian community can be deeply disequilibrating and at the same time profoundly evangelistic.

This approach to evangelism begins with issues of trust and continues to experiences with authority and completing relationships, so that the person experiences a glimpse of “the way life was meant to be” in God’s image. Evangelism is more than cognitive. It is experienced as well. Through the work of the Holy Spirit the individual, like Thomas, would experience the necessity of a relationship with Christ as the orienting means to experiencing that sort of life.

Authority/Rightness Model

The Authority/Rightness model of evangelism is a unique approach built on the assumption that every adolescent has the gnawing sense that they were “made for more and not less.” Every adolescent, by virtue of being created in the image of God, longs to do something that changes the world or their world. This desire is often hidden beneath the protective façade of indifference or ambivalence. These, however, are more often than not, defense mechanisms to cope with the disconnect they feel from any sense of purpose. Being validated by opportunities to make something right, whether it is art that

expresses true beauty or work that pushes back against the oppression others experience in various forms can open the heart to a desire for allegiance to a way of life that is characterized by this sort of orientation or toward belonging in a community of completing-type relationships that sustains and directs power toward its proper ends.

Figure 7.2

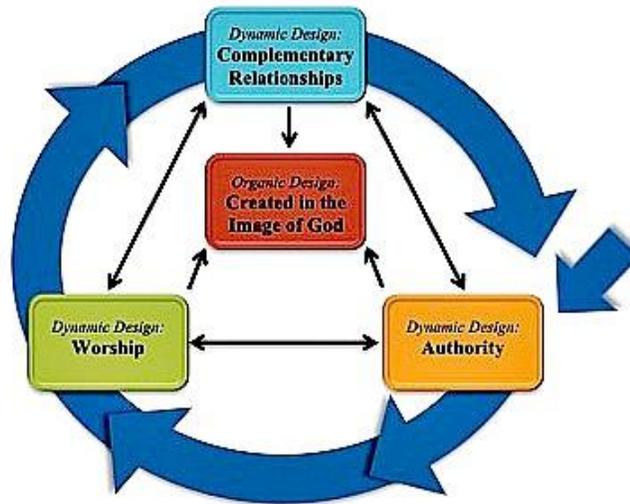


Figure 7.2 The Image of God Paradigm and evangelism with the entry point of Authority.

Authority/Rightness Case Study

The small country of Wales, a part of the United Kingdom, is a post-industrial economy that suffers from high unemployment and less than average government social services. Amidst such challenging circumstances, hope for the future is hard to come by, belied by the fact that the Welsh suicide rate is nearly double the rest of the U.K.⁸ The outreach ministry of Young Life has taken a unique approach with regard to adolescent evangelism. To speak in the abstract of “hope in Christ” that comes from Allegiance to

⁸Rod Nordland, "How Grim Was My Valley: A Teen Suicide Epidemic Sweeps a Community in Wales", Newsweek/The Daily Beast.com. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2008/02/28/how-grim-was-my-valley.html> (accessed September 11 2011).

the Kingdom life does not seem to take root among many of the adolescents they work with. So, staff and volunteers there sought out another entry point. They decided to take non-Christian Welsh kids who have little hope, who are oppressed by poverty and have little opportunities to transcend it, to a third world community in South Africa to serve the poor there. This allows these Welsh adolescents to see their poverty in the context of those in even greater and more desperate need. In the context of evangelism, it gives them an opportunity to discover that they are in fact made to “make things right” in the world by empowering them to serve those in dire circumstances that surpass their own.

The dynamic design of Authority is the entry point allowing these adolescents to experience the Kingdom sort of power that is meant to make things right in the world. Experiences that resonate with the sort of things for which one was made are empowering in and of themselves. However, experiences that demonstrate the healing power of Jesus by giving otherwise hopeless adolescents the authority to be agents of that healing, is a surprise confrontation with genuine hope and an encounter with the vulnerability of belonging.⁹ These sorts of exposures to righteousness and justice can open hardened hearts to the next dynamic design of the image of God, particularly practices of worship and allegiance. Building new allegiances to God, through the restoring work of Jesus, as the source and provider of true worth can diminish the attractiveness of lesser gods, especially the material goods that offer false status and often remain out of reach of the poor. Worship such as this does not happen in isolation. Worship leads to experiences

⁹ Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 34.

with community, the next dynamic design, reorienting the ends of relationships, from self-serving and exploitative to completing.

It should be noted that youth group short term mission trips to poverty stricken communities and countries – so prolific these days as to be considered an essential, legitimizing program of church youth groups – should be constructed wisely and with great care.¹⁰ Because these trips can devolve into self-serving experiences some research has called into question the transformative impact these trips have on adolescents that participate and has underscored the ways these trips can be culturally insensitive to the receiving community.¹¹ Great care needs to be taken if mission trips are to be used as the evangelistic entry point within the dynamic design of Authority.

Community/Belonging Model

The community/belong model is rooted in the dynamic design of complementary relationships. It rests on the assumption that for many adolescents belonging precedes believing. Relationships of trust with others, especially with adults or older peers, can speak transformational identity into the life of an adolescent. These relationships demonstrate, in the context of community, that one belongs to the body of Christ and can become acculturated to the “behind the wall” culture of the Kingdom of God.

¹⁰ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 69.

¹¹ David A. Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your C.Q. To Engage Our Multicultural World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 27.

Community/Belonging Case Study

This case follows the story of John. When John was in ninth grade he met a substitute teacher at his school who happened to be a Young Life leader. In the classroom, John seemed to be a normal, if not a bit rambunctious and impulsive student. Soon it was

Figure 7.3

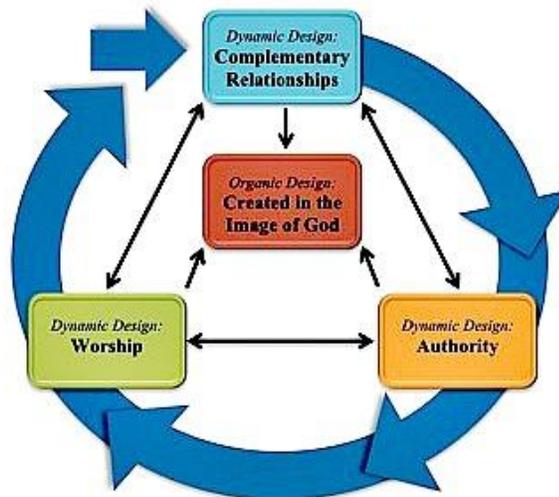


Figure 7.3 The Image of God Paradigm and evangelism with the entry point of Complementary Relationships.

clear, though, that John was an early adolescent who lacked the social skills to connect and assimilate with the mid-adolescents in his grade. As a result, John was very lonely. Socially he struggled to connect with other kids. He overcompensated and tried too hard to be friends with others in his classes, but he often found himself ostracized and left out. The Young Life leader made a point to greet him by name every time he saw John after school or at a game. One day the topic of Young Life club, the weekly meeting of students and leaders, came up. John hesitated and said, “I don’t have any friends.” Thinking he was probably exaggerating for effect or nervous about who might be there, the leader said something mediating, like “I’m sure you’ll know someone there.” He

stopped him and said, “No, I’m serious. I don’t have any friends.” So the leader looked him in the eye and said, “John, I’ll be your friend.” He came to Young Life club that night and never missed a week after that.

The other Young Life leaders welcomed John and made him feel as if he belonged. This was no small task, as John was socially awkward, his personality alienated others, and his lack of age appropriate social skills made him an emotional and relational drain. Nonetheless, later that summer John went to a Young Life camp for a week, heard and experienced the Gospel and became a follower of Jesus. It was at Young Life that John belonged and that opened his heart to the Gospel at a critical time in his life. Indeed, a few years later, John confided that he was so despondent from peer rejection he was contemplating suicide just prior to meeting his Young Life leader.

In the pattern of this model, the next step would be to focus on experiences of using God-given authority to affect change in the world or into experiences of worship and allegiance that lead away from dehumanizing choices and substitutes. In John’s case, he was given a chance to participate in a mission trip with Young Life leaders and students to Central America. He struggled to “fit in” with this group on a social level, but his sense of confidence, beginning to believe that he could make a difference in the world in the context of Christian mission, was considerably bolstered. This experience, because it also included exposure to significant poverty and its impact on the people there, began to shape some of John’s assumptions about his own allegiance to notions of obtaining wealth and success. This notion was furthered shaped into other Kingdom loyalties as John began to participate in a worshipping community in a local congregation.

For John, it was completing relationships and belonging that preceded his believing, calling forth the intrinsic dignity he possessed as an image bearer of God and opening his heart to the rehumanizing story of the Gospel.¹² His believing was reinforced, not just by knowledge and practices of the faith but also by his experiences with authority oriented toward making things right in the world. This encounter with authority, the sense that his decisions mattered helped meet an internalized need in his quest for resolving those questions of identity. As his sense of his true self grew, John was able to move into a deeper understanding of what worship was, a denying of that old self, for the sake of encountering the weightiness of life lived as a restored image bearer.

Summary

This is by no means an attempt to reduce evangelism to the level of formulas and programs. The idea is that evangelism should be seen as transformation in the context of the image of God. To become a follower of Christ is a process of restoring the image of God, not just in a transactional, forensic sense but also in an existential sense. People can be ushered from the “power of darkness into the kingdom of the Son [God] loves” (Colossians 1:13) by “doing” the image of God and discovering their “kingdom identity” through the ensuing restored relationship with him. The dynamic designs of the image of God merely serve as the framework for existential experiences in the evangelism journey that lead to a revitalized organic relationship for which all humans were created.

¹² The dimension of opposite sex relationships as a foundational relationship in the dynamic of complementary relationships has been noticeably absent from John’s case study. It’s not that opposite-sex friendships were not relevant to John’s case – as they certainly were – but that his deficit of any sort of relational connection of substance was so significant that belonging on any level was critical. There is no doubt that the belonging John experienced in the Young Life club communicated a sense of who he was, by virtue of the fact that he finally had a place where he fit in. That fitting in also included nascent opposite-sex friendships, which without question played a completing role in John’s identity discovery.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This work is more than an academic or ministerial endeavor. It is deeply personal. It is, in essence, what I wish I had known during the early years of my work in youth ministry when I told Katie that fateful morning, “Just be yourself.” I work today for the ministry of Young Life, a parachurch outreach ministry that seeks to introduce adolescents to Jesus Christ and help them grow in their faith through a particular strategy of ministry we have been committed to almost since the mission began in 1941. While my vocational calling has been dedicated to this ministry, I want this paradigm to be more than a way to “do Young Life” better. I want all kids to know Christ and I want them to know who they are meant to be uniquely in him.

The main emphasis here is on bringing the “first word” to bear on the question of adolescent identity that exists in an unprecedented cultural landscape. Questions of identity are not merely psychosocial or developmental. There are significant theological questions unique to adolescents regarding the task of identity (e.g. “Who am I in the opinion of the God who created me? What is his intent for my life?”).¹³ Youth ministry matters because it is one of the few arenas of contemporary life that is poised to impact adolescent identity from both a biblical and a cultural perspective.¹⁴ The hope then, is that this paradigm can have value in a multitude of ministry settings, whether church based or parachurch.

¹³ Amy Jacober, *The Adolescent Journey: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Practical Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 12.

¹⁴ Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, 18.

In youth ministry, it seems just about everyone is familiar, at some level, with this basic task of adolescent development. It is this general familiarity, though, that may contribute to a degree of ambivalence regarding identity and ministry praxis. This is not to say that many, in some part, may take this task seriously in their ministry. They may be intuitively doing much of what is describe here in this paradigm, whether it is intentional or not. However, for many others, the demands of the youth ministry job description and the needs of their adolescents and families may be so great, shaping ministry theologically faithful to the adolescent identity journey may be an appealing concept but not an immediate priority. Further, addressing identity as it is laid out in the created order of the image of God may be assumed to be happening as a matter of ordinary ministry practice when in fact it is not. Unintentionally, this assumption is complicit with the psychosocial notion that identity “happens.”¹⁵ However, it seems far more likely in adolescence today that a multiplicity of situational selves simply “happen” rather than a core self. Certainly humans grow and develop as a function of time, but that does not mean that everyone eventually becomes a fully formed and core “self.” The fragmented, technologized postmodern world incentivizes these multiple personas and is actually less compatible with a core self.

The challenge in ministry praxis then, on the one hand, is to grasp the nuances of adolescent identity; both the assumptions about what the self is in historical perspective

¹⁵ That identity ‘happens’ is the opinion among some respected theorists and developmentalists. For example, psychologist Susan Harter states, “From a cognitive-developmental perspective, the construction of the self is inevitable. As a result, the self will develop over time; that is, as cognitive processes undergo normative-developmental change, so will self-concepts, including their very structure and organization.” Harter and Fischer, *The Construction of the Self*, 8.

and the complexities of what identity is from a postmodern, psychosocial perspective. On the other hand, the challenge is to create a biblical paradigm for ministry praxis that is faithful to biblical theology and that takes seriously all the nuances and complexity of adolescent identity. The demands of the contemporary self, as it exists today, are a burden that no one, especially adolescents, can bear alone. Adolescents are not only unique, but are also constantly changing, such that adolescents today are quite different from those thirty years ago when many approaches to ministry were formalized.¹⁶ This means that those who minister to adolescents cannot dispense with the necessity of evaluating ministry praxis in light of psychosocial thought in its proper perspective, primarily the perspective provided by theological reflection on the image of God.

The archaeology of the self reveals that, at least as it is understood today, the self is a construction of modernity as much as adolescence is. An individualized, personal “self”, apart from some other corporate or communal existence did not exist for much of human history in the normative way it does today. This seems quite out of sync to our contemporary sensibilities, as the self is so deeply embedded in our cultural consciousness as to be considered a given for all of human history. What is more, the landscape of contemporary culture exists in what is essentially a norm of paradox. Pluralistic and postmodern society is more fragmented than any time in history and humans exists more isolated than ever within it. At the same time, humans are more technologically connected to all the fragmented parts of the contemporary landscape, with each connection presenting its own unique expectation for a response. Fifty years ago, prescient psychosocial theorists began to argue for a jettisoning of the concept of a

¹⁶ Jacober, *The Adolescent Journey*, 12.

core, formed self in favor of a flexible and fluid understanding of identity that allows for a multiplicity of selves to meet those demands. Pragmatism is not the same thing as wisdom, however. As the flexible and fluid understanding of identity has taken hold, the adolescent passage has only lengthened in that time period, indicating that adolescents struggle to resolve existential questions such as “Who am I?” in a fragmented, hyper-individualized, multiphrenic society.

While the concept of superficial, situational selves may be in sync with contemporary culture and may temporarily restrain the burdensome demands of the self, it is grossly out of sync with God’s intent. Even though it is a significant influence, psychosocial theory can only really address the self from an empirical perspective, from what is, and not from a “super-empirical” or metaphysical perspective, such as what ought to be.¹⁷ What it can offer to those in ministry is limited. At the same, theology is relatively new to the game, especially with respect to identity in adolescent ministry. Yet God has always been concerned with the question of identity. That is why the first word in identity has been and remains (for all of biblical and human history) the image of God. However, taken all together, the idea of shaping ministry praxis intentionally and even primarily toward fostering the formation and discovery of adolescent identity – who they are intended to be in God’s image – may seem too novel to be a high priority.

The conviction here is, however, that for adolescents to come to know their “self” they must come to believe they are organically created in the image of God, that is, to internalize in a deep way that who they are is not up for grabs or left to fate or luck and

¹⁷ Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 99-100.

that their intrinsic worth can never be taken away from them. Even in a fallen state, adolescents are image bearers of God in need of being renewed in that image.¹⁸ That there is a portion of the image that is being restored and renewed puts important emphasis on the destiny adolescents have as image bearers that no other dimension of human life addresses. This is “good news” that must be a constant refrain for them, especially in parachurch ministries that are focused on adolescent evangelism. It must be part of the process of helping them enter into and embracing “life behind the wall,” that is, the Kingdom of God, as the new but primal narrative about themselves.

Equally important is to embrace the fact that adolescents do not merely bear the image of God statically in a given moment. Through Christ, they are in the process of more fully representing the image of God dynamically over time. As Colossians 3:9-10 says, “...you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” The trajectory of the three dynamic dimensions of the image of God (Worship/Allegiance, Authority, and Complementary Relationships) toward a vitalizing human life and away from dehumanizing practices are meant to shape ministry praxis to be in cooperation with that renewing work of Christ. Thus the image of God functions as both a symbol adolescents can cling to and a stimulus to ongoing creative experiences that inform identity rather than merely being a still and defined concept.¹⁹ This is not, however, creative processes or ongoing renewal without direction or *telos*. This is the actualization that begins in the redemptive work and moves to that which is to come fully in Jesus

¹⁸ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 72.

¹⁹ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 520.

Christ.²⁰ In Christ is seen clearly what is only partially revealed in Genesis 1, namely what humanity, as the perfect image of God, should be like (Colossians 1:15-20).²¹ To that end, this paradigm is a humble attempt to shape ministry praxis in step with the redemptive work of Jesus so that the image of God regains its original place in the scheme of breathing identity into adolescents (see the seminal and archetypal events of life being breathed into humans by God in Genesis 2:7, and then by Jesus in John 20:22), and so that this new identity is nurtured and sustained through obedience to the Kingdom sort of way, following this same Jesus.

This paradigm is meant to be seen as a guide for discipleship as well evangelism. The hope is that through ministry shaped by this paradigm adolescents would be able to have a meaningful encounter with themselves and with the redemptive and life-giving work of Jesus so that following Jesus would not be another role or situational character to master on another stage-play but instead, it would take shape within them, integrated into the core of who they are and who they know themselves to be. Adolescence should be seen as the process of becoming that core self. Youth ministry typically intersects with adolescents from their early and middle adolescent years and the adolescent self may very well be a work in progress still upon graduation from a high school youth program.

Even if this is the case, if the adolescent has had in their ministry experience the organic reality of being created in the image of God repeatedly reinforced in them as something that cannot be taken away or something that cannot be escaped; if they have

²⁰ Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology*, 520.

²¹ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 72.

had repeated opportunities in their ministry experience to engage in “self-shaping” activities that are clearly consistent with the dynamic dimension of the image of God and that clearly stand against the dehumanizing practices of disoriented, disconnected human life, all of this will have established a self-concept as a follower of Christ and the adolescent will be so far down the road on that trajectory, it will simply be too difficult to abandon the course (or to say this in current ministry jargon, “to abandon their faith”).

This paradigm was created to have broad appeal and application in the larger context of ministry to adolescents. That is the reason there are few practical suggestions of actual ministry practices and “tasks with a *telos*.” In every sense, the best work is yet to be done with this paradigm. A local, congregation based youth ministry might be the ideal setting to apply the concepts here, as a communal, cross-generational -type setting might have the most resources necessary to address all the nuances of the paradigm. The paradigm is designed to be contextualized with respect to particular variables of that setting, from the impact of socioeconomics, the particular, unique group dynamics present, the direct involvement of adults in the program (or lack thereof) and including the typical resistance that usually occurs when there is a change of ministry practices.

Even though this setting might have an advantage in adopting this paradigm, a few things should be clear. No congregation as a whole or youth group in particular is going to recreate the kind of social capital or landscape of belonging of the kind that created and sustained the Augustine’s concept of the self or the corporate personality ancient Israel enjoyed. As much as youth groups in local congregations have to offer – and it is a lot! – such ministry cannot go back in time and recreate historic

metanarratives, corporate, tribal or communal structures that extend belonging or provide meaning giving creeds that once existed.²² For the most part, contemporary life is too fragmented, too rushed and too individualized to be, captivated by or given over to such structures, metanarratives and history, and this is true of adolescents particularly.²³

This is not cause for panic, though, if those in youth ministry will commit to do three things simultaneously: take the reality of adolescent identity seriously by shaping ministry theologically to address it, doing this with respect to psycho-sociology in its proper perspective, and doing this in such a way that is relevant to the unique landscape of contemporary adolescent culture, particularly with regard to the “self.” The norms of adolescent life and culture have changed greatly, even in the past generation. It should not be assumed that the first culture of an adolescent is the “behind the wall” culture of the Kingdom and that they are influenced to lesser degree by the culture outside the wall. Even for religiously devoted adolescents, the National Study of Youth and Religion found that they struggle to express themselves on matters of God, faith, religion or spiritual life that remotely resembles Christian orthodoxy.²⁴

It would be wise, therefore, to assume that for most adolescents Christianity is a second language more so than a first.²⁵ They are residents of the culture outside the wall

²² Pitirim Aleksandrovich Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age; the Social and Cultural Outlook* (New York: Dutton, 1941), 17.

²³ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searchings*, 143. The NSYR researchers concluded that American adolescents, like American adults, “are nearly without exception profoundly individualistic, instinctively presuming autonomous, individual self-direction to be a universal human norm and life goal.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁵ See for example the concept expressed in, Brian K. Smith, “Christianity as a Second Language: Rethinking Mission in the West,” *Theology Today* 53, no. 4 (1997).

which normalizes the tendencies the self has toward dehumanizing practices of idolatry, oppression and exploitation. Great care must be taken to acculturate them to into the habits, symbols, practices and language of the new culture, oriented toward the humanizing practices of worship and allegiance, toward making things right and just, toward relationships that complete and sustain, so that it becomes permanently embedded in them.

It would also be wise to assume that what one sees is not always reality, even in a ministry setting. Adolescents maintain multiple personas not to be deceptive or devious, but to meet the demands of the multiplicity of social settings they encounter and to escape the demands of becoming who they are all by themselves. The self, isolated, amorphous and burdensome as it is today – something that would be hardly recognizable to Augustine or an ancient Israelite – is a product of more than 1500 years of alterations and transformations. It is a fact of our time that will not change anytime soon.

Nor does it necessarily need to. God in his providence has always cared about identity and in fact was prepared for a time such as this. It is clear from a theological perspective that being created in his image is eternally effective in shaping identity. The challenge is to intentionally take on the demands of identity in adolescents by bringing the first word, the image of God, to bear through thoughtful and creative praxis and by trusting that this design of the created order can handle the burden of contemporary identity in adolescents. It can, thanks be to God.

APPENDIX

A Checklist for Applying Image of God Praxis to a Ministry Context

The Organic Dimension: Where we creating space for discovering the reality of being made in the image of God? This is the relational capacity adolescents have with God. In what ways are adolescents encouraged to see, understand and experience:

- Scripture as the primary narrative of God’s grand mission (as opposed to a mysterious and confusing devotional book used in quiet times)? How is this idea reinforced in the common habits of our teaching and living?
- Prayer as more than supplication, but also as the avenue to communion with God. What are our emphases with prayer? Are we considering other ways that adolescents may be able to experience prayer besides
- In a similar way, how are we exposing our adolescents to other Spiritual Disciplines as a means to trusting Jesus more, especially in light of the ways our digitally wired and disruptive world makes such historic practices foreign?
- Reconciliation, experiencing forgiveness and extending forgiveness in all of our relationships, including our relationship with God? Giving adolescents the chance to ask for and to experience forgiveness is an avenue to experiencing and believing in the forgiveness of their Heavenly Father.
- Discerning the ways they resonate with God’s notion that “I was made for more and not less?”

The Dynamic Dimension: Where are “doing” the image of God?

- **Worship/Allegiance**
 - In what ways are we giving adolescents the opportunity to learn and participate in the historic practices and sacraments of the Church?
 - Do they know the origins of Communion/The Lord’s Supper and can they?
 - Where have we given adolescents practice with prayers (e.g. intercessory, adoration, healing, contemplative, etc.?)
 - Have we led them/taught them how to spend extended times of silence or solitude?
 - Where are we leading them into encounters with confession?
 - How are they experiencing forgiveness and extending forgiveness?
 - Where do they share in the worship of God with others?
 - In what ways do we foster giving and serving hearts as opposed to the more common taking and consuming of their world? How do we help them become “co-creators” of culture that is redemptive and beautiful rather than being merely consumers (the value of shared meals, learning to make something instead of buying as default)?
 - Where do we give them the chance to tell others of the sense of worth they are experiencing through worship and allegiance to God’s Kingdom life?

- What are the idols our adolescents tend to give themselves to in our community? How do we address those idolatries thoughtfully and biblically, also to help them discern the dehumanizing effects they have?
- **Authority**
 - Where in our ministry do we bring our students into acts of service with thoughtful reflection that considers the true needs of the recipients (Beyond just what we “think” they need?)
 - Where do we create space for and encourage beauty and images of “rightness”? In what ways are we allowing students to tell the story of justice and righteousness through their eyes and through their talents and abilities (photography, art, video, music, etc.)?
 - Where are we bringing healing to bear? On ourselves? On others?
 - How do we help them discern the ways their decisions might exercise power over others?
 - In what ways do we give adolescents a direct hand in working for justice and just treatment of others (standing against human trafficking, for example)?
 - In what ways are we making adolescents aware of the oppressive use of their power and authority?
 - Globally, in terms of consumption; learning about fair trade and sustainable practices.
 - Locally, in terms of ways we tolerate poor treatment of the lonely and outcast among their peers?
- **Complementary Relationships**

How are we teaching and modeling for adolescents healthy social sexual relationships? Where are teaching them and allowing them to discern where relationships are exploitative and being used for selfish needs?

 - How can we teach and shape relationships among our adolescents that are consistent with the relational dynamics of the *'ezer k^e negdô*?
 - Where are we creating space for the healthiest and most respectful relationships with others of the opposite sex among adolescents? Where are adults also modeling this for them within our community?
 - Where do we have inter-generational experiences of community
 - What are specific things can we do that teach them to speak of and foster dignity in people of the opposite sex?
 - Where are we helping them discern areas they are tempted to compromise that dignity and exploit the opposite sex for their own needs?
 - In what ways are we helping adolescents identify the patterns of exploitation that are imbedded in everyday life (pornography, self-objectification, etc.) that foster exploitation of others or ourselves?

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