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Faith Development in Early Adolescent Girls: What Parents Can Do to Encourage their Daughter's Faith

Martha Jordan
dmin-fpcoord@fuller.edu

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FAITH DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY ADOLESCENT GIRLS:
WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO ENCOURAGE THEIR DAUGHTER’S FAITH

Written by

MARTHA JORDAN

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Chap Clark
Kurt Fredrickson
FAITH DEVELOPMENT IN EARLY ADOLESCENT GIRLS:
WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO ENCOURAGE THEIR DAUGHTER’S FAITH

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BY

MARTHA JORDAN
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ABSTRACT

Faith Development in Early Adolescent Girls: What Parents Can Do to Encourage Their Daughter’s Faith
Martha Jordan
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2017

Since parents can have a significant impact on the faith development of early adolescent girls, the Church needs to equip them to encourage the faith development of their daughters. Due to the personal nature of journeying with the Lord, people struggle with having conversations about their faith. It can be a challenge for parents to know what to say.

The development of boys has been documented well, but girls develop differently. Faith development is not as simple as physical development. The body grows at a certain rate and time, regardless of how the brain thinks. Faith development occurs in stages over years and can happen at any age. For this reason, Part One of this project discusses this context and the development of early adolescent girls.

A biblical foundation is important to explore, so Part Two examines how Christian identity influences how people see themselves in relation to God and to the Body of Christ. Theologically and scripturally, Christians are called to make disciples. Parents have a vital role in passing on the faith to their daughters. Adolescent girls need to be equipped with the tools to develop their faith. It is more than just teaching the biblical story. Adolescent daughters need to be prepared with spiritual disciplines to help them foster their faith. To grow as a disciple, adolescents need the support of the family.

Consequently, Part Three offers a strategy that engages both churches and families. Churches need to understand how they equip members to live a life grounded in faith. This understanding also should include developing a plan to equip parents in being the ones who pass on their faith to their adolescent girls. The strategy in this project provides a way to teach parents spiritual practices and offers a practical ministry application.

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INTRODUCTION

Faith is a personal topic that encapsulates each individual’s particular journey with the Lord. Due to its individual nature, people often struggle with having conversations about their faith and view it as a private matter. Some do not even know where to begin the conversation. Since many congregants tend to keep their faith journey a private activity, church leaders often have a hard time discerning whether people are deep in their faith. As a result, many mainline Presbyterian churches rely on membership statistics to assess the health of their congregations.

Discerning faith by membership numbers is an inaccurate tool of measurement. The number of people who attend mainline churches on a consistent basis is decreasing in the United States.¹ For Presbyterians, not only are we losing members, but congregations are closing their doors.² However, this movement is not exclusive to Presbyterians. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the trend is true for other mainline Protestant denominations as well.³ There is also an increase in people openly categorizing themselves as “religiously unaffiliated” or “none,” but this does not

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necessarily mean we have more religiously unaffiliated or nones. More people identify
themselves with these labels, and it just may be that they are more comfortable with the
moniker.  

Nonetheless, some church leaders have decided that numbers are important. This
is because statistics can be suggestive as people look toward the future. Since it can be
difficult to gauge the faith of individuals, churches focus on attendance data as a method
to provide information regarding faith development. Mark Chaves, a sociologist who
specializes in religion, explains the difficulty: “Attendance trends are more difficult to
interpret than one might expect, and reasonable people might disagree about whether the
main story is one of stability or decline.” While it may seem to be a simple process of
counting people, faith development is not as easy as measuring how many people attend a
service or participate in congregational activities.

Churches can count how many people are confirmed members of a congregation
or the number of people who contribute financially; but when church leaders believe that
numbers provide information about the health of the church and the faith of individual
members, they are being guided by a tool that was not designed to measure faith. So if a
church is large with many programs, the assumption can be made that members have a
deep faith. Consequently, for years church leaders have been concerned with attendance

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4 Drew Dyck, Kenda Creasy Dean, and Eddie Gibbs, “How Can Churches Reach Nominal Believers
Before they Become ‘Nones’? Nominals Don’t Hate Christianity: They Just Find It Totally Irrelevant,”
Christianity Today 58, no. 2 (March 2014): 24-25; Vern L. Bengston, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris,
2013), 7; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Entering and Leaving the Ranks of the Unaffiliated,”

numbers, which often influence how those churches implement programs. When they look around and see that the numbers are declining, a panic sets in, both in the pews and in the pulpits. Presbyterians ask what will attract new believers or at least halt the flow of current departure. When Presbyterians interact with other Christians, questions about membership and comparison of church programs and ministry frequently arise. Pastors desire to see their church more vibrant with an increasing number of programs and a larger congregation. The common perception is that if a church is large and active, the members must have a deeper practice of faith.

Amid the sense of alarm, churches try to determine the reason for the decline in membership numbers. Congregations and their leaders look for quick resolutions to problems. Church leaders glance around on a Sunday morning and perceive an increasing number of gray-haired heads in the pews and fewer babies in the nursery.

One area that distresses churches is the dearth of young people who are active in the life of the church. Many Protestant congregations are seeing a decline in membership of young people. Churches become anxious about the retention of young people, especially as they head off to college. Many young adults leave the church by the age of twenty-three, even if they have made a profession of faith as a teenager. In surveys about

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their faith, people have been asked about being religious and being spiritual. While many people have identified themselves as both, there has been an increase in the number of people who identify themselves as spiritual but not religious. The concept of spiritual but not religious is problematic for those who seek to analyze the data, as they must try to understand the difference between “spiritual” and “religious” and how one can exist without the other.

Another reason for church leaders’ concern is that the Barna Group has released information regarding the decline of young people’s participation in the Church. Although their research methods are not verifiable, the information from Barna is shared widely with the public and the group’s statistics receive attention in the media. Congregants and pastors hear this information and begin to wonder about the future of the Church. For many people in today’s age of technology, perception becomes reality. While the Barna Group’s methods may be questionable, their research draws attention to declining youth participation and sends people into a panic about the future of their church and the faith of their heirs.

Perhaps churches are looking at the incorrect issue. There is a disconnect in understanding the differences between membership and faith. Some churches do not

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11 Here is one example: CBN News, “Mass Exodus: How the Church Is Losing the Youth,” January 21, 2012, accessed February 24, 2014, http://www.cbn.com/ cbnnews/us/2011/november/mass-exodus-how-the-church-is-losing-the-youth/. The Barna Group does not share its research methods. There is no way for the research to be reviewed and/or independently verified. Instead the Barna Group just makes pronouncements of results with no opportunity for peer review and the opportunity to replicate it. Barna researchers are not accountable to their readers to see how and why Barna arrives to its conclusions.
report that they are experiencing a decline in membership, because they lower the age when children and adolescents are baptized and join the official membership of the church.\textsuperscript{12} However, this can be misleading, as joining a church is about an association with a certain group of people and membership in a church is not necessarily about an individual’s relationship with or faithfulness to God. Church leaders need to look further than the numbers when considering whether a person’s faith is growing.

Churches are missing the point. A church should not measure the effectiveness of its ministries solely by counting members. Instead, leaders should examine how they can equip members to live a life grounded in faith. Churches should explore how they can help congregants, including adolescents, make professions of faith and live a life demonstrating that faith. Churches should be less concerned with the number of people in the pews and more concerned with the faith of the people who sit in those pews. This requires an in-depth examination and not just a quick glance at statistics and numbers.

Being a member of a congregation does not determine the nature or depth of an individual’s faith. Church membership is not a precise measure of how important and substantial people’s faith is to them or how much it impacts their decisions. The questions for membership do not measure the depth of their soul or their faith journey.\textsuperscript{13} Some may be early in their journey, while others are farther along the path in their

\textsuperscript{12} Jeff Brumley, “Baptism: How Young Is Too Young?” \textit{Christian Century} 130, no. 3 (February 6, 2013): 18.

\textsuperscript{13} According to the Presbyterian Church (USA), \textit{Book of Order: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—Part II} (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2015-2017), sect. 4.2003, before new members are received, they must reaffirm the vows taken at baptism by “professing their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,” “renouncing evil and affirming their reliance on God’s grace,” and declaring their “intention to participate actively and responsibly in the worship and mission of the church.”
reliance on Christ. All membership can attest to is that at some point the individual wanted to make a pledge to Jesus and his Church. Such a decision does not equate to a deep faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. It is but one step in the journey and often begins with one’s parents.

The purpose of this paper is to explore what parents can do to assist their early adolescent girls to make a profession of faith and grow in that faith. This does not happen in isolation but occurs within a community of faith. It is worthy to explore how churches can help equip parents in supporting their early adolescent girls to make a profession of faith. Congregations need to examine if they are doing everything possible to encourage and support early adolescents in developing and growing their faith. If there is more a church can do to support parents in encouraging their young ones on their faith journey, it is imperative that the church do it. Faith is possible for every person and at all times. Faith is not just “for all men at all times”\(^\text{14}\) but for female pre-adolescents and adolescents as well. There is no magic moment in which the faith journey starts. Faith can begin early in a person’s life, even in childhood; for some, it may not begin until later in adulthood. Some individuals demonstrate their faith openly, while others are quieter in their spiritual expression.

It is important for churches to help provide a strong, stable atmosphere for all faith journeys. Early adolescents can profess a faith that will grow and mature over their lifetime. As an early adolescent girl grows and matures physically and emotionally, she will become more capable of growing and maturing in her faith. The faith that an individual has at thirteen years old is not the same faith she will have as an adult.

Churches need to help equip parents to support their early adolescent in this journey of a lifetime. Whether they know it or not, parents—regardless of where they are in their own faith journey—have the biggest influence on the faith of their child. For this reason, churches need to offer tools not just to encourage parents in their own faith journey but also to equip their adolescent children as well. The church is responsible for training parents to assist their children regardless of where the parents are in their own spiritual walk. Churches also should endeavor to assist parents in leading their children on their faith journey. Sociologist Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, argues: “The best social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents do look like.” Unfortunately, many parents do not have a deep faith to pass on to their children. As a result, the faith parents often demonstrate does not encourage its transmission to the next generation.

Keeping early adolescent girls in the church is important to the congregation. Researcher and minister Anne Phillips begins her book on the faith of girls by discussing Lo-ruhamah, the daughter of Hosea and Gomer. Lo-ruhamah is part of the theological and biblical framework of the Old Testament but often is ignored, overlooked, or forgotten, even in feminist studies. She is a pre-pubescent girl whose name means “not

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pited.”\textsuperscript{17} Lo-ruhamah is just one example of how we have forgotten and failed to recall many of the stories of adolescent girls. No longer can we keep silent. Since we learn the stories of adolescent boys like Joseph (Genesis 37:1-36), David (1 Samuel 16:1-13), Eli (1 Samuel 3:1-21), and Jesus (Luke 2:41-52) in Sunday School as children, we must teach about biblical girls such as Lo-ruhamah (Hosea 1:6-7). Early adolescents have been a part of the Church, are a part of the present Church, and hopefully will continue to forge the future of the Body of Christ. If churches focus on deepening the faith of early adolescents, then the future of the Church will look different. While changing the future of the Church is not the goal of this paper, this discussion does seek to impact and transform how parents interact with early adolescents on their faith journey. For adolescent girls, it is important that they learn, observe, and have modeled for them the reality that faith is not just for adolescent boys but also for them.

Faith development is the responsibility of the entire family. Many people associate the beginning of their faith journey with their mothers and grandmothers. Paul even did this with Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5). Books have been written regarding the faith of mothers and the influence on their children, including those who served as President of the United States.\textsuperscript{18} Mothers have a profound effect on their children, but encouraging faith development is not just a mother’s role. Faith is developed over time and then can be shared with others. The development of a strong faith is contagious and can be transmitted to others who are wondering about one’s relationship with God.

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{17} Anne Phillips, \textit{The Faith of Girls: Children’s Spirituality and Transition to Adulthood} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 1.

\end{footnotesize}
Faith development is not just the responsibility of mothers and grandmothers. “Grandparents and other relatives, mentors and youth workers can be very influential as well, but normally, parents are most important in forming their children’s religious and spiritual lives.”¹⁹ A number of people can encourage faith development, but it is imperative for fathers to realize that they have a deep impact on their daughter’s faith development. Vern L. Bengston, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris write: “What is really interesting is that, for religious transmission, having a close bond with one’s father matters even more than a close relationship with the mother.”²⁰ Parents have a responsibility to encourage and develop their children’s faith. If parents are intentional about the environment, they can raise their children to have a heart for God as the norm rather than an inner being that functions according to the standards of the world.²¹

The environment in which adolescents are raised influences their desire to follow in the faith while developing and growing their own faith. Joshua 24:15 speaks to this truth: “Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”²² Joshua determined that his household would follow the Lord. The members of his household were not given an option. Parents can and must determine whether faith

¹⁹ Smith with Denton, Soul Searching, 261.

²⁰ Bengston, Putney, and Harris, Families and Faith, 76.


²² All Scripture is taken from The New Interpreters’ Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha (Nashville: Abington Press, 2003), unless otherwise noted.
will be taught in the household. If faith is practiced, it will be passed on to the next generation.

However, if parents neglect their responsibility of teaching the faith to their children, the faith will be lost.\(^{23}\) If faith is not passed down from one generation to the next, it could mean that in one generation families will stop being people of faith. Pastors, lay leaders, and congregants also must encourage early adolescent girls to develop a strong faith so that in the future they can be the ones to lead others to Christ.\(^{24}\) Although the adolescent may grow up and leave the denomination or participate in a different faith tradition, the early influence is important for “religious transmission.” Religious transmission is the process of imparting to adolescents the faith in a manner that will enable them to incorporate that faith, so it becomes their own personal faith.\(^{25}\) Adolescents must be equipped with the tools to incorporate and develop their own spiritual walk with God. Elizabeth F. Caldwell explains, “A faith vocabulary is first shared and practiced at home as parents and other family members raise a child in the Christian faith.”\(^{26}\) It is never too early to start with small steps as a way to share the faith and the journey of developing a personal relationship with Christ. This is not an easy process, nor are there guarantees.


\(^{24}\) Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999), 123. As a pastor for eighteen years, I have heard countless journey-of-faith stories that began with a pivotal woman. One question I ask of new officers is to share their faith journey. A common response regarding who helped them develop their faith as a child often is a mother or a grandmother, who personally shared faith stories with the individual.

\(^{25}\) Bengston, Putney, and Harris, *Families and Faith*, 55.

At times adolescents may wander and explore other traditions, but the impact of that imparted faith from their parents is still present. According to Chaves, “Most striking of all is a steady decline in the percentage of people who report growing up with religiously active fathers.”\(^27\) It is the responsibility of both the mother and the father to share their faith in order to transmit the faith to the next generation. With fewer fathers actively practicing their faith,\(^28\) there are fewer opportunities for adolescents to learn that faith and have it transmitted to them. The decline of the faith of fathers impacts the youth and the development of their faith. There is a solid association between religious involvement and family life.\(^29\) The demographic of the family impacts the involvement in the life of the church. The level of involvement in the life of a church in a two-parent family with children is different from that of a single-parent home.\(^30\) In two-parent homes where both mother and father practice their faith in significant ways, there exists double the opportunity for children to experience Christianity and guidance in their own faith development.

If churches and congregational leaders can equip parents to share their faith and raise their children with the love of Christ, the journey of the early adolescent girl will deepen spiritually and change with life experiences informed by Jesus. As individuals have different experiences and learn more about God and their relationship with him, their faith will transform regardless of their physical age. Parenting early adolescents is not a short


\(^{28}\) Ibid.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 53.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 52.
sprint for the finish line. This is a process that needs to be thought out strategically.\(^{31}\) A parent’s job is not completed when a child graduates from high school but needs to continue on. For this reason, churches need to partner with parents and encourage them on their parenting journey. Church leaders can walk with them and support them through the twists and turns of raising children and teens.

Since parents can have a significant impact on the faith development of early adolescent girls, the Church should equip parents and teach them how to encourage the faith development of their daughters. This discussion is divided into three parts. Part One explores the research about adolescents, particularly brain development and faith development. Part Two focuses on parental involvement in this process and establishes a biblical understanding and theological foundations. Part Three then develops a plan to help churches and parents encourage faith development in teen girls. As a mother of adolescent daughters and pastor for families, I am concerned about passing on the faith to the next generation, both personally and professionally. Since parenting often includes a lot of trial and error, as a church leader I want to help equip other parents in encouraging their daughters to develop a deep and profound faith.

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PART ONE

CONTEXT AND DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY ADOLESCENT GIRLS
CHAPTER 1
BRAIN DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY ADOLESCENT GIRLS

This chapter examines current theories of how adolescents develop. It begins with a general examination of the topic. Then the discussion explores how development takes place in adolescent girls, which differs from that of adolescent boys.

A Brief Overview of Adolescence

Adolescence is a time of change. Complicating this time of change is the fact that modern culture is challenged in knowing how to treat adolescents. This culture views the adolescent as “an unfinished person.”¹ There is also a sense that adolescents are still innocent children, who are not equipped to handle adult issues and topics.² Essentially, society views adolescents as big children who are not capable of making adult decisions. According to Laurence Steinberg and Ann Levine, the shift from immature to mature thinking is easy to misinterpret.³ However, the converse also can be true. The challenge

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² Ibid., 21.
facing today’s culture is that adolescents can look like adults physically, yet society places expectations upon them that they are not quite ready to meet. This period of transition is a susceptible time for adolescents. In the midst of trying to figure out their identity, adolescents are being influenced by the broader culture to shape their principles, outlooks, and conduct. This transitional phase is essential in their development as they change from children to emerging adults.

In particular, early adolescence is a stage of great significance in a person’s development. Adolescence is a developmental process that takes place over time. Young people are developing in various ways physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. These changes do not happen all at the same time or at the same pace. This period of development is one in which early adolescent teenagers become more concerned with their own identity. According to Michael J. Nakkula, professor of Psychology and Human Development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, early adolescents are trying to figure out their distinctive identity: “Because so much is in flux in adolescence, the question ‘Who am I?’ is asked with great passion and urgency.” The question of “Who am I?” impacts many areas of adolescent life as they try to determine how they fit into society, their family, and their peer group. There is no quick fix or overnight change; rather, this is a process that involves growth and transformation over time.

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5 Ibid., 23.


Through this developmental process, adolescents are constructing various systems to help them navigate the journey. Adolescents have a “surface structure” and a “deep structure” to help them develop. The surface structure is what is easily perceived: the outward appearance and emotion. A person can observe the awkwardness, anger, moodiness, and other emotions. The deep structure is what is happening inside and is not visible to the naked eye. It involves wrestling to figure out their own identity, the challenge to assimilate the past and present, and struggling to find their place in the world. These structures are not always clear to the adults who surround adolescents. Sometimes an issue may look like a surface-structure question but really be a deep-structure question concerning individual identity. Adults may think they understand the issue with which an adolescent struggles. However, if they are focused on the wrong structure, then the adolescent may not receive the proper help and will continue to struggle. Questioning at both structural levels helps adolescents form their identity.

The early adolescent years often coincide with middle school and are a formative time in which the local church and concerned adults need to participate in the identity formation of the youth. This is because early adolescence is a time of transformation. Therapist Michael Gurian explains, “Puberty is . . . perhaps the most frightening episode of life” in their development. For many, there is a change in educational environment as they move from an elementary school to a middle school. There are physical changes to the body, brain, and emotions. Puberty is a time of change in adolescents’ interactions with the world around them. Psychologist Mary Pipher says that “adolescents are

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8 Pipher, Reviving Ophelia, 54-55.

travelers, far from home with no native land, neither children nor adults.”

Adolescence involves the transition from being a child, who is inexperienced and needs constant help, to becoming an adult able to make wise decisions and cope with the daily fluctuations of life. Early adolescents are not yet equipped to make adult decisions and need kind, caring, and loving adults to help guide them through this process. Although at times early adolescents may be mistaken for adults based on their physical appearance, in many cases they are emotionally childlike.

Understanding Brain Development

The female adolescent is not just growing physically on the outside, but inside her brain is experiencing a crucial phase of growth. Research has demonstrated that the "brain is an organ that grows and transitions, just like adolescents. Not only does the brain go through a period of growth during the time between puberty and young adulthood, but the brain’s hardware and software also go through a process of ‘wiring’ or ‘pruning.’” This activity of “wiring” and “pruning” occurs when adolescents are in the midst of trying to figure out how to think logically, how to handle emotions, and how to make sense of the many other factors that evolve into adulthood.

During this time of change, adults around the adolescents are integral in helping these young people adjust and discover their new identity as they ascertain how to process new information. The brain of the early adolescent experiences “the perfect storm

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10 Pipher, Reviving Ophelia, 52.

of changes: physical, hormonal, social, psychological and emotional.”12 Trying to cope with even one of these changes can be overwhelming, even for a person who is well equipped. Cognitive and emotional abilities are needed to learn how to respond to such changes. Most adults have these abilities to adapt and cope with changes and the challenges of life.

Using these developed abilities, stress is reduced and problems can be solved in a productive manner. It is important for adolescents to learn these abilities in order to know how to develop into healthy adults. If these abilities are not formed when challenges happen in their lives, they will not have the proper tools to handle the turmoil. Hormonal changes can contribute to this turmoil. Adolescents cannot see them but can feel them, which sometimes proves a challenge to explain. Hormonal changes can be a particular challenge, as they are not entirely obvious to the female adolescent or the people around her. The adolescent is significantly challenged during these changes.

While adolescents are growing into adults, churches cannot assume that adolescents possess the cognitive and emotional abilities of adults to make decisions about their physical, emotional, and psychological development—or more abstract issues, like faith. Questions that are raised by exploring one’s faith are challenging even for adults, who are better equipped to handle them. Since early adolescents are not able to manage all of these situations yet, it is important that churches provide a safe environment in which to ask and answer questions of faith—particularly if parents are not involved in these intimate conversations with their tweens and teens.

In early adolescence, children between the ages of eleven and fourteen, there is a change in the brain and thought process. Adolescents do not possess the same level of cognitive and emotional abilities that many adults use to function. As a psychologist, Susan Harter comments, “During adolescence, the emergence of abstract thinking, introspection, and self-reflection move self-representations to a new level.”\(^\text{13}\) This process is not something that happens in easily recognizable stages. It takes years to master and extensive trial and error, as the adolescent moves through the stages of human development. While early adolescents may grasp the theories and possibilities in logical format, it does not mean they always will think that way and in all areas of their life. They may be able to grasp the concepts in a math class but not when they go to the store to purchase an item.\(^\text{14}\)

According to Nakkula, “Adolescents are in a near-constant state of constructing their lives.”\(^\text{15}\) They seek to create an understanding of themselves and their multiple identities and roles. They attempt to understand how these identities and roles fit together into an integrated whole that comprises the self. This process can take early adolescents through various personifications and procedures by which they think through decisions. At times, adolescents may overthink and even obsess over a decision. They may have difficulty making a choice, because they feel overwhelmed by the countless possibilities.\(^\text{16}\) This process often takes place through experimentation as adolescents create a new identity distinct from their childhood persona.

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\(^\text{14}\) Steinberg and Levine, *You and Your Adolescent*, 134.

\(^\text{15}\) Nakkula, *Understanding Youth*, 5.

\(^\text{16}\) Steinberg and Levine, *You and Your Adolescent*, 141.
Current Developmental Theories

There are several different theories of development of early adolescents that are explored in this section. Each of these theories is valuable enough to influence churches positively, yet no one theory can provide the solutions for all situations. However, when specific elements are synthesized, they may assist churches to create a model for faith development that can impact their members. Each of the researchers examined offers important insights on the growth and development of early adolescents, and all need to be weighed and incorporated together. There are many theories related to the development of identity. Each researcher has something precious to add to the conversation, and they all need to be balanced and held in tension together. Churches need to learn from psychologists about development, because one cannot look just at the soul of an individual. Both the world and an individual’s human development impact how one views oneself. The spirit and the flesh cannot be separated (Romans 8:9-11). Just as to create the color purple an artist has to mix blue and red pigments, the observer only sees the purple and not the individual colors that formed it. When looking at an individual, observers cannot see the spirit and flesh as separate identities but must take into account the whole individual.

Erik H. Erikson’s work is a major part of identity theory. He summarized identity as an evolving concept, which begins in early childhood with implications encompassing throughout one’s life. Erikson identified eight stages that are organized around a crisis that must be resolved in order for people to move to the next stage of development and eventually develop into healthy adults. He emphasized the importance of socialization

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and emerging through the crisis to fit into society.\textsuperscript{18} For Erikson, adolescents must go through the crisis to allow them time to explore their identity and figure out who they are. Nakkula agrees and writes: “Facing daily questions about who one is and who one ought to become is not only exhausting, but, as Erikson maintained, it also produces an identity crisis.”\textsuperscript{19}

This identity crisis allows early adolescent girls to define themselves in relation to their family, peers, teachers, and the world. In this process, adolescents are able to have the “freedom to change” as they shape their identity.\textsuperscript{20} A female adolescent is in the process of discovering her “true self,” determining her place in the world and not the identity that others put on her. This may allow burgeoning young women to choose something they would not have explored previously. They no longer have to do exactly what their parents force them to do.

Nevertheless, there is a concern as they explore their new identity. Adolescents are “susceptible to charismatic leaders, moral crusades, and cultural fads, partly for those youth who are ever on the lookout to test the extreme edges of what is and what might be.”\textsuperscript{21} As adolescents seek and form their identity in this world, they need to be aware of themselves and how they fit into social situations and not be swayed by a captivating voice. For Erikson, it is important for individuals to discover their own identity and where they fit in

\textsuperscript{18} Erikson, \textit{Childhood and Society}, 236; see also Nakkula, \textit{Understanding Youth}, 19.

\textsuperscript{19} Nakkula, \textit{Understanding Youth}, 21.

\textsuperscript{20} Hine, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager}, 41.

\textsuperscript{21} Nakkula, \textit{Understanding Youth}, 26.
this world.\textsuperscript{22} The adolescent needs the freedom and ability to select personal identity as part of the preparation of becoming a mature adult.

A leading psychoanalyst whose work still influences current understanding of adolescent development is Carl G. Jung, who posited his theories in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{23} Jung concentrated on the unconscious and its capacity to influence the decisions people make in their lives.\textsuperscript{24} He focused his research on adults and divided human development into four stages, which correlate to the sun. The stages are dawn and early morning (infancy and childhood), mid-morning (adolescence), afternoon (the middle years), and dusk (very old age).\textsuperscript{25} The earlier stages prepare individuals for the dusk portion of life. The early part of one’s life is focused on oneself, while the latter half of life takes a contemplative turn that tends to be more profound and spiritual. According to Felicity B. Kelcourse, “Faith, from a Jungian standpoint, is based on (re)discovering truths that may address us from beyond our individual experience.”\textsuperscript{26} There is a power in non-verbal images and symbols seen in one’s environment. For example, in looking at the sanctuary of a church, an individual can determine a number of things that are important just by looking at the symbols. Such symbols might include the

\textsuperscript{22} Erikson, \textit{Childhood and Society}, 246.


\textsuperscript{24} Jung, \textit{The Essential Jung}, 35-36.


presence of a baptismal font to represent the grace and sanctification by Christ or a cross to signify Jesus’ atoning sacrifice.

The importance of Jung for Christian formation is his notion that the unconscious influences human decisions. Christian leaders need to be aware of how they are influencing an early adolescent’s faith journey through the non-verbal images presented in a congregational environment. While Jung believed the first part of one’s life is focused on one’s ego and identity, it is important to see how those shape one’s identity and impact one’s faith.

Swiss genetic epistemologist Jean Piaget and his lead researcher Barbel Inhelder theorized that the human mind is organized around experiences that are compartmentalized into “schemas.” When people have a new experience, they assimilate into the “schemas” they already have created. Piaget and Inhelder break down the cognitive development into four stages. The stages are “sensorimotor” (ages birth-two), “preoperational” (ages two-seven), “concrete operational” (ages seven-eleven), and “formal operational” (ages eleven-fifteen). Early adolescents are moving from the “concrete operational” stage to the “formal operational” stage. They are transitioning towards thinking critically and solving problems systematically. In the formal operational stage, individuals are able to think abstractly and generate hypotheses and theories. The

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29 Nakkula, *Understanding Youth*, 46.

manner in which they pose questions and theorize develops, and “adolescents begin to ask ‘What if?’ and can become passionately invested in explorations of the myriad ways in which the world and they themselves might be.”

The manner in which they process thoughts transforms, allowing them to be abstract in their thinking and put things together on their own. They no longer need concrete examples but are able to adapt ideas and concepts to their situation. No longer do they see the world as one size that fits all but instead adapt it to their condition.

Essentially, adolescents are changing the way they look at the world. Early adolescents no longer see only one reality with just one concrete way to view it. Instead, early adolescents can fathom that the possibilities are endless and that more than one solution exists. Adolescents yearn to cultivate an accurate representation of the world around them. Early adolescents deeply wrestle with questions about faith and their relationship with God through new methods. This wrestling can expand their understanding of God. This means seeing God as easily explained and his will as predetermined to a formal operational and abstract God of possibilities, who presents a myriad of options.

Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg provides a stage theory related to the development of moral thinking. Kohlberg studied seventy-two boys between the ages of ten and sixteen to discover the reasoning behind their decision-making process in

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31 Nakkula, *Understanding Youth*, 47.


hypotheses. The interviewer wanted to know why and how the subject thought through certain moral dilemmas. The main focus of his research was on cognition and its relationship to moral development.

From this, Kohlberg created six stages of morality that are divided into three levels. Early adolescents are moving from the first stage, “preconventional morality,” to the second stage, “conventional morality.” In stage two, early adolescents recognize that there is not just one right view; rather, there are different viewpoints. Early adolescents tend to focus on punishment. In stage three, early adolescents are able to see the expectations that others have for them and try to live and behave accordingly. Kohlberg tries to explain the motivation for moral development. He was interested in how individuals would justify their actions if placed in similar moral dilemmas. Kohlberg was looking for a universal understanding of justice. Kohlberg does not believe that all people go through every stage as they develop into healthy mature adults. While there are exceptions within each phase of development, the stages can be and should be taught to individuals. An implication of this theory is that one needs to have certain cognitive abilities in order to exert moral actions. One must have the cognitive development to


35 Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg, Lawrence Kohlberg’s Approach to Moral Education, 8; see also Crain, Theories of Development, 150.

36 Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg, Lawrence Kohlberg’s Approach to Moral Education, 9; see also Crain, Theories of Development, 151.


38 Power, Higgins, and Kohlberg, Lawrence Kohlberg’s Approach to Moral Education, 16; see also Kelcourse, “Theories of Human Development,” 42.
overcome egocentric thinking in order to weigh the needs of others and potential consequences before making a decision.

One of Kohlberg’s strongest critics was his research assistant, Carol Gilligan, who was concerned about how young women respond to moral issues.\textsuperscript{39} Nicola Slee, a fellow researcher on faith and gender, understood this and comments, “None of these theories can be read naively or applied uncritically to female development however, for, as many critics have highlighted, they are almost all, to a lesser or greater degree, gender-blind, inattentive to women’s experience and lives.”\textsuperscript{40} Women respond differently from men and need to be studied independently.

Researchers and those who care deeply about female adolescents must appreciate that there are many aspects of adolescent development that are gender specific to females. Researchers cannot just accept the male perspective as normative, as it creates hierarchy and power struggles.\textsuperscript{41} It is important to consider that females often respond differently than males in the manner and method in which they develop socially, morally, and spiritually. Society has raised girls and boys to be different in how they interact with their peers and what is considered acceptable behavior for their gender.\textsuperscript{42}

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\textsuperscript{40} Nicola Slee, \textit{Women’s Faith Development: Patterns and Processes} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 15.


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The brain development of girls requires deeper and broader study. While there are similar influences on early adolescent girls and adolescent boys, how girls respond to these influences differ from the responses of boys. During early adolescence, girls change their view about their bodies from “relaxed attitudes . . . and take up the burden of self-criticism.” The attitude about themselves alters as their priorities change. During the middle school years, young girls are particularly concerned about popularity, appearance, and sexuality. Their identity and self-discovery are shaped by their environment and the questions and comments of those around them. Predominant influencers at this age are their peers, as they begin to break away from the influence of their parents. An adolescent girl’s decisions “are not thoughtful, conscious choices, but rather reactions to peer pressure.”

Due to the difference between adolescent boys and girls, there needs to be more research on the specific nature of female development. It cannot be assumed that all the changes adolescent boys experience are the same or even parallel the changes that adolescent girls experience. While many studies have been conducted on boys, few studies have been conducted on girls. Since many researchers are male, research often stems

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43 Pipher, Reviving Ophelia, 39.


45 Pipher, Reviving Ophelia, 38.

46 Mercer, Girl Talk/God Talk, xix.

from their own experience.\textsuperscript{48} In recent years, there has been a flurry of books on adolescent girls.\textsuperscript{49} Initially the research focused on issues that are unique to adolescent girls, such as eating disorders.\textsuperscript{50} However, the challenge is that adolescent girls respond differently from adolescent boys, which requires more research into all their actions.\textsuperscript{51} Adolescence is a time of transition from childhood to adulthood. For adolescent girls, the transition is diverse and complex.\textsuperscript{52} There are many areas that still need to be explored. There is an absence of feminine voices in the developmental process. This missing part of the developmental process impacts the manner in which adolescent girls discover their concept of self and their decision-making process.\textsuperscript{53}

There even exists confusion regarding the experience of adolescent girls. In many cases, adolescent girls are not clear on their identity and what is acceptable for them. According to Pipher, who is a psychologist:

What girls say about gender and power issues depends on how they are asked. When I asked adolescent girls if they are feminists, most say no. To them, feminism is a dirty word, like communisms or fascism. But if I asked if they believed men and women should have equal rights, they say yes. When I asked if their schools are sexists, they are likely to say no. But if I asked if they are ever harassed sexually at their school, they say yes and tell me stories.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{48} Pipher, Reviving Ophelia, 35.


\textsuperscript{50} Mercer, Girl Talk/God Talk, xxx.

\textsuperscript{51} Pipher, Reviving Ophelia, 36.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{53} Gilligan, In a Different Voice, 156.

\textsuperscript{54} Pipher, Reviving Ophelia, 41.
Adolescent girls may not know or understand what is healthy and acceptable. This causes them to allow attitudes and interactions that they should not accept. There is an impact on them and their perception of who they are based on the way in which they are treated. Some decisions that adolescent girls make have lifelong implications. Such decisions include whether to be sexually active, their eating habits, and the image they have of themselves. While there are all kinds of development taking place spiritually, socially, intellectually, and physically, these changes occur at one time and alter how the adolescent and the world views them. Judith Orr writes: “Cognitive changes are also occurring as some girls with the aptitude and requisite environmental challenge develop abilities for abstract thinking in adolescence.” Society needs to remember that it is not just one thing that impacts the changes that are taking place in an adolescent but a variety of issues. Adolescents can cultivate the ability to think conceptually, including when it comes to faith development.

The manner in which adolescents make decisions changes as they develop. Pediatric endocrinologist Louise Greenspan and clinical psychologist Julianna Deardorff offer this advice: “Until your girl’s brain reaches maturity, the decisions she makes in emotionally stimulating situations, particularly those involving peer acceptance, may be driven more by emotions than reason.” There are distinct gender specifics for adolescent girls and boys that involve how they respond to the shifting circumstances,

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55 Ibid., 72.


which are affected by hormonal changes as well as changes in their attitudes and interactions with others. Hormonal changes impact them by sometimes controlling their emotions, sleeping habits, and appetite. These fluctuations cause adolescent girls to view themselves discordantly, including how they see their bodies. Orr says, “It is difficult for an adolescent to claim who she is when she does not receive acceptance and support.” Therefore, it is vital for adolescent girls to receive support and encouragement, so they can accept themselves and develop in a healthy manner.

As both a psychologist and feminist, Gilligan maintains that girls develop in a manner that is divergent from boys. Gilligan does not believe that the manner in which boys or girls develop is better but that they each develops through distinct methods. Her work has focused on moral reasoning and moral development in females. Adolescent girls essentially struggle to determine how to become a healthy woman. The method in which adolescent girls become healthy women is confusing, and the rules do not seem to be consistent. Gilligan proposes that there are two types of reasoning that influence moral decisions. One perspective is based on ethics of justice, while the other is founded on ethics of care. Males primarily may be focused on justice, while females primarily are focused on care and compassion.

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58 Ibid., 29.


60 Gilligan, In a Different Voice, 14-15; see also Pipher, Reviving Ophelia, 39.

61 Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice, 134; see also William C. Spohn, “Conscience and Moral Development” Studies 61, no. 1 (March 2000): 133.
Nakkula says that “by early adolescence, according to the archetype, exuberant self-expression gives way to insecurity and self-silencing.” In the 1980s, early adolescent girls were coached as part of the culture into becoming young ladies who behave properly. Behaving properly essentially meant being polite and caring for others while sacrificing personal needs and desires in order to be a good, supportive young lady. This is particularly true for white, upper-middle-class girls. Gilligan, Annie G. Rogers, and Deborah L. Tolman describe a process in which early adolescent girls are encouraged in “going underground” or “to cover up.” As a method of coping with relationships, many adolescent females may hide parts of their identity. By hiding part of themselves, they fit into the local status quo and into society. This can have an impact on their identities and even the rest of their lives. Suppressing a portion of their core identities limits their ability to construct authentic relationships and to develop the ability to rely on their intuition. Such suppression can lead to a disconnection in their own identity. According to Gilligan, Rogers, and Tolman, human development is distinct for men and women. For females, development needs to focus on interconnectedness with relationships, rather than concentrating on the hierarchy pyramid.

For Gilligan, boys and girls are imprinted with dissimilar experiences as children, which then leads to their differing development. One struggle that adolescent girls have

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62 Nakkula, Understanding Youth, 103.


64 Nakkula, Understanding Youth, 103.

65 Gilligan, Rogers, and Tolman, Women, Girls and Psychotherapy, 14.
as they develop is the mixed messages they receive.\textsuperscript{66} Many are encouraged to be concerned with their looks but also that beauty is only skin deep. These double binds are given to adolescent girls, who then wrestle with trying to determine how to assimilate these conflicting “truths” in order to shape their identity.

One critique of Gilligan’s theory is that it echoes the stereotypes popular in culture that women are caregivers as wives and mothers and men are public and business leaders.\textsuperscript{67} In observing today’s society in the United States, it seems there are more women in leadership roles in business and government, so these stereotypes are changing and even disappearing from society. Gilligan interviewed college-age women for her research.\textsuperscript{68} While it can be helpful to see how they navigated adolescence, it can be difficult to extrapolate for all adolescence based on research of older adolescents.

A Critique of Current Developmental Theories

The researchers’ theories studied in this discussion each have something to contribute when exploring the development of early adolescent girls. While the theories are different, each one makes contributions and impacts how researchers and society view adolescents today. Erikson’s view of navigating through crises as adolescents discover their true self is important. Adolescents appear to be in a period of trying on different identities, while uncovering who they want to be. Erikson is of interest to religious educators, because he looks beyond cognitive development to psychological and

\textsuperscript{66} Gilligan, \textit{In a Different Voice}, 134; see also Pipher, \textit{Reviving Ophelia}, 35.


\textsuperscript{68} Orr, “Socioeconomic Class and the Life Span Development of Women,” 45.
emotional development. One critique of Erikson is that he is gender-biased toward males. He has described the “normal” way of developing to be the manner in which males develop, which is different from female development.\textsuperscript{69} This sets up female development as abnormal and even counter-cultural. Churches should note his emphasis on how society can influence an individual’s development.

Jung is important to the influence of Christian education, as churches often teach faith through unconscious decisions. While many churches instruct through the words spoken from the pulpit, congregations have many unspoken lessons that are taught every Sunday. Churches that have stained glass windows can use them to share their theology or the importance of Scripture. For example, people sitting in the sanctuary may see the image of a shepherd and the flock. If they are familiar with the Word of God, this reminds them that Jesus is the Good Shepherd from the Gospel of John (John 10:11-18). The importance of a cross in the sanctuary is a reminder that Jesus died for human sin (Matthew 27:45-61). For Protestants he is not still affixed to the cross, as found in Roman Catholic churches; rather, the cross is empty, because Protestants put an emphasis on the resurrected Christ. The communion table, with a chalice and a loaf of bread, is an important reminder of Jesus sitting down at the table with his disciples (Luke 22:14-23). When individuals see these symbols on non-communion Sundays, it is a reminder that the table is important even when they are not utilized as part of worship.

Many churches teach through the actions of the members each week. Churches cannot communicate that they are a welcoming community if the doors to the building are

\textsuperscript{69} Slee, Women’s Faith Development, 18.
always locked, and only one door is unlocked on a Sunday morning. Churches
demonstrate that Scripture is the Word of God, when Scripture is valued and read in
worship. For some congregations, there is even a procession of the Bible into the worship
service or the act of standing for the reading of the Gospel lesson. These actions
demonstrate that Scripture is not to be taken lightly. Scripture is often remembered
through words of hymns that are learned by singing them over and over again, rather than
through the memorization of passages. Many concepts that churches espouse are not
through verbalizations but in how congregants practice faith non-verbally. A criticism of
Jung is that he expresses the idea that people are not aware of things that are happening to
them due to their unconscious mind. In addition, he tends to focus on stereotypes,
especially when it comes to the male and female perspective. Churches can still pay
attention to important symbols in a feminist way. Churches can make sure children see
men and women preaching from the pulpit and men and women caring for young children.

Piaget is helpful in his reminders that there are no longer quick, easy answers
acceptable for early adolescents. The questions that they raise and ponder continually will
become more abstract and challenging. For example, churches cannot just give the simple
answer that “God is love” for all questions as kids grow older and wiser. Instead, adult
followers of Christ must help young people wrestle with their questions of faith, so they
can discover and own their personal spiritual walk. Piaget attempted to identify universal
development by observing children in specific situations. The sample was a small number
of children. He then used the small group to find commonalities, which he extrapolated.
Despite his reminder that there are no simple solutions, in many ways that is what Piaget
was looking for in his limited research. Piaget does stress that there is value to teaching,
but it needs to be tailored to the individual’s stage of cognitive development. Adults may not reach the highest level of formal operational thinking in Piaget’s stages. While there may be issues with Piaget’s stages, “nearly everyone pits his or her ideas against Piaget’s.” Piaget’s theory is still widely used in today’s society.

Kohlberg followed in the tradition of Piaget but focused on the cognitive development of moral thinking. Kohlberg discovered additional stages of development well into adolescence and adulthood. For churches with a strong desire for social justice ministry, Kohlberg should be a strong influence in how they minister. Kohlberg’s stages of moral thinking are critical, as churches explore ethical questions of how to address social issues of hunger and poverty. Kohlberg’s theory emphasizes justice to the exclusion of other values. His scale has to do with moral thinking, which may or may not impact the actions one takes in a situation. Typically morality demonstrated by males is based on the concept of law and justice. This is different from females, who have been socialized to base morality on the principles of compassion and care. However, Kohlberg has overemphasized male morality as the standard, which sets female morality as inferior or not fully developed.

Gilligan’s notions of going underground and covering up are helpful in exploring individual identity. Adults are inclined to look at the exterior to make snap judgments about young adolescents, when instead they should gaze beyond the surface. Gilligan learned about adolescent girls by listening to their stories. This is useful in that sharing of faith needs to happen through the telling of stories. According to Gilligan, the identity

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70 Crain, *Theories of Development*, 146.
questions that adolescents explore may be different for boys, which revises Kohlberg’s stage development theory to interpret the manner in which women develop. The difficulty with this process is that there are many variables that influence and impact the development of people. It is also important to recognize that one mode of thought or development is not more important or significant than another.

Each of these researchers may influence how churches reach out to early adolescents as they explore their faith. For this reason, it is important not to discard these theories due to their shortcomings. These theories can be helpful reminders that faith “by its very nature must be changing and growing and in a state of perpetually shifting equilibrium rather than static and changeless.” In addition, they help provide the framework for conversation, which allows for dialogues about how faith is formed and shaped. While these theories may have limitations, they are widely used and offer a manner in which there can exist a conversation and a critique of theories. Slee notes that “no one model of human or faith development is likely to be adequate to the task or offer, by itself, a sufficient vocabulary and syntax for speaking about women’s faith.” Another important critique of stage theory is that it is influenced by the socioeconomic class of the

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71 Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 19; see also Slee, *Women’s Faith Development*, 23.


73 Ibid., 21.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 22.

76 Ibid., 16.
individuals being studied. Consequently, any theory that does not take into consideration the cultural and socioeconomic diversity of people by its very nature is lacking.

Many churches do not view the whole person but instead tend to focus just on the spiritual side of the individual. What happens outside the doors of the church impacts what questions people bring into the church. Life that happens in one’s external environment affects how one interprets personal faith. Consequently, faith and human development must be in conversation with each other. Churches must care about the entire person and not just the spirit, as people cannot be compartmentalized. Congregants need to begin to see how the combination of cognitive, psychological, physical, and emotional development impacts their faith development. A key question to ask is whether or not the local church encourages people on their journey or creates stumbling blocks to initiating and maintaining a faith walk. Faith is a journey that can be stunted, if its growth is not encouraged intentionally.

The goal of this project is to see how these five theories can improve the local church’s ability to encourage early adolescent girls on their faith journey. Social science influences human interpretation of Scripture. Scripture’s view of humanity can be the lens that influences people’s understanding of the relationship between modern social and behavioral sciences. For years, Scripture and social science have been considered independently. It is now time to see that both influence and mutually interpret each other.

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CHAPTER 2

FAITH DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY ADOLESCENT GIRLS

This chapter explores the stages of faith and how people, especially adolescent girls, develop their belief systems. Faith development does not necessarily happen at the same time and rate as physical development. Early adolescent girls develop their faith as they synthesize their experiences and apply them to their lives.

Measuring faith development is not a simple process. It is easy to measure if children have learned their ABCs. All one has to do is ask the child to say them. If the child says all twenty-six letters in the correct order, one is able to say that the child knows the alphabet. The same is true with many other skills that are taught to children. However, faith is different and not easy to gauge, due to its abstract nature. Faith development does not necessarily happen at uniformly specific points in one’s life:

“Bottom line: the core of childhood formation is primarily rule keeping, but the core of adult formation is growing into the way of wisdom, with a heart formed like Jesus.”

Distinct and various experiences help move someone along the faith journey. As the

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adolescent develops her faith, she will move away from a list of rules to a life that demonstrates and incorporates faith. The end of the journey is a development of a faith in which one is attached and committed to Jesus.

**Willard’s Spiritual Formation**

Dallas Willard, a leading philosopher on the topic of Christian spiritual formation, has written books trying to help people on the spiritual journey. He explores the formation of the Christian faith and how one then lives it out in the world, incorporating especially Jesus’ teaching on the Kingdom of God. Willard uses those teachings to help Christians discover how they are to live their faith. Willard describes the faith journey as “a conversation with God.”

This relationship develops through discipleship to Jesus, which believers should practice and invite others to practice with them. However, actual discipleship or apprenticeship to Jesus is, in our day, no longer thought of as in any way essential to faith in him. Willard wants people to become disciples of Jesus and his teaching in order to grow in faith. Spiritual formation is the process of transformation of one’s heart so that one’s life becomes a natural expression of Christ’s work and power.

Through his words and actions, Jesus is the primary teacher and guide. “Jesus as the actual teacher of his people has disappeared from the mental horizon of our faith. In

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that capacity he is not a part of how we ‘do’ our Christianity today.” Jesus is the example for what Christian living in God’s Kingdom encompasses. Christian formation is about following Jesus and living a life that puts Jesus’ words into practice.

It is important that individuals understand the teaching of Christ, but that knowledge is not the final destination on the faith journey. Many on the faith journey already have heard the stories of Jesus. They have learned the stories, but they now need to develop a deeper faith. This developing of a deeper faith requires incorporating knowledge of the story with its meaning. Jesus has provided the path to follow. “He has made a way for us into easy and happy obedience—really, into personal fulfillment. And that way is apprenticeship to him. It is Christian ‘discipleship.’ His gospel is a gospel for life and Christian discipleship.”

For Willard, spiritual formation is a distinctive strategy to develop a relationship with God. This is a process unique to the individual, although there are common components to developing one’s relationship. He writes:

My strategy has been to take as a model the highest and best type of communication that I know of from human affairs and then place this model in the even brighter light of the person and teaching of Jesus Christ. In this way it has been possible to arrive at an ideal picture of what an intimate relationship with God is meant to be and also come to a clear vision of the kind of life where hearing God is not an uncommon occurrence.

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5 Ibid., 316.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 273.
8 Willard, Hearing God, 10.
The process of spiritual formation is developing an intimate relationship with God. The relationship will develop “until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19). When Christ is formed in people, they have developed a faith. However, developing faith is not the end of the process; rather, it is just part of the journey. Once one develops a faith, it must be nurtured and encouraged to grow. The process to help one’s faith grow includes spiritual disciplines. While spiritual formation is individualistic, the formation does not happen in isolation. “Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our relationships,” according to Richard J. Foster.

The term “spiritual disciplines” can be misunderstood. Spiritual disciplines are practices that allow believers to remain open to God and develop their spiritual relationship. Spiritual disciplines exercise the spirit, mind, and emotions, so that people become closer to God. Willard says, “The disciplines for the spiritual life, rightly understood, are time-tested activities consciously undertaken by us as new men or women to allow our spirit ever-increasing sway over our embodied selves. They help by assisting the ways of God’s Kingdom to take the place of the habits of sin embedded in our bodies.”

Spiritual disciplines are practices that require human action. They are not passive things that happen to people but activity that helps foster growth in faith. Willard observes:

Somewhat ironically, perhaps, all of the “spiritual” disciplines are, or essentially involve, bodily behaviors. But really, that makes perfect sense. For the body is the first field of energy beyond our thoughts that we have direction over, and all else we influence is due to our power over it. Moreover, it is the chief repository of the wrong habits that we must set aside, as well as the place where new habits are to be instituted. We are, within limits, able to command it to do things that will

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transform our habits—especially the inner habits of thought and feeling—and so enable us to do things not now in our power.\textsuperscript{11}

Spiritual disciplines include but are not limited to prayer, worship, journaling, fasting, and service. “God has ordained the Disciplines of the spiritual life as the means by which we place ourselves where he can bless us.”\textsuperscript{12} God has given spiritual practices in the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace. The disciplines allow people to place themselves before God, so that God can transform them.

Once a person has developed a faith, that individual needs to continually work to develop it more deeply. This requires a constant relationship with God that is nurtured and encouraged to develop. Just as a relationship between a parent and child changes over time as the child matures, the same is true with one’s relationship with God. “It is through the action of the Word of God upon us, throughout us, and with us that we come to have the mind of Christ and thus to live fully in the Kingdom of God.”\textsuperscript{13} Once individuals have come to know the Word of God, they then need to live a life that allows Jesus—the Word made flesh (John 1:14)—to shape and transform their life. Willard offers this advice: “When God does speak to you, pay attention and receive it with thanks.”\textsuperscript{14} God’s plan for each person is uniquely tailored to that person, who must listen to God to understand it. Willard advocates “personal communion and communication

\textsuperscript{11} Willard, \textit{The Divine Conspiracy}, 353-354.
\textsuperscript{12} Foster, \textit{Celebration of Disciplines}, 7.
\textsuperscript{13} Willard, \textit{Hearing God}, 148.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 214.
with God both as life-changing episodes and as daily bread.”\textsuperscript{15} Being in an intimate and organic relationship with God nurtures and sustains the soul.

The ultimate example of such communion communication is Jesus Christ. He lived a life that demonstrated the intimate and organic relationship with God. Willard explains, “The faith by which Jesus Christ lived, his faith in God and his kingdom, is expressed in the gospel that he preached. That gospel is the good news that the kingdom rule of God is available to humankind here and now.”\textsuperscript{16} Contemporary believers have the example of Jesus and the words of Scripture to guide their lives, in order to learn how to “become participants of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4b). On this faith journey, Scripture is a map of how to live and act. True disciples of Christ follow the map to the best of their ability to grow in relationship with God. There may be many different paths that a person can take, but the map helps all reach their destination.

While individuals grow in their relationship with God differently, all have the same final destination: love. According to Willard, “God’s speaking to us, however we experience it in our initial encounter, is intended to develop into an intelligent, freely cooperative relationship between mature people who love each other with the richness of genuine agape love.”\textsuperscript{17} To know if an adolescent girl in particular has a deep faith, one must look for evidence in her life. If she demonstrates a relationship with God, practices spiritual disciplines to encourage that faith, and lives with love that is full of benevolent goodwill and willful delight toward God, then she likely is developing a deep faith. “The

\begin{footnotes}
\item 15 Ibid., 23.
\item 16 Ibid., 156.
\item 17 Ibid., 31.
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desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”¹⁸ The church needs to help develop people who have a deep faith, so they can lead others to develop their own profound faith in Jesus.

**Fowler’s Stages of Faith**

As a theologian and psychologist, James W. Fowler sought to create a framework for how people respond to faith and beliefs. Fowler, influenced by H. Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich,¹⁹ sought to synthesize faith with Erikson and Kohlberg’s development.²⁰ Fowler identifies six stages of faith development that are not age-related.²¹

The stages are designed as a path with specific structures that shape how people relate to the world and see themselves in it. The stages are cumulative and depend upon the previous stages.²² Faith is not a specific belief but a way of knowing and interacting with one’s surroundings and broader context.²³ Fowler’s system required interviews with

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¹⁸ Foster, *Celebration of Disciplines*, 1.


²¹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 118.


individuals that involved the interviewer to subjectively judge the individual. Through interviews, individuals had to communicate theologically to express their faith. This demanded that the one being interviewed have the correct language terms and skills in order to be able to express personal faith. Fowler’s stages were readily accepted by many churches as the manner in which to educate church members and be able to measure their growth in faith. Many churches developed educational programs around these stages.

Early adolescents typically are moving from stage two toward stage three. In the second stage of Mythic-Literal faith, children generally accept the stories told to them by their faith community but tend to understand them in very literal ways. There is a sense of sorting out reality from make-believe. Beliefs tend to be concrete. Thinking tends to be something like this: “If I pray, God will grant my wish.” People may struggle with their faith or move to the next stage if there are conflicts in their story or when literal interpretations conflict with real life.

Most people move into the third stage of Synthetic-Conventional faith in adolescence, although some adults do remain in the second stage. There is no direct correlation between people’s age and where they are on their faith journey. At this point in their life, adolescents have several different social circles that they are trying to blend together. Authority is located outside the self, and people tend to think that they believe what everyone else around them believes. Beliefs do not tend to be supported by critical


26 Kelcourse, “Theories of Human Development,” 45.
reflection. At this stage, people want or need a church structure to tell them what and how to believe.

Fowler was one of the first to try to define religious stages in one’s development. A difficulty with Fowler’s stages is the structure and necessity to master one level before proceeding down the faith path. It is a one-directional process, which is sequential and builds on the previous stage. There is an assumption of how one interprets the world. Fowler tries to create a system in which people process religious information and integrate it with their surroundings. Life provides a framework that is distinctive in particular locations. Another challenge is that it assumes all faith is demonstrated in the same manner. It does not take into account religious styles, which may help demonstrate and display faith in diverse ways. Individuals experience faith idiosyncratically, in part reflecting how they interpret and understand Scripture.

While I appreciate Fowler’s stages, I do not accept the manner in which he measures faith progression. This is not as straightforward a process as the stages suggest. Answers to faith questions are not objective but rather subjective. It is not easy to see how individuals progress through their faith, given its peculiar and often solitary moments of revelation. While there are certain benchmarks that one can visibly see in judging the physical development of an individual, faith development does not have visible criteria that can be observed readily.

29 Ibid.
The manner in which many females develop their faith is through relationships rather than through character development.\textsuperscript{30} The stage of faith people are in does not depend on the method in which they ascertain their faith.\textsuperscript{31} As a researcher, Slee observes the following: “Persons often operate at a variety of stage levels according to circumstances and the level of maturation achieved in a particular area.”\textsuperscript{32} According to Fowler, “Faith affects the shaping of our initiatives and responses.”\textsuperscript{33} Faith is ingrained in one’s identity and impacts how one makes decisions and thinks about issues.

Another critique of Fowler’s stages is that it is biased against women. Fowler’s stages have been studied to show that “women tend to score less highly on the Fowler scale than men and that men ‘advance’ to the ‘higher’ stages at younger ages than women.”\textsuperscript{34} The examples that Fowler gives for the highest stage are men, with the exception of Mother Theresa.\textsuperscript{35} These male examples also died as martyrs for their faith. They tended to have “sacrificed their relationships with partners and/or families for the sake of some larger good.”\textsuperscript{36} For a variety of reasons, the standards may be problematic for women in the manner in which they model the development of faith.


\textsuperscript{32} Slee, \textit{Women’s Faith Development}, 20.

\textsuperscript{33} Fowler, \textit{Stages of Faith}, 28.

\textsuperscript{34} Slee, \textit{Women’s Faith Development}, 32.

\textsuperscript{35} Fowler, \textit{Stages of Faith}, 201.

\textsuperscript{36} Slee, \textit{Women’s Faith Development}, 32.
Ultimately, adolescents long for faith and maturing lives that have meaning. They are on a faith journey and want to discover their life with God. They desire to reflect on their life and see where God tangibly intersects their personal experiences. Slee says that “patterns of training, ways of learning and modes of practice have not, by and large, reflected or served the needs of women, thereby functioning to perpetuate women’s marginalization and oppression.” For this reason, there are many areas of faith development that need to be explored further, particularly because faith is developed in individualized contexts and with a wide variety of questions framing the development. The language that is used to express faith may even be distinct for males and females. There needs to be a greater exploration of how faith is formed and evidenced in people.

**Discipleship and Spiritual Formation**

As early adolescents struggle with their personal identity, they pose questions about faith. These questions are not being addressed in public school and must be addressed in the church at the same time as they are being addressed at home. Nakkula writes: “Faith development is rooted in core components of the cognitive and moral domains of human development.” In exploring how to develop disciples in early adolescents, those who disciple must understand the whole person. The soul cannot be separated into a spiritual side and a cognitive side. An individual is integrated and intertwines body, soul, and spirit.

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39 Ibid., 5.

Compassionate observation and understanding of the entire person is necessary, because all aspects of the soul are attributed to the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:1-5). Exploring only one side of a person would be like looking at one side of a coin and thinking one knows all there is to know about the coin.

As Christians grow in their faith, it is important to remember the *imago Dei*. Christ-followers need to live their daily existence as if they see the image of God in each person who crosses their path. This means seeking to serve Christ in the community where one lives.41 If believers live a life that demonstrates how Christ dwells among them, they are more readily able to teach others the good news of Jesus Christ. Christians have an obligation to live as the image of God to the world (Genesis 1:26; Ephesians 5:1).

By living the life they are called to live, the world can come to know that they are marked by the Maker (1 Peter 2:9). The world can learn that all are created uniquely for a purpose. Acknowledging that each person is created in God’s image changes one’s understanding of others. It brings God in their midst. “Ironically, the call to live as a family, while thoroughly biblical with profound theological implications, is rarely used in the development of a holistic ecclesiology.”42 Believers are called as disciples to live not in isolation but as a part of the family of God.

This is because they are connected to Jesus (John 15:5). Jesus is the vine, and believers are the branches. They are grafted into Christ’s life and ministry as extensions of him. While grafted into the vine of Jesus, people’s lives change because they now grow as


part of something broader and more grounded. They are connected to him and rely on him for the best they can be in life. “Vines, too, need to focus their energy on producing good quality grapes, rather than lots of second-rate ones.”\(^{43}\) For this reason, one must remain connected with the community of faith in order to grow in that faith.\(^ {44}\)

Abiding in Jesus is the central matter of living a dependent life. The consequences of not abiding are severe: we are cut off from the divine empowerment. We can’t accomplish anything of lasting value—bearing fruit—unless we’re dynamically relating to him while he is abiding in us. If we’re disconnected from divine relationship and resources, we’re just as fruitless as the three soils in the parable.\(^ {45}\)

Followers of Jesus are called to be in community with one another. While each needs to participate in private intimate, spiritual growth, all must participate in corporate communal worship.\(^ {46}\) This is what it looks like to stay connected to the vine in order to grow and produce healthy fruit.

Discipleship is the guide to how Christians live their life. When disciples accept Christ, they share with others the difference that Jesus makes in their daily existence. Christian discipleship is the process by which followers of Jesus grow in faith and are equipped by the Holy Spirit, to overcome the pressures and trials of this present life and become more like Christ.\(^ {47}\) “Our formation into becoming like Jesus is part of the grand


\(^{44}\) Ibid., 71.

\(^{45}\) Issler, \textit{Living into the Life of Jesus}, 48.

\(^{46}\) Wright, \textit{John for Everyone Part 2}, 71.

cosmic project, what Jesus called ‘the kingdom of God.’”

This process requires believers to respond to the Holy Spirit’s prompting to examine their thoughts, words, and actions in light of Scripture. Just as an athlete works out to stay in shape, disciples should implement a workout to stay in relationship with God and to build on the living stone they are called to be (1 Peter 2:5). Followers of Christ are challenged to live according to the example that Christ gave to them. Disciples do not just read the words of Scripture; rather, they let the words be in their head and heart, so they can live a life that demonstrates the Word of God in all aspects of life. Christ-followers are called to live a life led by the Spirit and not to follow the ways of the flesh (Galatians 24-25).

Spiritual formation is developed and nurtured through a process. This process is not through actions but by allowing God to work on the inside. Spiritual disciplines are the practices that incorporate many different methods to encourage spiritual formation. It is not the academic knowledge or head knowledge but the habits and routines of how one lives out faith. This involves both personal and corporate practices. Spiritual disciplines include Bible study, worship, prayer, silence, meditation, and more. According to Laura Fleming and Mark W. Cannister from Gordon College’s department on Christian Ministry, “Pursuing these values and practices isn’t about tackling them all at once to try and earn a badge of honor from God, but rather discerning what needs the most change in your life and character in order to grow in Christ-likeness.” Some typical practices that nurture spiritual formation that many churches use are worship, Sunday School, youth group, and mission trips. Each of these can encourage the faith development of young people.

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48 Issler, *Living into the Life of Jesus*, 34.

It is helpful for churches to spend specific time explaining and teaching these processes to young people. If there is no explanation of how and why the church engages in these practices, they will not be passed down in a manner that encourages faith. A number of churches have young children leave for Sunday School or children’s worship. They are often brought into worship at an older age and expected to know and understand why congregants do what they do in a Sunday service. If there is no explanation, the young person might as well be in a service in a foreign language. Mission trips can be a time to demonstrate one’s faith. It is helpful to have believers share with the entire group on the mission trip why they believe and participate in mission and the difference it makes in their life. Sunday School is important for all ages.

As a pastor, I am often asked for the “right” interpretation of Scripture. This is a typical occurrence in Presbyterian churches and likely in other mainline denominations as well. In this format, knowledge about Jesus Christ is teacher-expert dependent. The “expert” imparts the knowledge to the “learner.” While early adolescent girls need to be taught, disciplers need to look to Scripture as their guide in teaching methods. This means asking questions and encouraging early adolescents to search for answers and engage in personal reflection. For adolescents, conversations rather than lectures draw them into struggling for a deeper understanding of their faith. In Christian Formation: Integrating Theology and Human Development, Jonathan H. Kim writes: “Since Jesus, in His earthly ministry, asked countless questions and challenged people to reflect on the principles He taught, we ought to do the same.”50

This method of discipleship and spiritual formation inspires and integrates questions that prompt reflection and soul-searching rather than just rote memorization. While memorization is important for young children who do not know the stories of Jesus, adolescents must be encouraged to develop the ability to take the biblical story and make it their story. Through inquiry, hypothesis, and even interrogation, they are able to take the biblical narrative and incorporate it into their own story. “Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as thankful recipients.”

The process of formation begins with God and then happens in the communal life of the Body of Christ. While it may appear to be an individualistic activity, it incorporates the Body of Christ. Spiritual formation occurs when individuals allow God to work in their life. The formation takes place through the practice of spiritual disciplines as the individual joins God on the spiritual journey. One needs to use spiritual practices as tools to develop a deeper relationship and on the journey with the Lord.

Incorporating the story into their own life helps them to develop a deeper relationship with the Lord. By knowing the story, individuals can begin to see examples in their own life that may be similar to stories in Scripture and come to understand that they are not alone in their experience. The words of Scripture can become an individual’s personal prayer in time of lament—for example, the Psalms give words when one does not have the words to speak. Jesus did not meet with his disciples just once a week to give them the important information that they needed to know. Instead, Jesus and his disciples

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spent evenings together, lived together, and walked through the countryside for hours and even days at a time. The lessons that Jesus taught were organic, not formal, lessons that came about through life experiences (Matthew 15:21-28; Luke 5:12-15; John 4:1-42). It is helpful for individuals to develop spiritual practices that encourage daily “engagement in a spiritual routine that keeps the minds and bodies of its practitioners focused on God and God’s hope for the world.” This daily practice emboldens the individual to be drawn closer to God and grafted to the vine.

In the Jewish tradition, each year the biblical story is told on the holidays. Many Jewish holidays start with a good story: Passover (Exodus 12:1-28) and the Exodus (Exodus 14:1-25), Purim and the story of Esther (Esther 9:18-32), Hanukah and the story of the Maccabees (1 Maccabees 4:36-61). Part of celebrating the holiday is sharing the story. When the story is shared, it is not just a telling of history but a handing down of the lessons and traditions as well. There is a sense of ownership of the story, and it is not just about events and the people of long ago. The transmission of the story personally connects them to the past and the future. The passing down of the story of faith helps provide the framework for how people can relate to God on their own individual basis. The sharing of the story demonstrates how others have developed their relationship with God and sets an example for how those hearing the story can do so as well.

Relationships are important in the development of an adolescent’s faith journey. Adolescents need to have people in their lives who journey with them through the

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52 Karen-Marie Yust and E. Bryon Anderson, Taught by God: Teaching and Spiritual Formation (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 52.
progression of spiritual growth. For adolescents to thrive on this faith journey, they need “a non-judgmental, inclusive community of love and support, a community where the stories of Christ are for lifting up, inspiring, and self-reflection.” Young people do not stumble into a mature faith journey. Discipleship and spiritual formation happen when adults who are farther along their faith journey share practices that have been meaningful to their spiritual growth. Adult relationships provide young girls with someone they can trust with their conversation about faith, who offer them a safe place to pose forbidden questions. The formation is the result of practicing disciplines and routines that connect with God and God’s work. God is at work in disciples’ lives, forming them from the beginning of time. God has knit us together and created us into the image of the Son.

Since no one adult has all answers to all questions, a variety of adults, not just the youth director, need to invest in the lives of adolescents to create nurturing relationships that are built on trust. This only can happen when adults are in relationships with adolescents. Early adolescents want to see adults who have a strong, growing faith and who allow adolescents to express their doubts and questions. Churches have the opportunity to provide these types of relationships through mentoring programs. Committed mentors offer staying power to journey with adolescents through their stages, as they engage in their deep search for faith. “The New Testament is clear on this point:


55 Psalm 139

all people who belong to Christ belong to one another in the community, without reservation or qualification.”  

Members of the Body of Christ are connected to one another, even when they may not see the connection.

The act of searching is important. Those who disciple cannot force someone to learn. Disciplers cannot teach someone if the student does not think the teacher has something valuable to share.  

Too often, those who are charged with spiritual formation are unsure of their own faith. Part of creating an environment in which searching adolescents feel free to express themselves involves church leaders who are comfortable with silence, as they wait to hear what questions are being raised. This means not assuming they know when people have questions of faith and what those questions might be. Spiritual formation allows for times of questions and times of silence. In today’s age where people want and need noise, contemporary disciplers often do not know how to live with waiting-for-God moments.

Adults often dismiss the faith of adolescents just because they are adolescents. Everyone can have faith. While faith may look different in each individual, everyone has some level of spiritual belief. Faith is a response to God, which is received from God.  

Faith and belief are related, but they are not interchangeable. Faith is conviction and trust in God. Belief is more of an opinion but not the strong confidence in God’s promises. People who believe can acknowledge that God made promises in the Bible but lack the certainty that they are true. People who have faith acknowledge that God made promises,

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58 Westerhoff, Spiritual Life, 42.
59 Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 17.
and they have confidence that God will not forget these promises and are certain God is actively working to bring about the promises (Psalm 139). In many ways, moving from belief to faith is part of the natural progression of brain development as an individual moves from concrete operational to formal operational understanding. Adolescence is a natural time to move from belief to faith.

Faith is a development that takes place over a lifetime. While faith can begin as a result of a “Damascus road” experience (cf. Acts 9:1-19), these types of experiences are not required for faith to develop. Faith can begin as a small seed that grows as it is nurtured. Faith develops through one accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Two main metaphors that are used to describe faith as organic are trees and a journey; both metaphors have been used throughout Christianity and are important to the discussion.\textsuperscript{60} The organic tree image helps demonstrate that over time the seedling grows into maturity and is transformed over time. The journey metaphor implies a structure of events and interactions that take place. The journey of transformation is intentional and points in a certain direction. For many people, these metaphors are not an either/or situation to describe their faith growth but a blending of both metaphors. Faith begins small and grows over time, as it is nurtured and encouraged through spiritual disciplines and practices. Along the way, there are many people who assist in the journey and physical places that influence and impact one’s faith. Once one has faith, it is not a time to stop and rest but an invitation to continue farther down the road to see where God is calling, perhaps even to help others on their journey.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 35.
A life of faith allows early adolescent girls to acknowledge the Spirit of God in their individual lives and how Jesus Christ reigns in it.\textsuperscript{61} For Christians, a life of faith is more than just saying that one believes in God but rather publicly acknowledging the Spirit of God in one’s life and allowing Christ to influence one’s choices. As one experiences the mystery and presence of God in daily life, one’s existence is transformed. Continual growth and transformation consistently change believers and draw them closer to God.

Faith development is not synonymous with involvement in religious activity. While there is a connection in people becoming more involved as they deepen their faith, being involved in religious activity does not equate with deep faith. Teenage girls participate in more religious activities than teenage boys,\textsuperscript{62} but this does not mean they are necessarily more faithful. For this reason, it is necessary to persist in investigating how early adolescent girls grow in a transforming relationship with God. Each young woman needs to discover her own call to follow. The realization of a call can transform the lives of adolescents from self-absorption to discipleship.\textsuperscript{63} This call and the recognition of it can deepen and strengthen the adolescent’s faith.

Developing faith is a progression as one receives Jesus into one’s life and then allows the Spirit to work within it. This development happens by practicing faith and learning through doing.\textsuperscript{64} This practice does not happen in secret in a private setting but in the community of faith. As vice president for Religion at the Lilly Endowment, Craig

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 37.

\textsuperscript{62} Smith with Denton, \textit{Soul Searching}, 277.


\textsuperscript{64} Dykstra, \textit{Growing in the Life of Faith}, 40.
Dykstra says, “We come to recognize and live in the Spirit as we participate more and more broadly and deeply in communities that know God’s love, acknowledge it, express it and live their lives in the light of it.”65 A community of fellow believers is an important part of developing one’s faith. One does not learn to play an instrument simply by being around the instrument or musicians who play; one learns to play by trying it. Burgeoning musicians also learn from others who play that instrument, so they can improve and get better. Likewise, one does not develop a faith just by being near people who have faith but by engaging that faith among people who are practicing their own faith.

**Critique of Contemporary Discipleship and Spiritual Formation**

While churches may reach out to youth and encourage their involvement in congregational life, being a disciple means engaging with and becoming an integral part of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). One cannot be a disciple of Christ in isolation.66 The church needs all spiritual gifts of its members to be shared with the community. “The Christian community, as the body of Christ, needs all the spiritual gifts of its members if it is to function correctly.”67 There is a necessity for relationships not just with peers but with multiple generations.68 Unfortunately, too many churches try to create a unique and

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65 Ibid., 40.

66 Examples in Scripture demonstrate that believers need one another: Ananias discipled Paul (Acts 9), Barnabas and Paul ministered together as a team (Acts 13), and Paul modeled the faithful life to Timothy (2 Timothy 3:10-11).


68 Paul’s greetings to the church includes various generations. Titus 2 gives words of instruction to the various generations. Psalm 102 offers an example of how to record the information for future generations.
isolated youth program to address the needs of adolescents.\(^{69}\) “The days of hiring a superstar ‘youth pastor’ and enlisting a few volunteers to run a ‘quality’ youth ministry program on the relational fringe of a church and expecting measurable enthusiasm for a lifelong commitment to Christ and the faith community, much less observable spiritual transformation, have been fading for years if not decades.”\(^{70}\) Churches need to incorporate youth into the entire life of the church and not have it as a separate silo ministry.

While churches have created youth ministry to address the development of adolescents, there has been a reliance on creating programs to meet the youth where they are in their lives. However, somewhere along the way church leaders have forgotten to include faith in this process. Faith does not happen in an empty void but grows and flourishes through vibrant relationships networked throughout the Body of Christ. “In terms that the author of Acts might have used, when the church is living out the kingdom of God, the word of God will spread powerfully and do its own work.”\(^{71}\) There is no excuse for adults to think that adolescents can walk the faith journey on their own.\(^{72}\) Jesus commands all believers to “love one another” (John 15:12); this only happens in the community, not at a distance.\(^{73}\)

Churches need to look at the entire person. This means valuing the theological understanding of humanity and the reality that the person is created in God’s image, yet

\(^{69}\) Clark, “The Adoption View of Youth Ministry,” 77-78.


\(^{71}\) N. T. Wright, Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), 267.

\(^{72}\) Clark, “The Adoption View of Youth Ministry,” 79.

\(^{73}\) Ibid.
reaching this level of comprehension cannot be the stopping point. Churches must balance their work with the social sciences and an understanding of human development. Leaders need to integrate their understanding of God’s world and how it reveals the truth about God to humanity. Churches must acknowledge the connection between faith development and human development.74

Congregations can learn from the social sciences and use this information to support early adolescent girls on their faith journey. Human development theory can help churches understand youth and the phases of adolescent brain development, as this continually challenges adolescents’ ability to express their faith. The timing that many churches have for profession of faith in adolescence is suitable, but churches still need to provide the tools in order to profess a faith. According to Dykstra, “Faith understood as a way of life always seems to involve the fashioning of distinctive emotions.”75 Adolescent boys and girls respond to emotions differently. How their faith matures and is molded will be different for boys and girls. Therefore, discipleship and spiritual formation must be understood through this lens.

A focus on psychological human development can limit human interpretation of God and Scripture. Nevertheless, everyone is able to respond to Scripture on a personal level. How individuals respond to a specific Scripture passage changes over time, as their understanding deepens. For many people, John 3:16 is an important building block for faith. Children can understand John 3:16 on a level that is possible for them. At an early


75 Dykstra, Growing in the Life of Faith, 115.
age, there is no discussion about the larger passage and the snake and Moses as it is not age appropriate. As early adolescents mature and grow in their faith, their understanding of the passage may change. As people develop, their understanding of love transforms from how a mother loves a child to adult love. While many people focus on the one verse (John 3:16), there is more to the passage as it connects back to Numbers 21:5-8. “Moses put the serpent on a pole, and lifted it up so the people could see it; even so, the son of man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15). The passage is a mystery and should not be considered in isolation but requires exploring the connection with the passage in Numbers. Ultimately, the passage is about life and believing in order to have eternal life through the crucifixion. While John 3:16 looks nice on signs at sporting events, it is important to allow people, including adolescents, to grow in how they understand this passage and the relationship it has with their own faith.

Too often, adults want and expect early adolescents to profess faith that is mature beyond their ability or experience. Faith can be expressed on various levels at different stages, and church leaders need to remain aware of this. A leader’s expectations of how early adolescent girls explain and demonstrate faith must match their level of development. Reading the same passage, individuals at distinct stages of faith may hear different words

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77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., 34.
from God. How girls process information is different from how boys process information.⁷⁹ Since early adolescent girls tend to focus more on the relationships, as churches teach the story they need to focus on the personal interactions and how a relationship with Christ will change their life.

Adolescents need to be surrounded by adults who are willing to model authentic faith in their daily lives. These adults not only should be family members but also include members who are in the church community.⁸⁰ By interacting with a variety of adults, specifically women who demonstrate their faith, there is an increased opportunity for teachable moments and to have that learning reinforced through a variety of life experiences. Girls learn from examples that are provided for them. Consequently, churches need to offer examples of women with strong and mature faith who can model faith development.

Mentoring can help early adolescents on their faith journey. Relationships with adults who are consistent and willing to share their faith is an important factor. This will help provide the language of faith. Joyce Anne Mercer says, “How we speak about something has the power to shape our experience.”⁸¹ This is because words have meaning and power (Proverbs 12:17-22). Churches need to equip their adolescent girls with the language of faith to have holy conversations about God and how they relate to God. By having adults and older teens around who converse about the big questions using the

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⁷⁹ Spohn, “Conscience and Moral Development,” 133.


⁸¹ Mercer, Girl Talk/God Talk, 2.
language of faith, early adolescents can learn the language of faith. Churches need to help provide the natural religious language for describing their life experiences.\textsuperscript{82}

Churches should encourage family relationships. Families who sit down and practice spiritual disciplines are more likely to pass on those traditions and rituals to their early adolescents. While it is helpful to have discussions with early adolescents about faith, discipleship is more than just talk. For this reason, it is important that parents live a life that shows their faith in a way that is visible to their adolescent. Parenting classes on pertinent development is imperative for parents. Churches should offer them information about brain development and sound advice. As children grow, parents move from being necessary for tucking little ones into bed at night to being unsure of how to have a relationship with their daughters. This is tragic, because early adolescent girls want to have a relationship with their parents; yet this becomes difficult, if parents struggle with how to have a conversation with their daughters. Parenting classes can equip and empower parents to have conversations with their daughters about faith. Churches can train parents to listen. Helping parents to learn how to listen to their early adolescent daughters is essential for continuing the conversation.

Central to church life is worship and how believers express their faith. Pastors and youth leaders need to develop fitting services that reach early adolescents at their level. Worship should be designed not solely around early adolescents but to critically challenge tweens and teens in their faith development. Worship is essential to living one’s faith and a critical component for its growth. It is not just a solitary discipline but a community practice. Once one develops a faith, it is not something that is marked off as

\textsuperscript{82} Dykstra, \textit{Growing in the Life of Faith}, 123.
done. Believers engage in it together to develop an ever deepening faith. Worship allows people who are in different places of their faith journey to grow together. Just as many school systems have inclusion programs to help students, congregants should look at corporate worship as their time to help one another on their faith journey.

Modeling the practice of one’s faith is vital. Church leaders need to model how to engage in faith, how to pray, how to ask questions, and the art of Scripture reading and reflection. Leaders can share devotionals that are age appropriate and accessible to adolescents—for example, distributing bite-size devotionals designed for youth by texting. Adults concerned about adolescents also could receive these, using them as a focus for conversation. Part Two goes deeper into this discussion. It explores parental involvement and establishes a theological foundation for parenting and the biblical understanding of faith.
PART TWO

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION
CHAPTER 3
PARENTING

This chapter explores the involvement of parents in the raising of their early adolescent daughters. Parenting practices in general are important. Parents who have difficulty sharing and teaching life skills often neglect the faith journey of their daughters.

Parenting Practices and Strategies for Adolescent Girls

Parenting is a process, a challenging progression that takes work. One factor that can impact the process is attitude. Parents need to approach parenting an adolescent not as a problem or a struggle but “as an opportunity to depend on God while teaching impressionable teens to do the same.”¹ There are some in society who think that adults should expect the worst from adolescents, because they will cause trouble on a regular basis.² However, this cannot be the attitude of the parent. Instead, parents should look at adolescents as new opportunities. Adolescents are a gift from God.³ While there are many

¹ Mueller, The Space Between, 17.
² Hine, The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager, 45.
books on the market on parenting, there are no easy solutions. Each child is different and responds differently. Just when parents think they know what they are doing, their child becomes an adolescent, and relational dynamics change all over again.

As early adolescent girls experience a variety of physical, mental, and emotional changes, the manner in which parents interact with their early adolescent daughter fluctuates as well. According to Gilligan, “Girls tend to be given more leeway than boys up until adolescence, when they reach reproductive maturity.” Previously, young girls may not have required the attention from their parents. When they reach puberty the type of trouble the adolescent girl can get into is different. Parents tend to focus on them to ensure that they do not get into trouble. Parenting practices must not be examined in isolation but in the context of the family unit. Parenting also must be practiced and active. Mothers and fathers cannot sit back and wait for a need to arise that requires a parent. This is abdicating their responsibility. Parents are called to participate in the life of their adolescent and give advice when necessary. Parents have influenced the lives of their adolescents when they were children, and that impact still matters today. While parents

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may not think or feel that their opinion matters, it is important for parents to be involved; otherwise, the adolescent may feel abandoned.\textsuperscript{10} Parents can see their influence in their adolescent if they look at their core values—for example, sports teams, education, volunteer activities, politics, and more.\textsuperscript{11} Parents cannot wait for a crisis to arise to become involved but must be immersed continually without hovering over their children all the time. Parents’ opinions and advice are needed in the lives of adolescents and can be present without judgment when asked for by the adolescent.

Furthermore, parents need to have a goal in how they function as a mother or father. If they do not have a goal or purpose, the parents will not have an idea of what they are trying to achieve. Chap Clark and Dee Clark write:

Your goal must be to constantly study your child and his or her world. Your role is to care enough to actively pursue them with mercy and affection and to demonstrate that you really want to get to know them better so that you will be able to encourage them to be like you or like some other ideal you have in your head. Being the best parent you can be means empowering, encouraging, comforting and cheering your kid on to be the unique person he or she was created to be.\textsuperscript{12}

After contemplating goals—as they relate to a variety of issues, from family to friends and other relationships—parents then need to examine and consider how they can parent when it comes to faith. Parenting is a progression of helping to equip one’s child with the tools necessary to grow up to be an adult. Although parenting changes and adapts over

\textsuperscript{10} Hine, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager}, 25.

\textsuperscript{11} Hunter, \textit{The DNA of D6}, 10. Hunter shares how his children support a college football team from a state where they live in as children. Although they moved away at five and six, they still support the team, wear the colors, and watch the games together. The parents and grandparents passed along that passion, not the local community.

\textsuperscript{12} Clark and D. Clark, \textit{Disconnected}, 25.
time as the adolescent grows, it is a constant work in progress that needs to be continually examined. “Never underestimate the influence of the previous generation.”

Parenting needs to be a priority. Walking the journey through adolescence is a challenge for daughters. Adolescents need to know that they have parents who want to go on the journey with them. While it may seem that the world around them and their biology are major influences, it is important for parents to know that they still make an impact on their adolescent daughters. Daughters need to know that they are a priority to their parents just as much as a son is a priority. If they perceive that they are being treated differently than sons, this will impact the relationship the adolescent daughter has with her parents and her ability to trust them. A teenage daughter’s thoughts and actions need to be taken seriously, and parents need to convey that she is important to them. Daughters should not be made to feel that they are interrupting something important when they have a question or want a parent’s attention. Early adolescents are trying to transition from childhood to adulthood and can have difficulty balancing that tightrope. When they know they have the love and support of dad and mom, it makes the balancing act a little easier.

Both father and mother need to be involved in the raising of adolescent daughters. While many people tend to think about the importance of a man in the life of a son, it is

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15 Clark and D. Clark, *Daughters and Dads*, 41.
16 Ibid., 32-33.
just as important for daughters to have a loving relationship with their father.\textsuperscript{18} While mothers offer a vital relationship for a daughter, at the same time the daughter wants to explore her uniqueness in the family unit.\textsuperscript{19} There is a distinct relationship between fathers and daughters that needs to be cultivated and encouraged.\textsuperscript{20} Both father and mother need to be involved in the raising of a daughter, as each will bring different roles and experiences to the relationship. This is a time of development and change in the life of the adolescent. Fathers play an important role in a daughter’s transition, by providing male encouragement and support in times of adolescent trials.\textsuperscript{21} Parents bring unique support, as they unconditionally love their adolescent daughter and brought her into the world. “The context of Scripture is clear: God defines family as generations of dads and moms influencing their children and grandchildren.”\textsuperscript{22} Family can provide support in the manner in which God loves and supports the parents. In some families, a mother or father is not involved in the life of the adolescent. Here is where the church as the Body of Christ and family of God can help fill the gap with these families.

Trust is a huge part of intimate relationship. For a relationship to develop, the individuals need to know that they are safe in sharing their thoughts and ideas. As that feeling of safety deepens, it becomes trust. Daughters need to know that they can trust their parents. According to the husband-wife writing team of Daughters and Dads, “Your

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Bengston, Putney, and Harris, Families and Faith, 76.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Clark and D. Clark, Daughters and Dads, 82.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 36-37.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 60.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Hunter, The DNA of D6, 4.
\end{itemize}
daughter not only wants to trust you, she also desires you to trust her!” Reciprocal trust needs to exist between daughters and parents and between parents and daughters, because trust is the foundation for deep relationships that foster respect, acceptance, and understanding. A relationship built on trust can encourage daughters to approach their parents when they are trying to figure out what to do when faced with the dilemmas and paradoxes of life.

The problem is that many people do not take the time to build the relationship. For some families, dinner is the only time during the week when families sit down and talk with one another. For some families, dinner together may not even be a tradition. Regardless, as the adolescent becomes more independent and involved in activities, it becomes harder and more complicated to find time to sit and talk. While dinners may not be the magic solution, parents who value family dinner time can make an effort to build a healthy relationship. This is important, because to build a healthy relationship parents need to spend time together with their adolescent. A relationship built on trust lets daughters know that it is okay to fail and still be welcomed as a part of the family.

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23 Clark and D. Clark, Daughters and Dads, 43.
24 Ibid., 45.
29 Cline and Fay, Parenting Teens with Love and Logic, 49.
a bond bears the fruit of understanding and allows parents to see her identity in her environment as someone transitioning into adulthood.

There are teachable moments in everyday life. Parents need to seize these moments to help raise their adolescents and teach them on numerous topics. Effective parents are preemptive and hands-on when it comes to instructing their children about family boundaries and rules and then holding them accountable and responsible to stay within them.\textsuperscript{30} For instance, parents set curfews and hold their adolescents accountable to be home on time. Another example is when parents take the time to explain why adolescents cannot do a certain activity due to the consequences.

While this relational journey is different for each parent and child, there are some generalities that need to be considered for relationship. According to Clark and D. Clark, “There are five tasks for parenting: understanding, showing compassion, boundarying, charting/guiding and launching into adulthood.”\textsuperscript{31} Parenting does not happen in isolation but comes as a reaction to an intricacy and density of issues. The five tasks of parenting can help parents be equipped to address issues that otherwise may be troubling.\textsuperscript{32} By being prepared for these tasks, parents will be able to navigate the journey they are on.

As parents engage in the task of understanding, they seek to grasp what the adolescent is doing, why they are engaging in certain activities, and the environment in which they live. This does not mean that parents agree with the behavior or attitude of

\textsuperscript{30} Matlock, \textit{Real World Parents}, 37.

\textsuperscript{31} Clark and D. Clark, \textit{Disconnected}, 88.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
their teen, but it is the beginning of a relationship to understand their reality. Building a relationship with an adolescent requires effort to comprehend their experiences. Parents can learn from listening and watching what the adolescent is telling them. To do this, parents must take the time to learn the environment of their adolescent. They may not agree with what is happening, but knowing the adolescent’s environment will help them understand more intimately and concretely the situations that the teen faces.

Beyond cognitive understanding, parents need to engage in an understanding of the heart. This takes shape as compassion shown toward their adolescent. This is more than just being kind. It involves working toward emotional responses that demonstrate a desire to be in a relationship with them. Parents need to be able to feel the range of emotions with their adolescents. This will enable them to build connections with their adolescent that can last forever. Enduring relationships are built on “Love and Logic.” This means parents demonstrate their love in a healthy manner that is logical. Responses cannot be issued through anger, frustration, or threats; rather, they must be communicated through devotion, adoration, and coherent dialog, which will help the adolescent grow and mature into adulthood. Foster says, “Love, not anger, brought Jesus to the cross.” In those moments of frustration, parents need to remember the deep love of Christ and use this as a guide.

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33 Ibid., 89.
34 Cline and Fay, Parenting Teens with Love and Logic, 95-96.
35 Clark and D. Clark, Disconnected, 91.
36 Cline and Fay, Parenting Teens with Love and Logic, 33.
37 Foster, Celebration of Discipline, 143.
As the third task, “boundaring” is the exercise of setting limits and rules and allows for both discipline and freedom. Boundaring is not just about setting boundaries for adolescents but also the discipline that takes place. It is not about punishing. It is about helping to teach and train adolescents into learning the acceptable patterns for life that will help them grow into adulthood. Adolescents need to learn to make choices. They need to understand about limits and outcomes, but these experiences best take place in a loving environment. These learning moments are opportunities, not focused on consequences but on acquiring knowledge for the future from the experience.

Parents also need to chart and guide the path for adolescents. This means walking the journey with them to help navigate the process. The parent warns of dangers and difficulties ahead and through mentoring and friendship helps steer them through adolescence. Supervisors in the workplace do not send someone out to do a job without the correct instruction. In a similar yet more important vein, parents must instruct and even mentor their teens through the process of completing tasks and steering through life. This is because parents are necessary to help navigate adolescence. Parents need to be on the journey with adolescents as a mentor, friend, and counselor ready to help guide when necessary and to be present when problems arise. Parents need to set expectations to help adolescents on the journey to adulthood. These expectations help direct adolescents and are used through a process of exploration. This is not a series of lectures

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38 Clark and D. Clark, *Disconnected*, 95.


40 Ibid., 100.

41 Clark and D. Clark, *Disconnected*, 98.
of what should and should not be done; rather, expectations and exploration can be accomplished through examining open-ended questions together.\textsuperscript{42} When expectations and situations are explored together, rather than dictated, they are more effective in being understood by the adolescent. This allows for clear communication with the adolescent.\textsuperscript{43}

A parent’s final task is to launch adolescents into adulthood. A parent launches adolescents into adulthood by helping to construct a support system as they begin to function in life as an adult. The launch does not begin at eighteen but rather in adolescence, as the parent begins teaching life skills. Parents love their children and should be willing to take the time to invest in their children. The investment is not a straight path from adolescence to adulthood but a maze of twists and turns.\textsuperscript{44} The parenting job requires a prolonged journey with the adolescent through the twists and turns of life and its complications.

Parents of adolescent girls cannot assume that parenting is the same as parenting adolescent boys. There is a difference in adolescent behavior that parents need to recognize.\textsuperscript{45} For years, some have viewed the male life as normative and then compared the female life from that male perspective. Some trace this back to Adam and Eve, since woman was created from the rib of a man (Genesis 2:22).\textsuperscript{46} Unfortunately, many in society configure adolescent girls as “starting with ‘male’ and then subtracting.”\textsuperscript{47} This skewed notion, when viewed in light of adolescent girls’ strength, athletic ability, and

\textsuperscript{42} Cline and Fay, \textit{Parenting Teens with Love and Logic}, 48.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Clark and D. Clark, \textit{Disconnected}, 99.
\textsuperscript{45} Pipher, \textit{Reviving Ophelia}, 35.
\textsuperscript{46} Gilligan, \textit{In a Different Voice}, 6; see also Genesis 2:22.
\textsuperscript{47} Mercer, \textit{Girltalk Godtalk}, 59.
academic ability in certain subjects impact their present and their future. Society frequently describes things as masculine or feminine, which implies not similarities but polar opposites. Traditionally, society has had a preference for male traits and has produced a patriarchal society.\textsuperscript{48} Society needs to stop determining what is appropriate and acceptable for each gender.\textsuperscript{49} According to Mercer, whose work is in faith, gender, and violence in adolescent girls, “Gender is not merely something one is born into, nor is it simply something one decides upon. It is more complex, by virtue of the fact that gender identity takes shape over time through one’s participation in cultural practices, even as one may work to transform those practices along with one’s identity.”\textsuperscript{50} Adolescent girls are trying to figure out their place and way in society.

Parents cannot treat their adolescent daughters as they would treat their sons and simply hope for the best. Instead, parents need to love and shepherd their adolescent daughters in a manner that will encourage them to grow into mature adults. According to Gilligan, “In contrast, the dynamics of female adolescence are depicted through the telling of a very different story.”\textsuperscript{51} The story of adolescent girls differs from that of boys, as they go through puberty at unique times. Interactions are dissimilar, and they respond emotionally contrarily. Girls and women are still struggling to discover their identity in a culture, which expresses male experiences as the norm and often disregards female

\textsuperscript{48} Radin, \textit{Brave Girls}, 4.

\textsuperscript{49} Mercer, \textit{Girltalk Godtalk}, 48.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 59.

\textsuperscript{51} Gilligan, \textit{In a Different Voice} 13.
experiences. While society may not like to acknowledge it, there are many gender stereotypes that undermine a woman’s authority and influence. For example, a woman’s nurturing side may not be viewed as able to make difficult decisions, because a woman is seen as too emotional and will cry, while men are viewed as natural leaders. There are many areas that still need to be explored in the development of young adolescent girls. Girls respond differently to faith than boys. Adolescent girls tend to have a more positive attitude toward faith and belief and are willing to explore a more complex spirituality. These differences impact how adolescent girls practice and discuss their faith.

Adolescent identity is impacted by the digital world. Many adolescent girls are involved in the internet. There is a sense of detachment from one’s own identity while one takes on a different identity in online games. According to Karen-Marie Yust, professor of Christian Education, “It is easy for children to overlook the ways in which their seemingly self-constructed personal communications are actually tied to identity scaffolding erected by others.” Many adolescents are overly involved in social networking and gaming apps. How they interact in these environments may be different for each context. She may use her real identity for one site, like Skype, and a persona

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52 Radin, Brave Girls, 12.
53 Ibid., 97.
that identifies her passion for another site, like Tumblr.\textsuperscript{57} “Most teens use a plethora of social media services as they navigate relationships and contexts.”\textsuperscript{58} This may lead to a variety of explanations as parents look at the many personas. Even online, adolescents seek to discover their identity in various contexts.

Self-esteem is particularly important for adolescent girls. In 1991, the American Association of University Women conducted a study and declared that girls’ self-esteem changes and decreases as they move through adolescence. These results were challenged in 1999 in \textit{Psychological Bulletin} when a study concluded that the self-esteem of boys and girls is basically the same.\textsuperscript{59} Either way, it is important that adolescent girls have self-esteem, as it serves to encourage and solidify an identity.\textsuperscript{60} In a society that is obsessed with feeling good, adolescent children are very sensitive to their feelings and how they perceive what is happening to them.

Emotions are different in adolescent boys and adolescent girls. The biological make-up of girls makes them more sensitive to pressure.\textsuperscript{61} Adolescent girls tend to pick up indirect and direct messages. They thrive in supportive settings that are designed to help them establish their identity while still being connected and attached to others.\textsuperscript{62} Adolescent girls are trying to figure out their emotional, sexual, and spiritual identity.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 37.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 38.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Pipher, \textit{Reviving Ophelia}, 118.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Radin, \textit{Brave Girls}, 2.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 16.
\end{itemize}
During a time of separating to find their own individual identity that is distinct from their parents, adolescent girls are programmed to seek connections with people, especially during stressful situations. As they continue on this journey of change, there is a struggle between reaching out to their families and separating themselves. How adolescent girls respond to stress is also different from boys. Stacey Radin, a psychologist and researcher, explains, “Biologically and psychologically, they are programmed to attach and connect, possessing a high sensitivity to anything that might endanger affiliations with others.” This struggle is a challenge as they try to figure out their own identity.

One important area of parenting is the attachment adolescent girls have to their parents. This relationship needs to be fostered and encouraged. The notion of attachment has to do with how the adolescent “feels” about the relationship. This means it does not matter what the parents think the relationship is or what actually happens. Essentially, the reality of that relationship depends on the feelings of the adolescent and how she perceives its reality. If the adolescent believes she is close to a person, there will be attachment even if the other person does not feel they are close. Attachment is particularly important for female adolescents to experience. In infancy and childhood, many girls have attachment with their mothers. During adolescence, this attachment changes and shifts to an attachment with their father. They need to feel the safety that comes with attachment. It is the responsibility of parents to create the environment for the

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63 Ibid., 135.
64 Ibid.
65 Clark and D. Clark, Daughters and Dads, 58.
66 Clark and D. Clark, Disconnected, 123.
attachment, while the existence of the attachment is determined by the adolescent. It is the parents’ role to initiate and work at the relationship even though the adolescent daughter longs for it to happen. An adolescent daughter hungers to be in a relationship with her parents, and it takes work and effort on the part of the parent to develop it.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus asks the gathered crowd: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” (Luke 15:4). The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and looks for the one that is lost. An adolescent daughter needs to know that her parents will seek her out just like the shepherd searched for the one lost sheep. There needs to be rejoicing when she is found. This joy contributes to how a daughter develops a sense of identity in which she knows she is important enough that she can wander away and her parents will search for her and welcome her home. Helping adolescent daughters develop a strong identity is a vital task of parenting. This is especially important in light of how adolescent girls seem to blur their identity with intimacy when developing relationships.

This confusion can have a lasting mark on them as they try to figure out how to be vulnerable as an individual and in relationships with others. Part of the ability to pass on faith is dependent upon the relationship between the parent and the daughter. The quality of the relationship is important for the transmission of faith. If the adolescent daughter

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67 Clark and D. Clark, Daughters and Dads, 65.
68 Ibid., 66.
69 Gilligan, In a Different Voice 170.
70 Bengston, Putney and Harris, Families and Faith, 78-79.
feels an emotional connection, especially an attachment with her father, there is a stronger chance that faith will be transmitted. She may change her religious affiliation to a different religious organization, but she will have a stronger desire to remain actively participating in a religious institution.  

**Christian Parenting Practices in Regard to Passing on the Faith**

Parents who are Christian must explore how they can pass on the faith to their daughters. “Religious leaders and parents need to know more about what we call ‘religious momentum across generations,’ how it can be encouraged, and why the momentum sometimes stops.” Passing on the faith in large part is up to the parents, but churches have a responsibility to help parents know how to pass on that faith. The congregational body of faith has a responsibility to encourage parents and equip them with the necessary skills to raise up the next generation of believers.

Parents who value their faith “invest considerable effort to educate their children in that faith, by both word and example.” Parents need to participate in their children’s faith and not abdicate the responsibility to the church. Brian Howard Honett says, “Too many Christian parents are content to let their children wander unattended in the spiritual wild.” The authors of *The Godbearing Life* agree: “Christians, by and large, have forgotten the family’s role as a ‘little church’ and today’s parents often bring their

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71 Ibid., 56.

72 Ibid., 13.

73 Ibid., 55.

children to church to have ‘professionals’ (meaning Christian education staff) teach them what it means to be Christian.”75 Although parents feel apprehensive or unqualified or tentative in how to discuss their faith with their children,76 they have an obligation to participate in the faith development of their adolescent daughters. “The principles of generational discipleship appear consistently throughout Scripture for all people. And they still apply to us today—even if we have, like the generations of Nehemiah, forgotten to be our kids’ spiritual leaders.”77 Both the Old and New Testaments urge parents to pass on the story to their children (Deuteronomy 6:7; Ephesians 6:4).

However, many parents have difficulty sharing and teaching life skills, so when it comes to faith they often neglect this part of the parenting journey. Just because it is 2016 and young women have greater opportunity than ever before, this does not mean that it is easy for adolescent girls to navigate their journey into adulthood. There still exist stumbling blocks based on their gender—and even more so, now that the concept of gender in general is changing.78 There are many things that need to be navigated as they grow and mature and figure out their faith, as their relationship with God is complex.79 This journey is complicated as the adolescent girl incorporates the role of women in faith and how they understand themselves in relation to being in the image of God and their role in society.


77 Hunter, The DNA of D6, 21.

78 Now more than ever, the idea of being “transgender” is becoming accepted and mainstream.

79 Mercer, Girltalk Godtalk, xv.
Even today, some faith traditions still see the role of men and women differently. There is a difference of opinion about women being subordinate to men and the ability to speak and teach in public.\textsuperscript{80} However, even in his era, Jesus took the time to value women in Scripture. He stopped to interact and relate with both women and girls (John 4:4-26; Luke 10:38-42; Mark 5:25-34), but somehow the Church does not always do the same. According to Mercer and Dori Grinenko Baker, “The flourishing of girls and women and the roles they play in the flourishing of God’s \textit{shalom} have always been part of God’s prophetic Word.”\textsuperscript{81} Churches need to re-read Scripture and examine ways to experience God’s \textit{shalom} for girls and women.\textsuperscript{82} Since the Old Testament, girls and women have played a part in God’s prophetic Word (Book of Ruth; Book of Esther; Exodus 1:15). Unfortunately, some churches and their leaders have ignored these passages. This has resulted in broad ignorance of the female story within God’s story for years and has silenced the feminine voice, which has created different expectations. Due to these altered expectations, parents cannot just look at passing on the faith in one manner but must consider it deeply as the journey for adolescent girls is distinct from that of adolescent boys.

Christian identity is a complex concept, as God created male and female in his image (Genesis 1:27). However, when it comes to understanding that image, society changes the understanding of the concept. Some in society have a different view of what

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 69.


\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
it means to be created in the image of God. According to Mercer, “God is at work to renew and restore all of creation to God’s vision of love and justice. That vision includes the lives of girls and women.”83 If a church struggles to see how both male and female qualities can be in the image of God, then it creates a distorted view of gender equality.

Daughters want their fathers to help them discover their identity as an adolescent girl on her way to becoming a woman, according to Daughters and Dads.84 “As she strives to answer the question, ‘Who am I?’ your daughter must continually be reminded that at the core of her being she is God’s special child, dearly loved and created for a unique purpose.”85 Parents need to remind their daughters that they are beautiful and special, as the contemporary song says, “[God] makes beautiful things out of dust. You make beautiful things out of us.”86 Parents must help their adolescent daughter discover that unique, beautiful identity that she has as a child of God.

**Christian Parenting in Regard to Faith Development**

These same parenting methods and practices that are used for teaching life skills and passing on the faith need to be used when helping adolescents develop their spiritual walk with God. There are teachable faith moments in everyday life. Parents need to seize these “God” moments to help raise their adolescents in a suitable way.87 Unfortunately, many of these opportunities are missed and not utilized. Parents must seize these moments

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84 Clark and D. Clark, *Daughters and Dads*, 82.

85 Ibid., 85.


and help adolescents explore and receive God’s grace and mercy. Parents need to examine the key circumstances of life and unpack them with their early adolescents. Taking the time to openly discuss God and the wonder and awe and power of God can occur, if parents allow it to happen. Often, parents and families of origin begin the process of teaching the faith to the younger generation but do not continue the practice as teens start to grapple with their journey into adulthood.

When it comes to Christian parenting, some in society may think this is a new concept. Secular society does not consider that parenting from a religious context has been happening since the beginning of time. According to psychologist Foster Cline and Jim Fay, “Parents have this much in common with God: We can give our children considerable freedom, just as God gave it to all humans—his supreme creation. This means freedom to goof up as well as get it right.” The expectations of parents are extremely high, yet the church should make them more realistic about what is possible to do in parenting. Parents need to remember the freedom they have received from God.

When it comes to parenting adolescents, adults sometimes think they have enough skirmishes on their hands that they do not even consider addressing faith with adolescents. However, despite the vicissitudes of living with tweens and teens, faith can be addressed openly in the midst of daily life. Faith does not have to be a conflict. Early adolescents are not breaking away from their parent’s faith. Individuals long for and

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89 Cline and Fay, Parenting Teens with Love and Logic, 60.
have “an urge of the soul to turn to God.” Early adolescents have a desire to be in relationship with God. There is no need for a battle to occur over a topic that an adolescent naturally desires, when it is a normal yearning to be in relationship with the Almighty. How adolescents describe that relationship may be different from how their parents describe that relationship. It is significant for adolescent girls to be able to define religion in their own terms.

For adolescent girls to have a faith that is real and one they can rely on, they need to own it. Churches would not expect an adult to take the faith of another adult and just accept it without personalizing it. Likewise, for adolescent girls there is an integrity that comes with describing their faith and relationship with God and the Body of Christ in their own terms. When it comes to faith, adolescent girls do not just passively accept what they are told. They wrestle with topics and, in the process of struggling, can figure out their place in the world. This wrestling likely will include their faith tradition, their connection to family, and how to live out that faith in an authentic manner.

For this reason, parents need to practice their faith authentically. While many may perceive that there is little correlation between adolescents’ faith and their parents’ faith, there is a connection. If parents are open to conveying their faith, it is possible to pass the faith on to the next generation. John Ellis Steen cautions, “Christian parents who do not understand or acknowledge their biblical role tend to ‘go with the flow’ by thinking that their child’s discipleship will be fully facilitated at church through organized ministries.

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93 Ibid., 8.
devoted to their ages.”94 Mercer says that for the adolescent girl her home and family are
the center for her struggles and feelings of inadequacy, which cause her to wrestle with her
faith.95 If this is true, then the home should be a place where adolescent girls can explore
and make decisions about the direction of their spirituality. Parents need to remember that
there will be times in their parenting when they are getting it right and times when it
seems like a constant struggle. This does not mean that their adolescent daughter is not
watching and learning. If adolescents see their parents practicing, they can learn the habits
of prayer, reading the Bible, wrestling with God’s Word in their daily life, and practicing
spiritual disciplines and see the importance. According to Cline and Fay, “Generally faith-
filled parents have children who will model after them and become faithful. Overtly
religious but controlling parents tend to have the most trouble with children who refuse to
go to church.”96 The difficulty is that many parents demand that their adolescent attend
church but do not show or demonstrate a faith at any other time. Parents need to
demonstrate a faith that is lived out more than just on Sunday mornings. Parents cannot
delegate to the church their responsibility of teaching the faith.97 The church is a
wonderful support system. In sports, there is a head coach and many assistant coaches.
Similarly, in the Body of Christ, the parent is the head coach of teens and the church is
one of the assistant coaches ready to support and encourage both head coach and player.

Collection of Ideas for Your Church, eds. Timothy Paul Jones and John David Trentham (Nashville:
Randall House, 2015), 40-41.

95 Mercer, Girltalk Godtalk, 42.

96 Cline and Fay, Parenting Teens with Love and Logic, 193.

Faith must be practiced and lived out. It is not something that merely occupies the mind. One cannot just think about faith in order to be a disciple of Christ; rather, one must act and embrace the Word of God as a lifestyle.\(^98\) A key way that disciples engage with God is through the Lord’s Supper. Its importance may be missed by the outside observer, but a Christian with deep faith does not view the Lord’s Supper as just a meal. Remembering Christ (Luke 22:7-20) connects the salvific act to their understanding of grace, redemption, forgiveness, and experiencing the Kingdom of heaven.

Another way authentic faith is lived vibrantly happens through prayer. For this reason, a strong prayer life must be part of a parent’s faith walk. Prayer is a solid habit for Christian parents to pass on and develop with their children. Prayer allows Christ-followers to be in conversation with God about what is on their heart. With respect to the female adolescent, prayer can be a resource for learning to deal with strong emotions, situations that concern her, and serve as a way to come before God and look for advice. Daughters learn to pray by seeing their parents pray for them, especially during times of need.

Parents need to pray regularly for their adolescent. Prayer does not change the adolescent into the perfect child, but it allows “you as a parent to align yourself with God and his plan.”\(^99\) This does not mean that life will be easy. However, by being in conversation regularly with God, parents can rely on God’s strength to help them in the difficult times. God loves the adolescent and the parent and can provide the tools and wisdom necessary for the task of parenting. As adolescent girls see their mother and father

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engage in a prayerful lifestyle, parents demonstrate and teach them how to turn their backs on fear and address their daily concerns through regular petition and supplication to God with thanksgiving, which ultimately can lead to joy (Philippians 4:3-5). Foster says, “To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us.”  

100 He advocates prayer as an essential discipline for all Christians to practice, because God often uses it to shape his people (Matthew 5:44; 6:5-15).

Living authentic faith, engaging in the spiritual discipline of prayer, and participating in congregational life, such as through the Lord’s Supper, parents can raise their adolescent daughters in an environment that will encourage them on their faith journey. They can begin to discover their own role within the Body of Christ. Mercer writes:

One way to support the religious lives of girls, then, is to participate with them in faith communities where women and men hold leadership roles of various kinds, where girls see themselves in stories and models of faithful living, where adults and youth engage in critical reflection on the use of sacred texts and religious authority with respect to gender norms, and where there is support for girls to try on roles “outside the box” of socially proscribed gender identity.  

101 If parents put their daughters in places that do not encourage their faith journey, these young women will not thrive. Tween and teen girls need a place where they feel safe to explore, express their faith, and confidently mature into a healthy faithful woman who mentors others on their faith journey. A duty of both fathers and mothers is to maintain “a family environment where love, mercy and kindness are the rule without closing our eyes

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100 Foster, Celebration of Discipline, 33.

101 Mercer, Girltalk Godtalk, 72.
to the plight of the world." Such an environment allows girls to grow and flourish while trying to navigate the complexity of adolescence.

Passing the faith to the next generation and developing a strong walk with God is not done in isolation. Parents cannot compartmentalize their faith and the sharing of it from the teaching of basic life skills in today’s society. Parents need to include God in the real world, so their adolescent does not miss God’s presence. Parents must live their faith with conviction and firmly embrace their Christian beliefs, so it will be easier for their adolescent children to respond with a sincere faith. However, many parents are not convinced about their faith and so do not display or express it in the home. When this happens, they cannot expect their early adolescent to develop a strong faith in Christ.

For this reason, parents should ask themselves, “Do we practice the kind of faith we want our children to have?” This is where the church needs to provide support. The local Body of Christ can equip parents to pass on their faith and help them express their faith in such a manner that their tweens and teens will be curious and desire to have that same experience. While later in adolescence they may want to rebel, if parents plant the seeds, an adolescent eventually may come back to God and embrace faith. A strong relationship with parents can provide a solid place of love and acceptance during this time of wrestling and decision-making.

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102 Clark and D. Clark, Daughters and Dads, 21.
103 Matlock, Real World Parents, 41.
104 Dean, Almost Christian, 39.
105 Ibid.
Mercer stresses this importance. She writes: “For the girls as a group, religious life had more to do with relationships than with rules. Their desire for connection and communion with God trumped moralistic notions of God.” While churches may focus on the rules of living a faithful life, adolescent girls need to feel the connection to God and the Body of Christ. This is often why adolescent girls are less concerned with the rules and the Ten Commandments than in feeling a part of the family of God and being connected to God. This is one reason why parents and churches should encourage adolescent girls to be a part of a group of girls growing in their faith.

Adolescent girls want to be a partner in the faith process. They do not want to be told what to think and believe but instead yearn to learn and journey together with adults and peers in their life. This means that adults should not tell them what to believe but rather invite them on a journey of faith. As the adolescent girl is on her journey, it is important to be present and a part of the exploration but also allow opportunity and time for the adolescent girl to lead the search. The point of view that adolescent girls have will be different from the parents. If parents are open to being shown a new way by their daughter, this can encourage mutual exploration and transformation. Christians do not live in a world where faith only can be taught by parents to a child but one in which the adolescent also can teach the parent. Many parents grew up with a view of God in a


vertical world that has a hierarchy. The challenge for parents is for adolescents to view the world not as a hierarchy but with more equality, as a horizontal view. Parents who remain open to walking the horizontal view will be able to accompany their daughter on the journey. Both parents and daughter then will grow on their faith journey.\textsuperscript{109}

This is important because faith is a continual journey. Parents need to model the idea of continually learning and growing. People cannot expect to learn faith only on Sunday morning. Christ-followers have to be open to seeing the “God” moments in everyday life and from different sources. Sometimes they come in strange ways, but parents need to teach and share with their adolescent how to anticipate revelation and experience God in all areas of life.\textsuperscript{110}

Ultimately, faith is a story. Stories offer the adolescent an opportunity to participate. When the participation takes place, experiences, and emotions can be shared.\textsuperscript{111} Scripture is a story that invites all to join in the telling of God’s story, which becomes the story of those who follow him. In telling the story, people can see the connections with their own life and witness the movement of God. The more parents tell and hear God’s story, the more they reveal that Christians do walk alone. Each female adolescent has a unique story and in a distinct time and place. By inviting her to participate in the story of faith, she will be able to see her relationship with God and the

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 88.
Body of Christ.\footnote{Ibid., 128.} There is no one truth that will be told to all adolescents. Instead, as each tween or teen puts herself in the story, she will see where she fits.

The telling of the story is more than just sharing Scripture. Adolescent girls need to be given the time and opportunity to tell their personal story.\footnote{Mercer and Baker, “Girls and God When Everything’s Changing,” 131.} In the process of telling their own journey, they will open themselves and their environment to form a connection to God’s story. It is out of their own experiences that they will see God’s presence in their life and not just on the pages of the Bible. Additionally, telling their personal story allows people to articulate what they need and want.\footnote{Ibid., 132.} It allows them to put voice to their soul and its deepest yearnings. By telling the story, they are able to put into words their relationship with God. Adolescent girls need help figuring out the experiences in their life that are impacting their understanding and relationship with God. Since each reality and relationship is different, adults need to take the time to listen and ask about the events in an adolescent girl’s life that have shaped who she is today. Especially in the hurt and tragic moments, girls long to have their story heard and see the presence of God.\footnote{Ibid., 133.} They need to know and experience that it is okay to approach God with their brokenness. It is in the midst of their brokenness, they can find and experience the Divine.

One spiritual discipline that parents need to practice on a regular basis with adolescent girls is holy listening.\footnote{Mercer, Girltalk Godtalk, 10.} In contemplative prayer, one creates a space to
encounter God. This is a time to intentionally seek God’s presence in one’s life. There are opportunities for holy listening with adolescent girls that can open up around life events, such as a win or loss at a sports event, struggling for grades in school, or even about relationships with other adolescents.\textsuperscript{117} Parents need to set aside what they are doing and take key moments to listen. The process of listening is vital, as it allows tweens and teens a safe place to wrestle with life and faith. It is not a time to correct, although there are moments for that as well. Holy listening is a time to care for the spirit of adolescent girls by hearing what is on their heart. Just as God wants to hear our prayer (Philippians 4:6-7), parents must take the time to hear from their daughters. This is the responsibility of both the mother and father. This gift of listening is given to both men and women, although culture has not encouraged men to listen, especially to their adolescent daughters.\textsuperscript{118} Fathers and mothers need to listen to their daughters, as this helps them develop healthy communication skills that become necessary as an adult. The challenge for the parents is to discover what type of communication works best for conveying information.

Another spiritual discipline that needs to be practiced and taught is prayer. This is one manner in which adolescent girls can explore their relationships with God. In the 1970s Judy Blume explored this concept in \textit{Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret}.\textsuperscript{119} The book was very popular and is the story of how a teenager named Margaret tells God what is happening in her life. She continually asks God where God is. There is a yearning to bond and relate to a God that she cannot see or touch. However, as Mercer points out,

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\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{118} Clark and D. Clark, \textit{Daughters and Dads}, 72.
\textsuperscript{119} Judy Blume, \textit{Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret} (New York: Laurel Leaf, 1991).
\end{flushright}
prayer is more than just listening to God, chatting about life events, and wondering about where God is in the midst of it. It is a powerful and significant way to relate and link with God. Due to its relational nature and immediate availability, adolescent girls value the experience of prayer. Adolescent girls hunger to connect, and prayer unites them to God. It offers more than just a connection, as there is a transformational potential that can keep them engaged in the practice. For parents, prayer can encourage dialogue with daughters.

As a part of their development, daughters need to know they are loved. Parents need to take the time to bless their daughters. This means they speak to their daughter with words of gratitude but also about their hope for the future. In the Old Testament (Numbers 6:24-26; Genesis 12:1-3; 35:9), a blessing was important as it connected their spirituality and faith with their hopes and dreams. Blessings are a gift. When parents take the time to bless their adolescent daughters, they are giving them “a lifelong gift of emotional, relational, familial and spiritual rootedness.” This gift of blessing helps to foster an atmosphere where she is shaped by the love and blessing her parents have given her. Adolescent daughters need to feel the love that encourages them. By knowing and receiving the blessing, they are more likely to experience an attachment to their parents. Everyone needs to hear good words and nice things about themselves, but adolescent girls are experiencing a myriad of transition and need that reassurance as they continue to figure out their identity and place in the world.

*Daughters and Dads* offer this advice: “Tell your daughter that she is loved—tell her every day. Remind her that God has made her beautiful, wonderful and gifted. She is a


121 Clark and D. Clark, *Daughters and Dads*, 79.
masterpiece of the living God, and you get to be the messenger of that wild, wonderful truth!” This gift from her parents will have a lasting impression on an adolescent daughter. She needs to hear the affirmation and blessing from her parents, as a part of their daily refrain. Adolescent daughters will hear much negativity from the world but receiving blessings and love from parents can counteract these attacks on their identity and self-esteem, particularly because they may not receive such affirmation from anywhere else.

It is essential for the Christian community to help adolescent girls know their true worth and identity. Christians were not created to be in isolation practicing their faith but in community, supporting and encouraging one another (1 Corinthians 3:9; Acts 4:32-38). It is the responsibility of the church to be in community, so believers can build one another up on the faith journey. If parents and churches are not careful, the world will shape their adolescent daughters into a different view of themselves. They will not see the image of God in themselves but rather the harshness that society often shares. Adults in the Body of Christ can remind adolescent girls continually that they are blessed and made in the image of God. In order to have the peace that God wants for his people (Philippians 4:7), churches must remain vigilant to protect adolescent girls from hostility and help them reclaim their identity as children of God created in God’s image.

Parents can invite and encourage women and men of faith to walk the journey of faith with their adolescent. Despite parents’ best intentions, there will be times when they are not able to reach or respond to their adolescent daughter. By surrounding them with other adults of faith, they provide a network to help them wrestle with the hard questions,

122 Ibid., 93.

to see these faithful adults as role models on the faith journey and more.\textsuperscript{124} The journey to adulthood is not one that the adolescent girl can do on her own or just with her parents. Community is important. For adolescent girls, it is vital to have adults and other adolescents in relationship. Community as a key element in practicing faith has been present since the beginnings of the Church (Acts 2:43-47).

The community for the adolescent is more than just being involved with her peers. It is important for the various generations to gather together in order to bridge the gap between them. "Bringing the generations to sit shoulder-to-shoulder or look eye-to-eye was more important for long-term faith than any other youth group activity."\textsuperscript{125} The diversity of having a variety of adults from different generations is important to the adolescent’s faith development. Fuller Youth Institute discovered that there needs to be a diversity of adults and at least five adults who are invested in an adolescent.\textsuperscript{126} This is because young people need deep care and a solid support structure to grow, particularly during moments when they stumble. This involves a Christ-centered support system that fosters nurture and growth, which also buttresses during times of trials and failures. This support system can encourage her to grow in her faith and to discover who God created her to be as an individual. How people are uniquely created and have their own purpose given to them by God is explored further in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{124} Mercer, \textit{Girltalk Godtalk}, 44.

\textsuperscript{125} Powell, \textit{The Sticky Faith Guide for Your Family}, 96.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 98.
This chapter explores Christian identity. God created male and female in his image (Genesis 1:27; 5:2). Scripture sets this forth as a core biblical truth of gender and identity. However, how this concept is understood is actually different for males and females.

Churches for years have discounted the faithfulness of women in living out their Christian identity. Despite the faithfulness women have demonstrated over the centuries, they “have generally not been accorded significance, their stories have not been recorded, their struggles and conflicts have not been noted, their gifts and ministries have not been accorded public recognition in the literature, traditions and practices of the churches.”¹ When these stories are not passed down from one generation to the next, it is as if female adolescents and other women never mattered or exerted any important influence. It is as if the world is saying to women that their stories of faithfulness and faith development are not important to the Church. Even when the Church discusses the faith development of women in Scripture, it often is reduced to be qualified as “feminist theology” or “womanist

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¹ Slee, Women’s Faith Development, 2.
rather than just theology, which implies that the male perspective is considered the normative of society. For this reason, a fuller biblical understanding is necessary.

**Biblical Understanding of Humanity**

In examining and attempting to determine whether someone is expressing a faith in accordance with biblical teaching, the examiner must go beyond the individual’s development. It is necessary to explore development in light of the church’s understanding about God and the relationship with humanity. James R. Estep writes: “If we are to fully understand Christian formation—and, in particular, from a developmental perspective as it relates to lifespan, it will require the integration of both what God has revealed through His creation and His Word as well as our willingness and ability to engage both as we develop a complete portrait of formation in Christ.” Too often society tries to compartmentalize the individual, and this is especially true of adolescents. It is important to examine the entire person and look critically at how human beings have been created by God and for what purpose.

While theories regarding human development contribute key thoughts and provide understanding regarding the human condition, those who follow Christ cannot forget to balance these theories with Scripture. Ultimately, Scripture answers the question of “Who am I?” that is explored as individuals try to figure out their identity. Klaus Issler writes: “If we take seriously that Jesus was born and moved through the same stages of human development,”

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3 Estep, “Developmental Theories,” 47.
development as all human persons, then the truths taught by the Father (John 12:49-50) passed through Jesus’ own formation journey.”

Genesis 1:27 states, “God created humanity in God’s own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them” (CEB). This is the *imago Dei*, a concept that says all human beings are marked by the Maker. While all have been created in God’s image, each is created differently (Psalm 119:73-74; Jeremiah 1:4-5). Celebrating such differences can yield a fuller understanding of God and his different aspects. Having an understanding of *imago Dei* requires recognizing the value and worth in all humanity. This means that each person has characteristics of God—including rational, moral, and spiritual characteristics.

If all people are made in the image of God, and they are all bearers of God’s mark, then it is a worthy endeavor to develop a relationship with everyone that is consistent with one’s relationship with God. By taking the time to see the image of God in another person, one can develop a better understanding of God. Acknowledging that each person is created in God’s image transforms one’s understanding of others. In viewing other people through the lens of being created in God’s image, one sees their value as a person and an individual is not discarded or treated as inferior.

If Christians truly live according to the truth of Genesis 1:27, that all are made in the image of God, then it is vital to abide in the understanding that all have the capacity to...

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4 Issler, *Living into the Life of Jesus*, 60.


experience and relate to the Divine. Interaction with God is not dependent upon being mature adults. Interaction with the divine can begin early in life. At the onset of interacting with God, it becomes possible to start understanding God. God’s image can be reflected toward all people. God’s image in human beings gives them the ability to reflect spiritual wholeness to one another. In light of their uniqueness, people will reflect God’s image differently. Given their distinctiveness, how males and females understand their image of God in themselves will differ. God’s image in each person will produce a different understanding of God and a different relationship with God. Each understanding and relationship needs to be valued for what it is. This means that how females relate to God is just as valuable and instructive as how males view and relate to God. For this reason, the Church and its theologians cannot look at female relationship with God as being unimportant.

Paul supports the core of this concept when he discusses people and their various gifts. He challenges the reader of the letter to the church at Ephesus to comprehend that each person has a spiritual gift that is needed for the church. Spiritual gifts are given by God for the benefit of the community of believers. “God has given his grace to each one of us measured out by the gift that is given by Christ” (Ephesians 4:7 CEB). Each gift that is shared with the Church, the Body of Christ, is to be valued. No one gift is more valuable than another gift. Karen Choi references this same core concept and Scripture but with respect to distinct ages. She writes: “As Ephesians 4:7-16 reveals, Christ has given each believer, which includes adolescents, spiritual gift(s) to use to serve others for

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7 Ibid., 20.

the growth of the body, the church.” Believers are not divided by age or gender; instead they are identified by the gifts that they bring. The various gifts allow people to demonstrate their faith, and using those gifts allows people to grow and deepen their faith. Employing the gifts given by God allows one to feel a solid connection to the church body and a sense of purpose. “It is not, then, for men to teach and women to listen, or for men to prophesy and women to take it in, or for men to found churches and for women to pray for the church-planting husbands. Men and women share gifts and calling.” All gifts are needed for the benefit of the community and for “building up the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12 CEB).

If the Body of Christ is to flourish, the local congregation needs to communally share the gifts that each believer has. Adolescents bring gifts that are needed in the church, and many have talents with technology that older congregants could use in order to reach out to the community. An adolescent can design a website or run a computer for a contemporary service. There often is a sense of creativity with adolescents when they know that they are important for a church. When it comes to church ministry, a frequent justification from adults is this: “We’ve always done it this way.” However, this is not the case with adolescents. They have not always done something one way and therefore do not mind trying a new method. According to Paul, all gifts of the Spirit need to be shared in the community of believers (1 Corinthians 12:7; Romans 12:4-6). For the church to flourish, Christians need to read and interpret “the Bible with tradition instead of through

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tradition.”11 By including the gifts of women in the life of the congregation, the church can expand its ministry.

What Paul intended and what actually happened in the early Church may be two different concepts. In his letters to the church at Colossae and Galatia, Paul said there is no distinction between male and female (Colossians 3:9-11; Galatians 3:28). The labels and divisions were to be removed from the members of the house church, and any tension would be gone. “If Jesus is Messiah and Lord of all, then all are invited to the table. And if all are invited to the table, then everyone has a place to sit.”12 Paul is telling the early house churches that they should be together in conversation, share their life at the table, and accept one another in spite of what the world tells them to do. He said this in light of the reality that both the Roman world and the Jewish world believed in and lived with hierarchies.13 “Jesus was not once criticized for any of his relations with women and neither was the presence of women in the earliest churches seen as an outrage.”14 Women were fully present and involved in the life of the early Church.

Reformed Christians claim to believe in the priesthood of all believers.15 The Old Testament offers several images on the importance of individuals with “chosen people,” “priests of the Lord,” and “holy nation” (Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 14:2; Isaiah 61:6). This imagery of a special identity is carried over to the New Testament:

11 Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 154.

12 McKnight, “I Am Church,” 218.

13 Ibid., 219.

14 Ibid., 226.

Now you are coming to him as to a living stone. Even though this stone was rejected by humans, from God’s perspective it is chosen, valuable. You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-5 CEB)

Peter reminds readers that they have been chosen by God and no longer have their own identity; rather, they have God’s identity. Peter’s words establish the notion that all members of the Body of Christ comprise “a holy priesthood” and can come boldly before the throne of grace (1 Peter 2:9).

This notion that all Christians have the right to go directly to God through Jesus Christ is an important principle in the Reformed faith. As priests, all members of the house can connect with God directly (Hebrews 5:1). Peter’s words are in the present tense and are not a future event. This means that the individual in the moment is part of the royal priesthood being built up for God’s work. It is a present moment that requires involvement in the community of believers.\textsuperscript{16} There is no hierarchy of believers; rather, all are one.\textsuperscript{17} Paul desired to fashion a community composed of everyone.\textsuperscript{18} All members of the community need to allow themselves to build up God’s house. This is not the responsibility of someone in the future; each member is to help in the building in this moment of time. Adolescents are living stones that need to build up God’s house. They enrich church life by bringing an excitement for the faith. They are not confined to the blueprints of previous temples. Adolescents may be less constrained and can remind all people to risk for God. This is Jesus’ intention when he discipled the twelve.

\textsuperscript{16} Pheme Perkins, \textit{First and Second Peter, James and Jude: Interpretation}, A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 43-44.

\textsuperscript{17} McKnight, “I Am Church,” 219.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 218.
In Scripture, Jesus calls the disciples and instructs them how to fish (Luke 5:1-11). After fishing all night, these trained fishermen did not ignore the advice and counsel of Jesus. Instead of being confined to how they have practiced their fishing in the past, they were able to follow Jesus’ directions and they were astonished at how much they caught. At times members need to be reminded to risk for the Gospel, which can happen when the church sees all participants as valuable and chosen by God for a purpose.

Reformer John Calvin did not distinguish between clergy and lay leadership but instead interpreted Scripture to show a value in both offices of leadership. Clergy and lay leaders are peers and equals in church leadership that is shared. Both laity and leaders need to value the connection of all believers to God. God does not just commission and challenge clergy with a responsibility to foster the faith of people. God challenges and commissions all believers to connect with God and fulfill their calling (2 Thessalonians 1:11; Romans 12:2). The Spirit does not limit the call. The Spirit gives “to women the freedom to discern what God has called them to do.” This calling does not magically appear at a certain date or age but rather is there from the beginning of time (Isaiah 49:1; Galatians 1:15). No one’s relationship or connection with God is more worthy (Romans 8:14). Believing all relationships to God as worthy, churches cannot think that adolescents have a lesser role in understanding and relating to God. How they understand and relate to God is just as important as adult members of the Body of Christ. Adolescents can and should impact the faith of adults.

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19 Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.19.25.
20 McKnight, The Blue Parakeet, 161.
21 Dean and Foster, The Godbearing Life, 12.
Scripture provides many examples of how one is to live a life of faith, including stories featuring the young. The boy Samuel was serving the Lord by assisting Eli. One night Eli had gone to bed when Samuel heard a voice call out his name. Eli told Samuel it was the Lord speaking to him. “So Samuel grew up, and the Lord was with him, not allowing any of his words to fail” (1 Samuel 3:19 CEB). Men were not listening to God in those days, and God did not speak very often. This silence is often a form of divine judgment, yet God spoke to Samuel.

The first two times Samuel is called by God, the young lad assumes he is hearing the voice of Eli, his master. It makes sense, especially if Eli sometimes called to Samuel for assistance during the night. It is not until the third “call” that Eli finally grasps the situation and realizes that God is calling Samuel to reveal his Word to the boy. Following Eli’s instructions, Samuel responds to God when the Lord once again calls. God announces to Samuel what he is about to do. The prophecy given to Eli through Samuel seems to speak of the defeat of Israel and the death of Eli’s sons as an imminent event.

These words were not to be taken lightly. This important message was entrusted to Samuel, barely a tween, who is “defined repeatedly (and so far exclusively) as dealing (ministering to/before) God. This is what interests us. This counts as news.” God did not look at Samuel’s age and decide that he was too young to participate in ministry. In 1 Samuel 2:11, 2:18, and 3:1, Samuel is described as serving the Lord. His age was not relevant to his ability to serve before God. According to Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, “The young innocent one is now authorized; the old knowing one has

become fully dependent upon Samuel. Yahweh does indeed ‘raise up and bring down.’”[^23]

No longer was the older, wiser man the only one sanctioned to distribute God’s words. God looked at Samuel’s heart when God shared the message about Eli’s family and ministry. Samuel, despite his youth, was the one God assigned with a substantial message. However, Samuel, as he matures, does not always follow God’s leading. “When Samuel resists he hears the voice of God directing him to a future that will be better. That future will include David the shepherd boy.”[^24]

The Gospel of Mark provides another wonderful illustration about faith development. In the parable of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30-32), Jesus tells the disciples about the Kingdom of God. Over the years, there have been different interpretations of this story. The seed is described as “the smallest of all the seeds on the earth; but when it’s planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all vegetable plants” (Marks 4:31b-32a CEB). The plant becomes a place where birds will nest and take shelter. From the small seed, the plant grows into something very large. Our faith too will start small and grow, if we tend the faith.[^25]

Christians should not be discouraged on their faith journey, nor should churches be discouraged with the faith journey of adolescents. The faith of adolescents begins small and needs to be nourished; and while it may seem invisible or difficult to see, the church needs to interact with adolescents in order to help them


cultivate the seeds of faith in their life. It is important to understand that “God will accomplish great results from small beginnings.”

The story provides hope that God can achieve great things even when human beings are not able to see the work. Believers are reminded that sometimes very large things have “small beginnings.” Churches do not need to be discouraged as they plant the seeds of faith. The root structure of what is planted remains unseen, so one may not see how deep the roots reach. The church needs to work at tending the plant and encourage its root structure. While it may not always be evident, God can and does use each individual to do great things. The mustard seed is a perennial plant and will continue to blossom and bloom. Perennials die back to the ground and sprout new growth in the spring and bloom again. For that to happen, the seed needs to be cultivated continually. Similarly, Christians must have their faith cultivated continually. Believers cultivate their faith by being in relationship with other Christians. “Significant relationships with other Christians matter because they teach us something about what God is like.”

Sometimes it is difficult to perceive the evidence of faith growing—especially in the young. When seeing nothing above ground, and fearing that no growth is happening, some may choose to abandon the plant in its most tender state rather than continue to fertilize and tend the seed. It is the same with adolescents. While young children may freely respond to questions about faith with cute answers, adolescents do not necessarily respond to questions in the same manner. Early adolescents may even be silent on issues


27 Ibid., 99.

of faith, which can lead people to think that they do not care. In reality, they just need to have their faith tended to or be allowed to process silently what may be very much and profound issues of faith and Christian identity. It is because of God’s grace that individuals are called to bear witness to God in the lives of the church community and especially the adolescents as they develop their faith.²⁹

The world began with chaos. God brought order to that chaos, created everything, and called it good (Genesis 1:1-31). God contains the chaos through the swaddling bands.³⁰ If Christians truly believe that God created everything, then they cannot just rely on social science to explore how people develop. There must be a consideration for the Word of God as they try to figure out how people of faith develop their identity as disciples of Christ. Scripture says that faith develops over time organically through a process (Luke 2:39-40; 2 Peter 3:18). The roots hold the mustard bush in place, but over time the mustard bush grows visibly from the seed (Matthew 13:31-32; Colossians 2:6-7). When personal relationship with God interacts with Scripture, human beings can develop a deeper understanding of God’s identity. In understanding God’s identity, people can come to know more about their own identity in relation to others and the world—and most importantly, with God.

**Biblical Understanding of Females**

Reading and interpreting Scripture can be perplexing for women. While Scripture can be redemptive and liberating, some passages prove challenging to comprehend. “The

²⁹ Ibid., 51.

Bible is a profoundly liberating document, but there is no denying that it also contains deeply problematic texts—indeed, ‘texts of terror’ that have adversely impacted the lives of women, slaves, Jews, Palestinians, Native Americans, and gays (to mention but a few).”³¹

There are a number of passages that present difficulties in interpretation for women, as they have been used in the past as a tool for oppression. There has not been one simple answer to how people over the years have interpreted women in Scripture. Scot McKnight writes:

“Perhaps a gentler way of putting this is to suggest that I think traditionalists read the Bible about women in church ministries through tradition instead of reading the Bible with tradition.”³² The Scripture should be the lens through which Christ-followers read and understand rather than using a specific tradition to determine their understanding of women.

Scripture gives a frightening view of women in scriptural times. It offers stories of misogyny, which has been a challenge for many in discovering how to study these passages for women.³³ For example, there is Genesis 21:9-21, the “text of terror” where Hagar sexually experiences being given by Sarah to Abraham and then is rejected for her pregnancy; the violent rape of Tamar, which reveals hatred (2 Samuel 13:1-22); and the torture and dismemberment of an unnamed concubine (Judges 19:1-30), just to name just a few. The Church has not been sure about how best to share these passages of sexism and abuse. Some try to discount passages that make them uncomfortable,³⁴ while others critique


³² McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet*, 146-147.


³⁴ Ibid.
the patriarchy. However, a third approach integrates the two concepts. “It recounts tales of terror in memoriam to offer sympathetic readings of abused women.” While biblical readers cannot ignore the history of victimization of women, their outrage on behalf of women can be an important way to claim the female voice. When the outrage on behalf of women is ignored or silenced, Christ-followers are missing part of what God seeks to communicate. Women are created as image-bearers of God and when that voice of experience is silenced, the Body of Christ and even society lose part of the image of God and the issues that concern God. Women have wisdom, insight, and perspectives to offer the Church. There are insights in Scripture that females can relate to differently from males, which may open a new perspective on understanding God.

Although women are included in Scripture, they are often overlooked. Throughout the stories in Scripture, the highlights are of men and their accomplishments. “The Bible was written by men, and the Bible tells stories from the angle of men.” The males have controlled the manner in which God’s story has been told and have passed on the patriarchal view. Too often, the women have not been considered or remembered. “Women constitute the ‘passive,’ ‘hearing’ sector of the community, thoroughly subordinate to male authority and discourse.” Unfortunately, many women in Scripture are unnamed, and their stories are left out of the pulpit. Cheryl Anne Brown writes: “Despite considerable interest in women in the Bible, in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, not many

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 McKnight, The Blue Parakeet, 156-157.
scholars have expressed interest in the portrayal of women in the literature that developed during the post-biblical period, particularly during the years of formative Judaism and Christianity.”

This has led to a need in the recent past to share the story of women in Scripture. “Remembering these often-unnamed women has been an important task to scholars who have helped pave a way for women over the last fifty years to claim roles of leadership in contemporary faith communities.”

While there are examples of women throughout Scripture, the church needs to help claim those examples and share them with the congregation, especially with women and adolescent girls. “It is not possible to know all that women did in the Pauline churches.”

While contemporary biblical readers are unsure of many specifics, “the true story is the rather unnoticed presence of women in the ministry of Jesus and in the earliest churches.” For this reason, it is important to understand the role women occupied in the leadership of the faith community.

For example, Rahab helped the people of Israel at a defining moment in their history. She was an unlikely heroine. In the Old Testament, the prostitute Rahab assisted the spies Moses sent into the land (Joshua 2:1-24; 6:22-27). The story includes many sexual references. The manner in which the story is told is tantalizing and tempting. She

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41 McKnight, “I Am Church,” 225.

42 Ibid., 226.

is portrayed as a seductress, yet there is more to the story of Rahab than her sexuality. She is a woman who is capable enough to hide the spies when they have been detected and then shrewd enough to demand her and her family’s freedom from the spies. “Also noteworthy is the deftness with which Rahab handles the government’s men and her ability to strike such a favorable bargain with the Israelite spies.”

She was an outsider to the people of Israel who had an important impact on their lives, yet she is not given respect. The focus often tends to be on prostitution and her sexuality, rather than her heroism. “In light of her impressive confession of faith, it is not unwarranted to say that she has become, if not a quintessential Israelite, at least an exemplary one.” It is also important to note that Rahab is listed in Matthew’s genealogy for Jesus (Matthew 1:5). “Surprisingly, five women are included in his record—surprising since women would not ordinarily have been included and all the more since the intrusion of these names into the genealogy rehearses aspects of Israel’s past that some might think should best be forgotten.” The majority of the genealogy that Matthew lists are men, but Rahab is mentioned. This shows the significance of her part in telling the story of Jesus. Women in churches need to know the significant role of Rahab’s leadership in saving the people. Without her, the spies would have been captured and the Israelites would not have been able to take the land promised by God. This was a key part of the Old Testament

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44 Ibid., 56.
45 Ibid., 57.
46 Ibid., 58.
47 Ibid., 63.
journey to the Promised Land. Rahab is mentioned in Matthew’s genealogy for her significant contribution. While she may have been a mere female and a cultural outsider, those who walked with Jesus think she is important enough to mention in his lineage.

Women are important to Jesus in the New Testament. He selects a woman from Samaria with whom to share his good news as Messiah and allows her to be the one who proclaims this biblical-theological truth, to both men and women, in her village. According to John’s Gospel, Jesus already has performed a miracle. After interaction with the Pharisees, Jesus is headed back to familiar territory. He travels through Samaria where he meets an unnamed woman at the well (John 4:1-42). This woman approaches the holy ground of Jacob’s well and has a conversation with Jesus. It was not typical to have a conversation with a woman, as there were risks of impurity and gossip. Women who were not accompanied by a man did not have conversations with other men. This was a gender issue and against the societal norm. In addition to the fact that a good Jewish man would not interact with a Samaritan, a man would not dialogue in such a way with a woman about theological issues.

It is important to note that the woman simply is identified by her town and not by her name. “When the woman gets to the well, we are prodded to keep in mind her status as a Samaritan. She is not merely a ‘certain’ random woman, but a woman ‘of Samaria.’”

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53 Ibid., 146.
Even her own conversation minimizes. “The Samaritan woman said to him, ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’” (John 4:9). The identity of the woman is not in her name but in her heritage, which reveals that an outsider can be a part of the Kingdom of God. This unnamed woman was not discounted by Jesus but instead was one who went on to declare to her community the presence of the Messiah. While she may have been in a difficult situation before meeting Jesus, once she meets him, she goes on to become the first evangelist to the Samaritans. Women today can use her as an example of evangelizing and sharing the presence of God in their midst.

Exploring this interaction with the Samaritan woman is where adolescent female readers can learn more about Jesus’ identity and how much he values women. It is in this passage that readers learn how Jesus is the gift of God or living water (John 4:10). This is done through the concrete lens that water is necessary to sustain all of human life and shows Jesus as essential water that one can draw from the well. Jesus tells her that he is not greater than Jacob, but he can provide something that only he can give her. Frank Anthony Spina says, “By now, the matter of gender, ethnic identity, and religious affiliation have faded into the background.” While her gender may have faded into the background, it is important to notice that she is still an anonymous woman who comes to understand who Jesus is. This unnamed and seemingly unimportant woman at the well identifies him as the Messiah. While an educated man like Nicodemus does not understand

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54 Wright, *John for Everyone Part 1*, 50.


56 Ibid., 148.
what Jesus is saying (John 3:4), here a Samaritan woman is open to claim Jesus’ identity.\(^{57}\)

In essence, she understands the important theology that Jesus presents, whereas a learned and cultured man cannot fathom it. This woman is “an outsider, but she is no fool.”\(^{58}\) While she may be a woman, “she wants to know more” about Jesus and the living water.\(^{59}\)

Not all women in biblical times were considered outsiders. In the early Church, many women were an integral part of the ministry. The first-century Church shared diverse opinions about women. Some emphasized the roles of Mary Magdalene and Priscilla.\(^{60}\) Mary Magdalene was at the cross during the crucifixion, watching and ready to serve as needed. (Matthew 27:55-56). Mary was also one of the women to find the empty tomb who was told to go and tell the disciples the good news (Matthew 28:1-10). Priscilla was a missionary in the early Church and accompanied Paul to Ephesus (Acts 18:2-19). Paul specifically mentions women by name in his writings to the early Church (Romans 16:1-15). According to Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, this “indicates that a number of them were active in Christian mission.”\(^{61}\)

However, Paul’s words also have been used to silence females in the Body of Christ:

I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Timothy 2:12-15)

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\(^{57}\) Ibid., 150.

\(^{58}\) Ibid.

\(^{59}\) Wright, *John for Everyone Part I*, 42.

\(^{60}\) Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament*, 249.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 309.
This text has been difficult for women throughout the life of the Church. “It has frequently been used to silence all women, to exclude them from leadership, to confine them to domestic roles, to legitimate hierarchical relationships.”

Still, this is a part of Scripture and needs to be examined and included. The interesting part of this passage is that women are told not to speak. The concept that women need to be silent infers that women were not silent in biblical times. Frances Taylor Gench looks at it logically, “You don’t command them not to teach unless they are, in fact, teaching.” Paul does not mean that women are prohibited universally from speaking.

Instead Paul is addressing a problem of individuals dominating the worship service. When the reader explores the Greek text, the gender of the word must be explored. “The Greek makes clear that it is men who act as though they alone should be allowed to speak, and it is to them that this rebuke is addressed.” Paul was not trying to silence women in worship. Paul wants members of the church to realize that worship is not about them and no one individual should dominate or interrupt the service. Paul’s words are not a barrier for women to teach or govern; rather, he assumes that women are fully participating in the life of the worshiping community. “Paul knows that women play an important part in the word of the Christian communities,” as they have been a vital part of the faith community in the Old and New Testaments.

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63 Ibid., 5.


65 Ibid., 346.
If women were not allowed to teach or steward the Word of God, there would be no female prophets in the Old Testament; yet there is Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14), and Deborah (Judges 4:4). In particular, Deborah demonstrated qualities that were important for leading and governing. “She is at once a prophetess, a poetess, a great military leader on a par with male military leaders, and even a judge, not simply like others, but a judge to whom Israelites turned for legal counsel and settling of court cases.” Such passages show that women had been speaking out in religious communities for years and had been in leadership positions. As an educated Jew, Paul would have been keenly aware of this.

In order for women to fully embrace their gender and identity in Christ, the Church needs to teach the importance of their broader contribution as presented by God in his story. “The story of the Bible is not only the story of our past, it is the story of our future.” This means embracing where the Spirit is calling all people to hear God’s Word. It means viewing males and females as equals created in the image of God, with each bringing an important part of the story that only can be understood when viewed in its entirety. In The Spirit of the Disciplines, Willard writes: “I believe men and women were designed by God, in the very constitution of their human personalities, to carry out his rule by meshing the relatively little power resident in their own bodies with the power inherent in the infinite Rule or Kingdom of God.” While Scripture at times has been interpreted

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66 Brown, No Longer Be Silent, 39.

67 McKnight, The Blue Parakeet, 212.

to limit the role of women in churches, God created both genders to be an important and visible part of the Kingdom of God.

**Biblical Understanding of Adolescent Girls**

During biblical times, society was patriarchal and adolescent girls were not thought of highly. Achtemeier, Green, and Thompson state, “In a father-oriented society like this one, children, like slaves, were among the weakest, most vulnerable among the population.”

There was a hierarchy within the family structure, and children were just above slaves. The rationale for the hierarchy was based on the perception of who had the most reason and the consideration of women as inferior. Husbands had the “highest kind of reason, women have reason but in less developed form, children having undeveloped reason.” The perception was that females had less reasoning than males and children had less than adults; therefore, female adolescents would have been thought to possess the least amount of reasoning. This perception was reflected in the way that they were treated. They were often overlooked or ignored. This is evident in that there are few passages in Scripture that discuss adolescent girls. However, from God’s broader and infinitely divine perspective, adolescent girls have much to offer.

This is not an in-depth study and reflection on adolescent girls in Scripture. Rather, it is meant to be a brief reflection, in order to highlight to the Church universal the importance of females in Scripture. There is still a variety of research that needs to

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70 Ibid., 288.

71 McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet*, 158.

happen on adolescent females in biblical times, much in the same way Esther Menn highlights in her article on the little servant girl:

As a result, some of the child characters in the Bible are ignored in biblical scholarship and highlighted primarily in children’s Bibles. Perhaps because they are small, child characters are easy to dismiss or to stereotype as simple, innocent, and insignificant. This oversight is dangerous, however, because it mimics a common tendency to discount children as less than fully human and not entirely worthy of respect as bearing the image of God.73

It is important for the biblical reader not to discount female adolescents but to discover that they are able to contribute to God’s story despite their age. Menn goes on to say, “Children emerge as leaders, protagonists, and witnesses in the Bible perhaps not in spite of their youth but because of it.”74

Scripture even provides examples of where young girls are called into leadership. In the New Testament, Peter quotes from the prophet Joel, who gives emphasis to the right to prophecy. “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18). Peter’s reference to the prophet Joel is a reminder of what has happened in the past and foreshadows what will happen in the future.75 The Church needs to be reminded that God thinks highly enough of adolescent girls to give them prophecy. This spiritual gift of prophecy is entrusted to the young, and God’s Spirit is poured out on them. The voice of

74 Ibid., 341.
women was to be valued in the community. Early Christians gathered in private spaces, and in those locations, “there was potentially more room for women, both slave and free, to speak and be heard.”

One of the few adolescent girls in Scripture is Lo-ruhamah, the daughter of Hosea and Gomer. Although Lo-ruhamah is the daughter of an Old Testament prophet, biblical readers know very little about her, which can cause her story to be overlooked. However, her name means “not pitied,” and she is important in the story of Hosea. Her name reminds the reader of the completely ruined circumstance of the kingdom of Israel, yet by naming her “not pitied” it shows God still has great plans for Israel. While biblical readers do not know what she contributed to the plans, her name stands as a reminder to Israel of God’s importance in the community’s history. In the Bible, names often have meaning and typically connect back to their story. Adolescent girls can learn from this story that they are not insignificant but have a part in God’s story. Even those who are not at the center of the story still are to have a role in God’s narrative.

Another Old Testament story is dramatically changed by a little Israelite servant girl who is nameless. As a young girl, she was taken captive, served the wife of Naaman, and seems like a minor character (2 Kings 5:1-19). Like Lo-ruhamah, she does not appear later in Scripture. She seems unimportant, because she has no official power or authority, yet “the girl’s few words are the first spoken in the narrative.” This young

76 Ibid., 139.


79 Ibid., 342.
servant girl had been taken captive and was living in a foreign land, yet she is highlighted as the person with prominent voice who “testified to the power of healing that Israel’s God offers through the ‘man of God’ (5:15) living in Samaria.”80 Her testimony ultimately changed the life of Naaman and the Syrian perception of the Israelites. As he believed her testimony and followed the prophet’s instructions, Naaman was healed. As a result of this healing, the Syrians viewed Israelites more positively and they became open to their God. The evangelistic proclamations of a young servant girl altered the actions of one of the most powerful leaders in the Syria army. From her, adolescent girls learn that their voice is important and that the way they wield their words can alter the tide of someone’s personal story when they are heard. Knowing that adolescent girls can influence someone’s life with their testimony is powerful to know. It encourages them not to be silent, to testify to God’s presence in their life.

There are a variety of texts that have small snippets of the story of adolescent girls. The biblical narratives regarding children can demonstrate a variety of skills. There are further examples of adolescent girls participating in intricate political situations. Miriam negotiates with Pharaoh’s daughter, saving Moses and offering her mother as a wet nurse and nanny (Exodus 2:1-11). This changes the history of an entire people, taking them from slaves in Egypt to the Promise Land that God had promised to Abraham.

Genesis focuses on the family of Abraham and his descendants. Jacob had a daughter named Dinah, who was raped by Shechem. When Jacob’s sons return, they are “indignant and very angry” (Genesis 34:7) over the circumstance. Hamor and Jacob pursue marriage negotiations for Dinah and Shechem. Jacob and his sons say that they will agree to

80 Ibid., 345.
allow Dinah to marry Shechem and let the two families merge, if Hamor, Shechem, and every man in the city is circumcised. They demand that the men are circumcised before Dinah can marry into Shechem’s family. While they are recovering from the procedure, Levi and Simeon “took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males” (Genesis 34:25). This story is a morally complicated one as Dinah’s brothers avenge the rape of their sister through mass murder. The brothers then take the women as wives. Shechem, a rapist, becomes a victim. Dinah speaking her story is her first step to justice.

Here is an example that changes the course of history for Israel. Rebekah offers water at the well to a stranger (Genesis 24). It is through this encounter at the well that Rebekah meets her future husband, Isaac. Together they have two children, Esau and Jacob, who later becomes Israel after wrestling with God (Genesis 32:22-32). The kindness of a young adolescent girl helps to birth a nation.

From the author of Luke and Acts of the Apostles, there are three slave girls who speak up in various settings (Luke 22:54-62; Acts 12:12-17; 16:16-18). While their stories may be different, each of them is vocal about speaking the truth. “All three paidiskai are allowed to convey their message through direct speech, but after their report is challenged in some way, they are given no further opportunity for rebuttal or clarification. Indeed, they are never heard from again.”81 The stories for these girls end abruptly. Biblical readers never learn the rest of their story in Scripture. While they may have had insight and wisdom that would be helpful to the situation, their voices were silenced and their part of the biblical narrative ends. In essence, this serves as a cautionary tale of what can be missed when the female voice and perspective are shut down.

One of the better known texts regarding an adolescent girl is the story of Jesus’ mother, Mary. She was a young woman betrothed to be married to Joseph (Luke 1:26-38). An angel of the Lord, Gabriel, appears to her and announces that she is with child. Mary was not ready to have a child, but she accepted what the angel told her. While this may have seemed like an impossible event, Mary responded “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). She then leaves her home to visit with her cousin, Elizabeth. Scripture shows Mary rejoicing at the news and offering a song of praise for all that God has done for her and through her (Luke 1:46-56). Mary’s testimony reminds adolescent girls that through God all things are possible and that in the midst of whatever is happening in life, it is good to offer praise to God. God is the constant in life and is the strength in times of trouble. “In the biblical witness, God seems especially fond of calling upon unlikely suspects” to be Godbearers to the world.\(^\text{82}\)

While Scripture offers ways to relate to God, adolescent girls will view God in light of their own experiences. An adolescent girl’s language about God tends to be relational and nurturing,\(^\text{83}\) so God often is described through metaphors that are used for other relationships, such as best friend or parent. Metaphors for strength and power are used in their explanations about God (Psalm 18:2; 28:7, Deuteronomy 32:4). The relationships and images are ones that adolescent girls can picture or connect with from their own experiences. By teaching and exploring the biblical metaphors regarding God, this encourages adolescent girls to explore having a personal relationship with God.

\(^{82}\) Dean and Foster, *The Godbearing Life*, 17.

\(^{83}\) Mercer, *Girltalk Godtalk*, 17.
Sharing with tween and teen girls the stories of adolescent girls in Scripture brings opportunity to help them form their Christian identity and to hunger for spiritual formation. Such stories can guide them to see that they are a part of God’s plan and story. When the voices of adolescent girls are silenced or ignored, it does not affirm the importance of adolescent girls in the modern story that God is weaving at this time.

“While God does not ask any of us to bring Christ into the world literally as did Mary, God calls each of us to become a Godbearer through whom God may enter the world again and again.”84 Mary reminds biblical readers that even someone as unlikely as an adolescent girl can be solicited by God for a greater plan.85

84 Dean and Foster, The Godbearing Life, 18.

85 Ibid., 44.
PART THREE

MINISTRY STRATEGIES
CHAPTER 5
SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

This chapter explores and develops practical methods to encourage early adolescent girls to explore and deepen their faith. The goal is to ground these methods in practical theology. This chapter also presents an action plan in response to a biblical understanding of God and his Kingdom.

Background on the Importance of Spiritual Formation

To encourage faith development, parents and leaders need to find the right balance between theological discussions and amusing activities that work for each adolescent girl. It cannot all be entertainment, as this will not pass on faith and encourage faith development. While there needs to be some fun to encourage relationships to be developed, there also must be solid content to help encourage the development of faith and the realization that each Christ-follower needs to have a personal relationship with God.

Faith development is a process. It is not an instantaneous event but a lifetime practice of accepting the need for Christ in an individual’s existence and embracing his rule in life, which needs to be affirmed continually. Issler says, “Deep heart formation
involves a process over time.”¹ This process is a combination of individual reflection and group learning. Adults must mentor and walk alongside youth, so they can develop. It is a combination of developing faith through learning the stories but also through learning the practices to help one go deeper in faith. “God desires that we become Bible-hearted practitioners, not just Bible knowers.”²

A tradition at First Presbyterian Church in Moorestown, New Jersey—where I serve as associate pastor of families—is that the congregation holds hands for the benediction at the end of the service. People move from their pew in order to stand with another person. It is a reminder that all are in community and no one walks the faith journey alone. The spiritual practices parents and other mentors demonstrate need to be a combination of such activities, which are done both alone and in community, to graft the human heart closer to the vine (John 15:5), so that belief takes shape as practice.

Spiritual practices need to be a part of daily life. Faith does not develop in visiting a church once a week for one hour. Instead, it is important to encourage spiritual practices throughout the week to develop faith. Ron Hunter, Jr. poses this important question: “If a child receives on average only one hour of spiritual influence per week, how does your church acquire more opportunities to provide coaching or instruction?”³ By fostering an environment that practices spiritual disciplines, the church can help provide more opportunity to develop a faith.

¹ Issler, Living into the Life of Jesus, 70.
² Ibid., 53.
³ Hunter, The DNA of D6, 9.
The adults who work with adolescent girls need to be comfortable with practicing spiritual disciplines and a variety of experiences. Two books that can provide guidance in this journey are *Life Together in Christ: Experiencing Transformation in Community* and *The Good and Beautiful God.* In *Life Together in Christ,* Ruth Haley Barton offers in nine chapters a reflection on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) and describes how the lives of the disciples were transformed in community. Barton models with a guide how individuals can be transformed in community by the power of the Holy Spirit. In *The Good and Beautiful God,* James Bryan Smith provides in nine chapters the opportunity to hear the truth from Scripture rather than the lies that can be heard in the small voice in a person’s head. Through examining the God that Jesus describes in Scripture, J. B. Smith models how to love God even more. Each chapter provides an opportunity for spiritual formation through practices that reinforce the biblical messages on the mind and heart. Gaining experience in practicing spiritual disciplines sometimes can be acquired best in a small group setting.

Together, these resources will help deepen personal faith through daily disciplines and encourage developing a deeper relationship with God and Scripture. These books also encourage the readers to see things in a new light and to be open to where the Spirit of God is moving in their life. This may open up the adults, who will journey with the adolescent girls, to new spiritual practices that they did not know existed.

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Additionally, churches need to be aware of the technology that can help foster spiritual development, particularly because adolescent girls are prone to live their life online and technology is a part of their everyday life. There are many apps available for smartphones and tablets. Many young people like technology and enjoy using it for a variety of purposes. “In just a handful of years, use of tablets and smartphones for Bible searches has skyrocketed, from 18% in 2011 to 35% in 2014.” While technology can take time away because it easily distracts human beings, mobile devices can provide a way to “interact for our quiet time.” To remain relevant in the lives of female adolescents, churches need to become aware of the possibilities and help them explore ways to connect with God through their technology in addition to using the traditional biblical spiritual practices.

There are a number of practices that adolescents can explore as a way to encourage their faith journey. These include Sabbath keeping, Bible reading, worship, solitude and silence, prayer, spiritual or soul friendship, personal reflection, and service. These are important practices because “the spiritual journey deepens as we discover the longing and desires God has placed within us and that God himself longs to meet (Psalm 37:4).” Practicing spiritual disciplines provides a sound way to explore spiritual formation and encourage faith development. Parental involvement in a female adolescent’s exploration of spiritual formation is important. A vital way in which parents can guide the spiritual formation of adolescents is by teaching and practicing the disciplines with them.

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6 Hunter, The DNA of D6, 13.

7 Barton, Life Together in Christ, 72.
Keeping the Sabbath

Sabbath is an important part of the faith journey (Exodus 20:8). According to McKnight, Jewish Sabbath is not the same as what Christians practice on a Sunday.\(^8\) For Christians, Sunday is focused on worship and fellowship with others. This often involves a flurry of ministry activity or labor-intensive celebrations and potlucks. In contrast, the Jewish Sabbath is focused on resting from one’s labors. The goal and purpose are very different. By observing Sabbath as a family, there is a freedom and a time to rest. Through such rest, Christ-followers admit that they are not in charge and that God is central to life.

Through this spiritual practice, Christian parents can spend time in Jewish Sabbath, which allows them to rest from their labors and focus on their relationship with the Lord. Sabbath is “a rhythm of study and relaxation that mirrors the breath of life given by God in our creation.”\(^9\) In the story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42), Jesus reminds Martha not to be “distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing” (Luke 10:41b-42). If individuals are not careful, it is easy to be distracted by the things of this world. This is because human beings can create a false narrative that requires being so busy and occupied that they may miss the God-moment in their midst. When one observes Sabbath, one is reminded of the need to focus on relationship with God, which is essential. It is important in a community to rest not just physically but spiritually and allow God to restore and renew (Hebrews 3:7-4:11).

\(^8\) McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet*, 14.

Reading the Bible

Bible reading is another spiritual discipline that Christian parents can engage in alone or with their daughters as a daily part of walking with the Lord. This is not an easy practice for adolescents, so it will take time and learning. Since the Bible is divided into verses, chapters, and books, parents will need to spend time and allow adolescents to discover how best to read the Word of God—not piecemeal but as an entire book. Young followers of Christ need to learn that the Bible is not a collection of morals and truths to be divided up but that all the stories are connected and together tell God’s love story to humanity.10

Female tweens and teens can be taught to trust the Holy Spirit-inspired words of Scripture as their guide, wisdom, and strength for life. McKnight offers a relevant perspective. He says, “None of the wiki-stories is final; none of them is comprehensive; none of them is absolute; none of them is exhaustive. Each of them tells a true story of that Story.”11 In guiding their daughters’ exploration of spiritual formation, Christian parents and adult mentors must show how the different books of the Bible influence and impact one another and need to be looked at as an entire story and not just as singular verses. When female adolescents read the story, they will be able to see the redemption and grace for them personally. McKnight offers this advice on how to present the practice:

Reading the Bible with our wise mentors is like sliding down a waterslide. The gospel is the slide; the Bible is one wall, our teachers and our tradition the other wall, and the water is the Holy Spirit. The pool at the bottom of the slide is our world. If we stay on the slide and inside the walls as we slide down, we land in our own water world. If we knock down the walls of the slide or get too careless, we can tumble out of the safety of that slide and injure ourselves. However, observe this: our life is lived in the pool. So here’s my point: God asks us to

10 McKnight, The Blue Parakeet, 46.
11 Ibid., 65.
listen—attention, absorption, and action—to the gospel story and to read the Bible with our wise mentors who have gone before us, if we do so, we will land in the pool in our day and in our way.12

When Christian parents and disciplers read together the story with the young women they guide, they can see and hear and absorb the message that God is giving to his people.

The practice of lectio divina as a spiritual discipline is helpful in reading the Bible. It allows Scripture to penetrate the heart in a personal way. Lectio divina is the practice of reading a segment of God’s Word again and again, allowing certain words or phrases to stand out to the reader.13 It engages readers to intimately reflect and meditate on what is being read. The practice often is described in four movements in Latin: lectio, meditatio, oratio, and contemplatio.14 This practice allows individuals to hear the Word read aloud, meditate on it privately, reflect on it corporately, and respond to the Word through prayer to finally rest in God’s presence. It is not the practice of simply reading the Word but engaging it in a way that the reader is transformed. “Meditation is both commanded by God and modeled by the Godly in Scripture.”15 In meditating on the passage, practitioners of lectio divina actively engage the heart to see how this passage connects their life with God’s story.16


16 Thompson, Soul Feast, 23.
Since the Bible is God’s Word for his people and is intended to be a guide for the faith journey (Psalm 119:105), reading and sharing the Word in different versions also can make the heart of God come alive for adolescent girls. This may mean using the New Revised Standard Version, the Common English Bible, or The Message\textsuperscript{17} in devotionals. God speaks to individuals through the Bible, which is intended to correct and direct humanity (Hebrews 4:12). For this reason, it is important to read and study his Word. In doing so, adolescent girls and their parents will be drawn closer to God. “This is a kind of reading in which the mind descends into the heart, and both are drawn into the love and goodness of God.”\textsuperscript{18} By reading and knowing Scripture, they will develop a deeper relationship with God and one another.

Worship

The spiritual practice of worship is the Christian parent’s opportunity to offer praise and reverence to God and to teach daughters to do the same. They can praise God’s magnitude (Psalm 8), goodness (Psalm 34), and splendor in words (Psalm 96), music (Psalm 150), ritual (Psalm 50), or silence (Psalm 65). “In worship, disparate people seek unity far greater than the sum of themselves but don’t have much control over how, or if, this happens. . . . We cast the Word of God out into the world, into each human heart, where, to paraphrase the prophet Isaiah, it needs to go to fulfill God’s purpose.”\textsuperscript{19}

Worship is an opportunity for Christian parents to gather with their daughters as members

\textsuperscript{17} Eugene Peterson, \textit{The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language} (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002).


\textsuperscript{19} Norris, \textit{Amazing Grace}, 246-247.
of the Body of Christ and find unity together. It is an opportunity for young followers of Christ to learn how to remind themselves of who God is and what he has done for them.

By engaging in personal worship of God, female adolescents can experience freedom in their developing faith and drawing closer to God. The spiritual practice of worship can take place in a community on a Sunday or another day of the week. This practice allows adolescents to partner with one another to demonstrate their faithfulness to God. This time of worship can begin the conversation with God.

Solitude and Silence

Solitude and silence are essential in order to hear the “gentle and quiet whisper” (1 Kings 19:11-13 Message) and the “still small voice” of the Lord (1 Kings 19:11-13 KJV). In Scripture, God says, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). This does not take place in the busyness of the everyday world but requires time to be alone and silent in order to hear from the Lord. This does not always require days or hours, but even a short fifteen minutes can make a difference. While silence may sound like a difficult thing to do, it can actually be extremely helpful. Author Kathleen Norris describes her experience with children and silence: “What interests me most about my experiment is the way in which making silence liberated the imagination of so many children.”

By teaching and engaging in silence with their daughters, Christian parents help them to learn how to remove the distractions and connect with the Lord in a different way than ordinarily done. Female adolescents can experience solitude by intentionally

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21 Norris, Amazing Grace, 17.
spending time by themselves to be in the presence of God. As they engage in solitude, they will learn how to invite God to do something inside them. For adolescent girls, this can be an opportunity to hear messages of love from God that can counteract the negative voices they may hear in society.

Prayer

By engaging in the spiritual discipline of prayer with female adolescents, Christian parents and disciples have the opportunity to show how prayer is the art of having a conversation with God. This conversation can be about what they are experiencing or concerns that are weighing them down. The Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11) given by Jesus offers an example of how to make requests of the always present and loving Father. Luke uses the word “recite” to let biblical readers know that Jesus expects his followers to use this prayer over and over again. Therefore, Christian parents can begin teaching and engaging in prayer with their daughters using this format. McKnight goes as far to say, “I think the Lord’s Prayer is both a model and the precise words we should use whenever we gather in prayer.” The struggle is that many are not sure of the correct way to pray. Prayer may be initiated by personal requests and needs but then should move beyond ourselves.

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22 J. B. Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, 166.

23 McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet*, 124.

24 Ibid., 125.

Through such engagement in prayer, adolescent girls can come to learn that it is more than a simple grace before a meal. “Prayer is not doing, but being.” Together parents and daughters can experience prayer as an act that is a mystery to explain but deepens the connection and relationship with God. It is an opportunity to both talk with and listen to the Almighty. Romans 8:26 states, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” Young female followers of Christ can escape condemnation and perfectionism in this area by coming to understand that they do not need to have the correct words but have the opportunity to trust the Spirit and approach God knowing their voice will be heard.

Spiritual Friendships

Spiritual or soul friendship is a personal relationship with another disciple of Jesus in prayerful conversation or other spiritual practices. Learning the value of spiritual friendships frames relationship with Christ as a spiritual journey in which an adolescent girl can expect her character and life to be changed and transformed. By teaching their daughters how to engage in soul friendships, parents will imprint in them that this is not a journey to be taken with just anyone. This is because such relationships involve honest conversations and wrestling with one’s faith, which may not feel safe to experience with everyone. Adolescent girls naturally seek out heart-to-heart conversations with peers, so having a soul friend with whom they can share this conversation will help draw them closer to the Body of Christ. Barton explains the process and says, “As we are changed into more loving, surrendered Christ-followers, we become the presence of Christ in the

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26 Ibid., 350.
world that God loves and sent his only Son to save. We are able to join others on whatever hard road they are traveling and discern loving, God-guided response to their need.”

Often spiritual friendships are important to a group setting. A spiritual friendship is a relationship that honors and encourages faith development in one another (Proverbs 19:20). Relationships that encourage one another to be kind and compassionate while striving to go deeper in relationship with the Lord are important for faith development (Colossians 3:12-14). Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster write: “Created for friendship with God, we humans require friendship to stay alive. Along with a rhythm of life rooted in the practices of faith, a circle of spiritual friends comprises one of the basic ingredients of Godbearing ministry.” Godbearing ministry encourages people to allow God to work through them, so others may witness the presence of God in their lives. This spiritual discipline inspires individuals to look for God in their midst, which ultimately deepens that relationship with God. The blessing of spiritual friends is that they point adolescent girls to God. “Spiritual friendship, one of the neglected disciplines of community, nurtures our attentiveness to God.” This is particularly important as tweens and teens face the challenges of life in school, with boys, and as they engage in online activity. They also need to try to figure out where God is involved in these aspects of their life.

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29 Ibid., 125.

30 Ibid., 127.
Personal Reflection

Personal reflection is quiet time where God reveals himself. By taking time for personal reflection, Christian parents and adolescent girls can explore where God is in their life and where Scripture is guiding them. It takes work, as Christ-followers in today’s society are often too busy with the world to take time to pay attention to the inner self. By engaging in personal reflection with their daughters, Christian parents can show them that busyness is based on hurry. J. B. Smith says, “Hurry is an inner condition that is fear based.” 31

Particularly in today’s society, adolescent girls need to not live in fear of what might happen. This involves learning how to embrace peace. Christian parents can teach their daughters how to spend time reflecting on what God is really doing in their life. This involves taking time to silence the voices of this world and instead focus on God’s voice for their personal life. J. B. Smith writes: “When we slow down we allow ourselves to be found, found by life and found by God.” 32 Understanding the need to take the time to slow a busy or hectic life creates an environment in which to grow in love for God, others, and self. Jesus observed this practice when he took the time to explain the meaning of his parables to the disciples (Mark 4:10-12).

Service

Serving others is an expression of one’s relationship with God. By engaging in this practice with their parents, adolescent girls can learn service as a response to the love they have experienced from the Lord. All Christ-followers are called to humbly serve

31 J. B. Smith, The Good and Beautiful God, 183.
32 Ibid., 184.
God by serving one another (Galatians 5:13). Service is spiritual formation in practice. “Spiritual formation results in the ability to discern how God is sending us into the world uniquely to do his will.” Female adolescents can experience this dynamic. As they are drawn closer to God, they will desire to do his will in the world. In the process of doing his will, they will be encouraged and transformed.

Together Christian parents and female adolescents can see how it creates a cycle in which they, as a community of believers, demonstrate the love of Christ to the world. In the process of demonstrating love through services, their lives are converted and relationship with God strengthens. Dean and Foster write: “In the Christian community, youth learn compassion by practicing acts of compassion.” By doing service, adolescents learn the art of compassion for one another, just as the Good Samaritan demonstrated compassion (Luke 10:25-37). In particular, adolescent girls will learn an important aspect of becoming Christian women: “Following Christ is not just about being nice; it is about living heroically, compassionately.” Adolescents can be excited about doing service. When Christian parents and disciplers show them how to do Christian service, it will become an outflow of their faith and can strengthen it.

**Bible Study for Early Adolescent Girls to Encourage Faith Development**

Churches are communities. While parents have a central role in the faith development of their daughters, they cannot impart all that is needed for the faith journey.

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34 Dean and Foster, *The Godbearing Life*, 152.

Having a variety of adults involved in the lives of adolescent girls offers them a variety of mentors to help shape and inspire their faith. By encouraging a community of believers to surround tweens and teens, there is a greater chance that they will take hold of their faith and develop ownership of it.

In preparing for a Bible study with adolescent girls, leadership is important. While selecting a leader may not seem a significant part of the process, the manner in which the group operates will depend on the leader. Houston Heflin describes the youth leader as being a “co-discipler.”36 This concept of co-discipler is that there is a relationship in which each person teaches the other. This is not a relationship in which the adult has all the answers; rather, the adult also remains open to learning from the youth. This type of relationship requires an openness to where the Spirit is moving and a confidence that those in charge do not need to have all the answers to the questions that are raised. This can allow them to journey together to figure out the answers. This type of relationship also allows parents and disciplers to discover that the youth has something to teach them. For example, when selecting a mentor for her confirmation class, my daughter considered a variety of possibilities, including which adults would be willing to learn from her. As an adolescent girl, she desired to have someone who would be a co-traveler on the faith journey exploration rather than someone who would tell her the destination and how to get to it.

Those who serve as teachers, mentors, and co-disciplers in a Bible study need to have a right heart. A right heart is one that is not anxious but instead turns to the Lord in

36 Houston Heflin, Youth Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Youth Ministry (Nashville: Abington Press, 2009), 38.
prayer to be centered and remains at peace (Philippians 4:6-7). A person with a right heart turns to the Lord for wisdom rather than listening to the voices of this world. Such people do not have to come with all the answers, but as instructors they must be willing to journey through this process with the adolescent girls. “When we come together as teachers and learners, we also come together as persons called by God to participate in the ongoing creation of God’s realm on earth.”37 It is important that they do not come because they want to have power and indoctrinate a younger generation; rather, they come with a servant heart willing to go on the journey of discovery together.38 This is more than just having the right leadership; it means creating the context that encourages spiritual growth. Teaching means creating the space in which truth can be shared with one another.39 There is a genuine hospitality that creates a dialogue together, which invites God to be revealed and exposed.

This Bible study for adolescent girls is the seed to start a small group focused on early adolescent girls. It is led outside the normal Sunday School time and is a place that focuses on relationships with these adolescents. This particular study is designed for seven weeks. The group would begin as a small group spending a few weeks together to encourage relationships among the girls and the leaders. By getting to know one another first, this may allow for a better discussion in regard to the Bible and their faith development.

There are two facilitators of the group, with neither being a paid staff person but rather members of the church community. Each week begins with the girls catching up

37 Yust and Anderson, Taught by God, 39.
38 Ibid., 153.
39 Ibid., 159.
with one another and a sharing of concerns for the week. The facilitator then leads in a short prayer. The Scripture passages for the week should be read by the group. Depending on the session, it could be read in a responsive format or one girl could read the entire passage or each person can read one verse.

The group then reflects individually and then corporately. By starting with personal reflection, the adolescent girls can practice the spiritual discipline of personal reflection. After they have pondered the passage individually, they will share their insights corporately and learn from one another. This affirms that the adolescent girl has a voice that can and should be heard. The personal reflection would begin with a guided question. Ideally there are five to ten people in the group, including the facilitators. The purpose for this is to allow for the individual voices of the adolescent girls to be heard and allow for the development of soul friendships. If the group is much larger, not all voices will be heard and it becomes harder to develop deep relationships with one another. The class would end with prayer.

During the first week, the facilitator should model a prayer for the group. Ideally, this prayer time is an opportunity for the adolescents to practice their prayer life. If the adolescent girls are not comfortable leading the prayer, the facilitator can continue to model prayer with input from the girls. Throughout the study, there is time to encourage and even practice the spiritual disciplines. The context of the small group study naturally lends itself to become a place for adolescents to develop spiritual or soul friendships. The small group needs to be an atmosphere where individual members can share their feelings and questions in a safe environment. By fostering this type of environment for sharing, deep relationships with one another that stimulate faith development can take place.
There also is an encouragement to journal based on the passage during the week and to bring it back the following week to share within the group. Journaling is a way to capture personal reflections and then return to them later for further pondering. It also may be helpful for the leader to have a variety of translations available, as sometimes hearing the passage in a more modern version can help it make more sense.

Below is a breakdown for each weekly session, its focus, beneficial teaching points, and points of departure for group discussion. Each week is designed to be a ninety-minute small group. The first thirty minutes are to be spent on building relationships with one another through sharing, focusing on their lives, and what has happened since their last gathering. This also would be a time to share concerns they want lifted up in prayer. The next fifty minutes would be spent doing the actual study with the practice of the spiritual disciplines. The last ten minutes would be spent in prayer time and include sending the girls with words of encouragement for the week.

Week One: God’s Image

The first Bible study in the series focuses on imparting to adolescent girls how and why they are made in God’s image. Adolescents need to see themselves as created in the image of God and to live their daily existence as if they see the image of God in each person who crosses their path. The foundation for this is Genesis 1:26-31, which is why it is the Scripture selected for this particular gathering.

After reading this Scripture, the group reflects on its meaning. Participants learn that Genesis 1 was written as a statement of faith in the midst of horrific times and how it confirms that God is indeed great and the creator of all things. Furthermore, despite all of
the difficulties of today, they come to see how God created humans and pronounced everything “very good” (Genesis 1:31) and that regardless of human shortcomings God loves all people. He sees us (or at least our potential) as “very good.” During the discussion, the Bible study leader can note that prior to Genesis 1:31, all that God created was good and now with humans it was very good. Having come to understand they are “very good” as well, adolescent girls are presented with the teaching point: Christians have an obligation to live as the image of God to the world and to see the image of God in the people that they meet. Table 1 below shows the specific discussion questions. The free exchange of thoughts, perspectives, and ideas lasts for forty minutes. This allows time for the facilitator to spend ten minutes to summarize what had been discussed and to affirm the discussion. The facilitator should not correct their thoughts and perspectives. The particular questions guide the girls into seeing themselves as a part of God’s creation that is very good and recognizing the image of God in those around them.

Table 1. Discussion Questions for God’s Image

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK #1</th>
<th>GOD’S IMAGE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What does it mean to be created in the image of God?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How do you hear verse 31? What does it say about you personally?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Why does verse 26 refer to God as “us” plural?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What does this tell about the nature of God?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does being created in God’s image influence the way you see or treat others?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How can we affirm to you that you are created in God’s image and are “very good”?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As a part of the study, the group explores the spiritual practice of reading Scripture. This passage in Genesis offers an opportunity to hear repeatedly that each person is created in the image of God, which is important for adolescent girls to hear. It also is good to hear it in several translations that are affirming and inclusive. Suggested versions would include the NRSV, CEB, The Message, yet would not include NKJV,
which in Genesis 1:26 is not inclusive. Modeling the practice of reading Scripture helps demonstrate to the adolescent girls a manner in which they can read God’s Word for their life on a regular basis. It also proves helpful to hear Scripture in different translations, if they are struggling to understand the meaning of a particular passage.

Week Two: Connection to the Body of Christ

The second study in the series builds on the first week and focuses on imparting how adolescents need to see themselves as created in the image of God. This concept is one that will be repeated again, because it is important for the girls to appreciate and truly believe this about themselves. In addition, adolescents need to live their daily existence as if they see the image of God in each person who crosses their path. The foundation for this is John 15:1-17, which is the Scripture for this particular week.

After reading the Scripture, the group will reflect on its meaning, particularly the vine and the branches. Participants will learn that as members of the church community they are grafted as the branches into Christ’s life and ministry. When individuals are grafted to the vine, which is Christ, lives are changed because the individual now grows as part of the vine. Adolescents will be introduced to Jesus as the vine and believers as the community of branches. The girls will come to see how individuals are connected to him and rely on him and how abiding in Jesus is the central matter of living a dependent life.

The consequences of not abiding are severe: individuals are cut off from divine empowerment. Individuals cannot accomplish anything of lasting value—bearing fruit—unless the individual is dynamically relating to him, while he is abiding in the individual. Table 2 shows the specific discussion questions to help generate personal and corporate
reflection around this theological metaphor and truth. The free exchange of thoughts, perspectives, and ideas lasts for forty minutes. This allows the facilitator to spend ten minutes to summarize what had been discussed and to affirm the discussion. The facilitator will take care not correct their thoughts and perspectives. The particular questions guide the girls into seeing themselves as a part of God’s plan that has value and adds fruit to the world to benefit all of God’s creation.

Table 2. Discussion Questions for Connection to the Body of Christ

| WEEK #2 CONNECTION TO THE BODY OF CHRIST | What vine are you attached to? How do you know? What kind of fruit are you bearing?
| | Do you abide in Christ? What steps can you take to help you abide in him?
| | What does the secular mindset have us believe? What does Jesus want us to believe? (John 15:6)
| | What is the significance of this “I Am” statement? What other “I Am” statements did Jesus say?
| | Why is it important to be deliberate about our intention to be close to Jesus Christ?
| | What is the ultimate purpose for bearing fruit? (John 15:8) |

After the discussion, the spiritual practice of service is a natural discipline to model. While in the group, there will be a conversation about how the group might want to serve together. It is important to practice the concept of serving one another, and this also offers a reminder of how believers function as grafts into Christ’s vine. The service could be a one-time commitment or a monthly service as a group.

Week Three: Looking for a Refuge

The third Bible study in the series focuses on building a relationship with the church community. The foundation for this is Psalm 55:1-8, which is why it is the Scripture for this week’s gathering. This psalm is a prayer of someone taking refuge in God. The psalmist is praying for help and a place of protection, peace, and rest.
After reading the psalm, the group reflects on its meaning. Participants learn that God can be a refuge in times of trouble. They see the psalmist as a person with great anxiety searching for safety and observe how he continually calls upon God. The beginning verses of the psalm of lament describe a person who is wandering restlessly, overburdened with stress and worry. This psalm teaches adolescent readers how to lament to God and to share the cares that are holding them back from joy.

As the facilitator guides participants into discussion, based on questions found in Table 3, she will encourage the adolescents to connect emotionally with the psalmist. The particular questions guide the girls into developing relationships with God and with the small group community. These questions should help foster a sense of safety to share feelings and thoughts within the group. The free exchange of perspectives lasts for thirty minutes. The facilitator spends another five to ten minutes to summarize what has been shared and affirm the discussion.

Table 3. Discussion Questions for Looking for a Refuge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK #3 LOOKING FOR A REFUGE</th>
<th>What feelings are described in the Psalm? What is causing those feelings?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What does the psalmist expect God to do for him?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Describe the image of God that you find here.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you see in this community? How do you listen to gain understanding?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you expect God to do for you?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does it affect you to know that God is near to you when you are in pain?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

After the reading, the discussion on the questions should be a little shorter than previous weeks. This will allow for time to be spent on developing the spiritual practice of spiritual or soul friendships. Building a relationship takes time and work. This requires listening skills and developing the practice of holy listening. The facilitator will teach and demonstrate how to take time to listen to an individual, not interrupt or interject personal
thoughts or comments, and really focus on what the other person is saying. The girls will practice holy listening and come to see how important it is when developing soul friends. Participants will come to see that they do not need to have the right words to speak, but just being present as a person in the midst of crisis can be extremely helpful. Since God is not physically seen in the world, participants will learn how good it is to know that a soul friend is around for times of crisis and may be able to help and be a support. Allowing the group to do some holy listening and practicing being present with one another will be a skill that is encouraged from this point forward.

Week Four: Boundaries

The fourth Bible study in the series focuses on boundaries. These limitations are about helping set guidelines for what is an acceptable pattern of life. Participants will learn that it is necessary at times to set up borders in order to know what one can and cannot do. The foundations for this are Romans 8:12-17 and Galatians 3:23-4:7. These two passages will be contemplated for this particular gathering along with the story of Esther. After reading the Scripture passages from Romans and Galatians, there will be a short discussion on understanding them and a short re-telling of the story of Esther. If possible, this should be done by one of the adolescent girls who may have heard this story in Sunday School or through other learning environments. If no adolescent feels comfortable sharing the story, the facilitator can summarize the story of Esther. A reflection on the story of Esther as the group assimilates her story with the New Testament passages will follow.
After reading the first passage from Romans, and the group reflects on its meaning, participants will learn that in Romans 8 there is an importance in being part of the Body of Christ that comes with rights and responsibilities. Lives are transformed by the Spirit. As children of God, each individual has a responsibility and the privilege to live according to God’s laws. The girls will come to see the need to be guided by the Holy Spirit in the way that individuals conduct their lives and not live according to the ways of the world. This concept will be connected with how parents set up boundaries for their adolescents and help serve as a guide, just as the Holy Spirit guides each individual towards God’s goals.

Then the group will read the Galatians passage and reflect on its meaning. Participants learn from the letter to the church at Galatia that there is a different understanding of the law. The notion is that the law is there to support and guide a person through life and is not to be used to punish an individual. Boundaries are not designed as punishment but are for teaching and supporting as the adolescent discovers what she is capable of doing in life.

After hearing the story of Esther, the group reflects on the meaning of boundaries. Through the Book of Esther, the girls can gain insight into God’s special and purposeful plan. The story gives lessons about courage, divine timing, and God’s supreme love. As Scripture reveals, Esther is a Jewish woman living in Persia and reared by her cousin Mordecai. She was taken to the king of the Persian Empire to become a part of his harem, and eventually he made her a queen. The king gave Haman the authority to handle the fate of the Jewish people. Esther’s people, including her cousin, were to be killed. In light of this story, participants will step into her shoes and ask how the queen could serve her
people in such dire times. They will see her bold step of approaching the king and revealing the plot against the Jewish people. They will observe how she was able to change the outcome by embracing her call to serve.

For thirty minutes, the group will dialogue about how God’s laws were designed to help and bring out the best for each person and how boundaries seek to create a way of life that will bring out the best in the adolescent. Table 4 below shows the specific discussion questions, which are designed to encourage freedom and reflection. Afterwards, the facilitator will help summarize what has been discussed and affirm the free exchange. The facilitator will continue the practice of not seeking to correct their thoughts and perspectives but rather guide them into deeper reflection. The particular commandment and law of seeking rest and renewal in the Lord through Sabbath practices will be introduced after the discussion segment.

Table 4. Discussion Questions for Boundaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK #4 BOUNDARIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul concludes that we have an obligation. Describe in your own words the negative and positive aspects of that obligation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do we experience the reality and privileges of being God’s children?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What evidence do you see of your life being controlled by the Spirit?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How does a clear grasp of God’s law help us to realize our need for Christ?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul lists several ways in which people have been categorized. How have these categories sometimes functioned as barriers? In light of the context, how have these barriers been broken down in Christ?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How can you act more like God’s beloved daughter?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How can you be bold and courageous in your faith? Even in times when it appears there may be persecution for that faith?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Esther realizes there needs to be a response to the situation. Are there times that God is calling on you to respond to a situation where you can improve the lives of those around you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What can Esther teach about spiritual practices in helping to make the right decisions?</td>
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It is important to explore the spiritual practice of Sabbath, but this will not be practiced during the group time. Rather, there will be a conversation about how to examine one’s life, how to find rest in God and seek his presence, and how to make space for practicing a Sabbath time at home. The discussion will include comments about what might be restful and restorative for each individual. The adolescents will be encouraged to partner with at least one other person to practice Sabbath together, in an attempt to help hold one another accountable for the practice and cheer each other on.

Week Five: Guiding and Mentoring

The fifth week of the Bible study in the series focuses on the faith journey. The group is on a journey together, but each individual is simultaneously on a journey to go deeper in her relationship with the Lord. The concept will be presented as the group functioning together as co-travelers on the faith journey. The foundation for this is Psalm 23, which is why it is the Scripture selected for this particular gathering.

After reading this Scripture, the group reflects on its meaning. Participants learn that this psalm in particular is designed to provide comfort. The psalmist knows that there will be circumstances that are threatening. The participants will observe how the shepherd leads the sheep through the treacherous places, yet the sheep do not fear. The shepherd caring for his flock serves as a reminder of the new wholeness. The girls will see how the psalmist knows that God is with him in the good times but especially in the dark times. Table 5 shows the specific discussion questions. The free exchange of thoughts, perspectives, and ideas lasts for forty minutes. This will allow for ten minutes for a facilitator to help summarize what had been discussed and affirm the discussion.
The facilitator should not correct their thoughts and perspectives. The particular questions guide the girls into seeing their relationship with God in a positive manner that provides refuge in times of crisis.

**Table 5. Discussion Questions for Gathering and Mentoring**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK #5</th>
<th>GATHERING AND MENTORING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There are two large metaphors in the psalm: the shepherd (vv. 1-4) and the host (vv. 5-6). Compare and contrast these two images. Look at the shepherd. How exactly does he care for his sheep? Look at the host. How does he provide for his guests?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I fear no evil” is a bold statement. What does it mean for you to say that?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Enemies are prominent in the psalm prayers and appear here. Who are your enemies?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What is the most comforting thing that you have experienced in the life of faith?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who shepherds you? How can we encourage one another in our faith journey?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do we work on our relationship as a group?</td>
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</table>

After the discussion, the spiritual practice of focus will be the Bible reading as experienced through *lectio divina*. This week it will be different from previous weeks. The facilitator will ask the girls to close their eyes and listen to Psalm 46:10, “Be still and know that I am God,” being read slowly. Each participant will pause and reflect silently on what that means for her personally. The facilitator will read the passage again slowly and then ask the girls to listen to what God might be saying to them personally through “Be still and know that I am God.” After silent listening and meditation on the Word, participants will open their eyes and briefly share what thoughts, impressions, words, and feelings that came to mind. To close the time of *lectio divina*, the facilitator will ask the girls to close their eyes again and privately pray regarding what they heard silently and corporately, with the facilitator offering a final prayer to wrap up.

With this passage, the spiritual practice will be a weeklong experience of Bible reading. The facilitator will say, “As you go about your week, carry the Word with you and recite it as often as you can. Try to recite the *lectio divina* verse or Psalm 23 before...”
you fall asleep each night, and again when you awake." This at-home practice will serve as a guide for the girls to practice *lectio divina* individually. Through personal meditation and reflection during the week, the goal is for each girl to receive comfort from God’s Word whenever she needs it and to be reminded continually of God’s comfort and connection to her in an intimate way.

Week Six: Spiritual Gifts

The sixth Bible study in the series focuses on imparting to the adolescents that each individual has special gifts, which need to be shared with the Body of Christ. The foundation for this is Ephesians 4. The group will reflect on Ephesians 4 and the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42).

After reading the chapter from Ephesians, the group will ponder its meaning and why Paul challenges the reader of the letter by pointing out that each person has a spiritual gift that is needed for the church. Participants will learn how spiritual gifts are given by God for the benefit of the community of believers, not just the individual, and how each gift is to be valued and shared with the church, the Body of Christ. No one gift is more valuable than another. The adolescents will come to see that believers are not divided by age; instead believers are identified by the gifts that they bring. The various gifts allow people to demonstrate their faith and, by using those gifts, allow people to grow deeper in their faith. The passage will shed light on how using the gifts given by God allows one to feel a deeper connection to the church body and a sense of purpose.

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The story of Mary and Martha is one that individuals may have heard previously. There should be a short re-telling of the story of Mary and Martha. If possible, this should be done by one of the adolescent girls. If no adolescent feels comfortable sharing the story, the facilitator can summarize the story. There should be reflection on the story of Mary and Martha, as the group assimilates the concept of different gifts. Mary was focused on learning from Jesus while Martha was focused on the hospitality given to guests. Table 6 shows the specific discussion questions. The free exchange of thoughts, perspectives, and ideas lasts for thirty minutes. The group should take ten minutes to share what spiritual gifts they may see in themselves or in one another. The facilitator will spend ten minutes affirming and summarizing the discussion. The particular questions guide the girls into seeing that Christians have an obligation to share their gifts in order to build up the Body of Christ.

Table 6. Discussion Questions for Spiritual Gifts

<table>
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<tr>
<th>WEEK #6</th>
<th>SPiritual Gifts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count how many times the word “unity” or “one” is used in Ephesians 4. How many different ways is the word “unity” or “one” used?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Unity is given by the Spirit. It is not something we produce. What can we do to maintain the unity of the Spirit?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>When you think of Christ’s gift of peace, what difference does it make for you when you are facing stresses or conflicts?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What difference have you observed Christ’s peace making among others who have had serious differences of opinion or conflicts?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What might you do to strengthen the bond of peace in your group, in your local church, or with people of other faith communities?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What gift does Mary and Martha possess? What does Jesus say about the gifts?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Is there a time and a place to share a gift? Or is there a time when a gift is not helpful?</td>
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After the discussion, spiritual practice of spiritual gifts needs to be explored. Spiritual gifts may not be easy for everyone to see and recognize within themselves or others. By taking a spiritual gifts inventory, the girls will learn how the gifts may be
present in each member of the group. This will start encouraging each member to see the gifts and abilities given by the Spirit that should be shared in the community.

**Week Seven: Priesthood of all Believers**

The last Bible study focuses on imparting to the adolescent girls the importance of the Kingdom of God. This includes the idea that each believer has a special place and role in the Kingdom. The foundation for this is 1 Peter 2:1-10 and Mark 4:30-32. These passages from 1 Peter, Mark, and the story of the death of Lazarus (John 11:1-44) will be the basis for the study for this particular gathering. After reading the Scripture passage from 1 Peter and Mark, there will be discussion on understanding these passages before transitioning to the passage from John. Participants will reflect on the John passage as a standalone periscope before trying to assimilate the passages together. These passages should be read in a more modern translation, possibly The Message, to help with understanding.

After reading the passage from 1 Peter, the group reflects on its meaning. Participants learn that there is no hierarchy of believers that will happen in the future. All members of the community need to allow themselves to build up God’s house. This is not the responsibility of someone in the future; each member is to help in the building at this moment in time.

After reading the passage from the Gospel of Mark, the group ponders its meaning to learn about the Kingdom of God. Over the years, there have been different interpretations of this story. The seed is described as “the smallest of all the seeds on the earth; but when it’s planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all vegetable plants”

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(Marks 4:31b-32a CEB). The plant becomes a place where birds will nest and take shelter. The girls will learn that from the small seed, the plant grows into something very large.

The story of raising Lazarus from the dead is one that individuals may have heard previously. There should be a short re-telling of the story of raising Lazarus. If possible, this should be done by one of the adolescent girls. If no adolescent feels comfortable sharing the story, the facilitator can summarize the story. There will be reflection on the fact that Jesus allowed Lazarus to die so that Jesus could reveal something about himself. Jesus had healed many people, but now he demonstrated he could raise the dead. Participants will learn that God had promised that the Messiah would have victory over death and how the incident with Lazarus helps confirm Christ’s identity.

Adolescents will come to view themselves as living stones that need to build up God’s house. The girls will learn that they enrich church life by bringing an excitement for the faith and are not confined to the blueprints of “previous temples.” The girls’ paradigm may shift, as they see themselves as exciting reminders for people to risk for God, set apart for a chosen purpose. The hope is to encourage their faith journey as adolescents. Although the girls, and even the church, may see their adolescent faith as but a small beginning and needing to be nourished, they will be able to take hope in that while it may seem invisible and difficult to see, both they and others in the church can help them cultivate the seeds of faith in their life. Table 7 shows the specific discussion questions that will guide this thought process and free exchange of perspectives and ideas. Like other Bible studies, the discussion will last for thirty minutes, followed by ten minutes for the facilitator’s summarization and affirmation. As with all other discussions, the facilitator will not correct thoughts and perspectives but rather encourage reflection, open-minded exploration, and
holy listening when others are speaking. These particular questions seek to guide the girls into seeing their individual worth in the Kingdom of God.

### Table 7. Discussion Questions for Priesthood of all Believers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK #7</th>
<th>PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is a cornerstone? What will happen to those who trust in the “Cornerstone?”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How does being chosen by God for a special task make you feel? (Honored, worried, confused, conflicted, reassured, or something else)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What status did Peter ascribe to believers in Christ? What does he expect of believers?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Agriculture was a common example in Jesus’ parables. What would Jesus use today to help convey the same ideas?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When was the seed planted in you? What has been the result?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why did Lazarus have to die?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Why does it matter that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How do Mary and Martha express their faith? Does it look the same or is it different?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What difference does this miracle make in your life today?</td>
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As a part of the study, the group will explore the spiritual practice of reading Scripture, specifically 1 Peter 2 (Message). A modern translation is used to help deepen the girls’ understanding. These passages may not be as easy for individuals to read if the reader is not familiar with cornerstones. By reading these passages together, the group can collaborate to see how they are living cornerstones. A *lectio divina* style of reading may be helpful but is not necessary. The facilitator will need to gauge the emotional and spiritual dynamic of the group to determine its usefulness.

Based on the response from the participants and their interest in further spiritual formation, another seven-week Bible study experience will be offered to explore women of faith. Although the first Bible study series included recognition and discussion of biblical women such as Esther, Mary, and Martha, the girls may have more interest in learning about other women and adolescent girls in the Bible. This study would include Lo-ruhamah.
(Hosea 1), Miriam (Moses’ sister in Exodus 2), the servant girl to Naaman in (2 Kings 5), Dinah (Genesis 34), Deborah (Judges 4), and Mary the teen mother of Jesus (Luke 1). This study will delve more deeply into the role of biblical women in encouraging faith development. The facilitator can draw from the wisdom of Liz Curtis Higgs, who has written three books that highlight the importance of women in Scripture and what modern women can learn from them. These books have Scripture as their foundation but also include insights for why we need these women. The first book is titled The Bad Girls of the Bible: And What We Can Learn from Them. The second book is Slightly Bad Girls of the Bible: Flawed Women Loved by a Flawless God. The third book is titled Really Bad Girls of the Bible: More Lessons from Less-Than-Perfect Women. In addition, Higgs has a Bible series on individual women in Scripture, which the facilitator can use as a resource for specific Bible study content. The prevailing tone of this small group experience will highlight the importance of continuing to spend time in God’s Word, wrestling with what Scripture says for the individual and the church, and strengthening soul friendships. This will be an opportunity for the facilitator as well as the adolescent to learn more about women in Scripture, since such Bible studies are rarely the focus of a church’s practical ministry application.


45 Liz Curtis Higgs, Loved by God: Trusting His Promises and Experiencing His Blessings (Addison, TX: Sampson, 2004).
CHAPTER 6
PRACTICAL MINISTRY APPLICATION

This chapter offers a critique of what churches are doing and are not doing to encourage the faith development of adolescent girls. It includes practical programs that can encourage parents and the church to pass on the faith to adolescent girls. Together with the Bible study for adolescent girls, this practical ministry application serves to help the church develop a ministry plan that encourages and inspires tweens and teens to discover their faith and how to go deeper in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Critique of Current Practices of Churches

One of the most infamous films in the teen movie genre is Mean Girls, from 2004, which showed a side of teenage girl behavior based on the book Queen Bees and Wannabes by Rosalind Wiseman. The movie focuses on the dynamics of high school cliques. The teenage girls display aggressive behavior as they try to become part of the cool A-list clique known as “the plastics” and keep other teenagers out of their clique.

The humor and universal theme of Mean Girls resonates with what is happening in today’s society, especially with how adolescents can be excluded from friendship and even bullied at such a tender stage of human development. Modern bullying can be
difficult for adults to identify and understand, which leads adults to fail to correct such behavior.\textsuperscript{1} This same neglect can happen in the local church. Sometimes churches ignore teen rejection or bullying behavior.\textsuperscript{2} The church thinks it is enough to simply teach children, youth, and parents the biblical message from the Gospel of John: “Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other” (John 13:34-35 Message). Adults can fall into the trap of thinking good Christian teenagers have heard the message of love and will not behave the way the girls in Mean Girls behave. However, such assumptions are ineffective and naïve. While adolescents in the church have heard the message of love, they also have heard the messages of society. Churches cannot ignore the situation and instead need to create a means through which to help parents with their adolescent girls.\textsuperscript{3}

Parenting is not an easy process.\textsuperscript{4} There are many detours that can happen on the journey, if parents are not careful. Adolescent girls want to develop a faith but need help along the journey.\textsuperscript{5} Parents and church leaders can partner to help adolescent girls discover and then nurture that faith.\textsuperscript{6} Since the journey for adolescent girls is different from that of adolescent boys, this must be accounted for when determining how best to support their spiritual growth.

\textsuperscript{1} Boyd, It’s Complicated, 134.
\textsuperscript{2} Ronald Hecker Cram, Bullying: A Spiritual Crisis (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 48.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 77-78.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 46-47.
The literature can be helpful in understanding the differences between adolescent boys and girls. Gilligan was one of the first to point out the differences between boys and girls in this regard. She has written several books lifting up the differences in male and female views. As a feminist, she brings to light the differences in their thought processes and explains why society now needs to spend time studying adolescent girls in order to help them. In doing research on adolescent girls, everyone in society will benefit. The female journey often contains brokenness. Only when the brokenness is out in the open can the broken individual begin to look for ways to heal. While she does not discuss this issue theologically, Gilligan believes that many of the issues in the world today could be addressed with equality for women. Gilligan raises many wonderful points about the differences between adolescent boys and girls. These differences should not be ignored but must be examined in order to help adolescent girls grow up.

There are many Christian resources written about parenting. Unfortunately, many are for families of young children and do not offer ideas for adolescents. While it is imperative to start early and develop a good foundation, Christian parenting books cannot stop with elementary-age children as there is still parenting needed in adolescence.

Few authors combine information about faith with the social science information regarding development. Clark is one of the few who fuse material concerning development of the brain and body along with faith development. One of the limited number of books discussing the topic of fatherly influence on daughters, titled *Daughters and Dads: Building a Lasting Relationship*, was written by Clark and his wife. Another interesting

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7 Gilligan, *Joining the Resistance*, 41.
8 Ibid., 77.
perspective comes from David M. Csinos and Melvin Bray, who focus on a Christian understanding of faith but also includes authors from different traditions.

In exploring the parenting curriculum from a Christian perspective, there was a heavy focus on Scripture and situations. I was not able to find a Christian parenting curriculum that included information from the social sciences about the development of adolescents. The Getting It Together curriculum by Carol A. Wehrheim, a Christian educator, focuses on faith questions with a time to examine one’s life and discovering how to nurture the spiritual life. While the curriculum is designed for adults and those who work with families, there are also suggestions throughout the material on how it can be done together as a family. Christianity Today International has a number of Bible studies available that guide parents through Scripture and supplement with short articles from Christian Parenting Today magazine to be read prior to the class. These articles are designed to help bring practical, real-world experiences to the Bible study.

There are several things that parents need to do to help adolescent daughters on their faith journey. One is to be open and honest about their own faith and remain ready to take advantage of teachable moments to talk about faith. If female tweens and teens do not see parents discuss or even wrestle with faith, they will not develop the skills to do it for themselves. Adolescents must be made comfortable discussing faith using their own terms, which may be different from that of their parents. While many parents may enjoy

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and appreciate traditional worship, this likely is not the musical form that reaches their adolescent daughters. A contemporary service may reach their adolescent daughters in a way that helps them grow in their faith. In this way and others, parents need to be open to their daughter’s faith being different and distinct from their own faith walk. They should strive to find times to listen. Parents need to spend time in holy listening, which means not interrupting and intentionally focusing on how to really comprehend what their adolescent daughter is saying. This is a time to learn and understand. Parents also need to find adults to accompany them on their faith journey. These should be adults who are open to discussing their faith, mentoring the adolescent, and ones who are not simply looking to provide the right answer or the rules but people who will accompany the adolescent on the journey to where God is leading them. Parents also should encourage involvement in a Christian youth group, either at the local church or with regional or nationwide organizations such as Young Life or other groups that embrace fellowship and reflection while on the journey.12

Parents should practice the rituals of the faith. Practicing one’s faith is more than just going to church on Sunday morning or saying grace at mealtime. There are many ways that one can incorporate faith practices into daily living. Pastor and mother Traci Smith has written *Seamless Faith* as a guide, which contains simple practices that families can do together to practice their faith.13 Throughout her book, she references practical suggestions on how one can incorporate faith into a variety of milestones and everyday events. The time

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commitment is from one minute to one hour. Practicing faith is important and cannot be an afterthought. Pastor and mother MaryAnn McKibben-Dana wrote *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family’s Experience with Holy Time* as a reflection on how she and her family incorporate times of Sabbath into their life.\(^{14}\) McKibben-Dana takes readers on her personal journey as she and her family try to change from a frenetic chaotic life to one of keeping Sabbath all year long. This book comes with a supplemental study guide that encourages adults to gather and discover together how to have time of family Sabbath. Faith cannot be ignored; otherwise, the faith will not be passed down. It must be practiced on a regular basis.

If parents do their job correctly, faith will not be a battle or an argument. Instead, faith will happen and grow organically. Faith should not be a war. Passing on the faith to an adolescent daughter is a privilege that comes to parents as a blessing from God. As part of their own faith development and growth as Christian disciplers, parents need to be open to the journey. While the destination may be known, people will take different paths, so there is no one right way to get there. Parents need to be prepared to go a different way than they had planned and allow their adolescent daughters to set the course. By allowing this, the parents affirm her faith and relationship with God. The daughter may experience God differently from her parents but that does not mean it is less important or wrong.

Parents cannot parent alone. The church needs to be a part of the process, by taking their direction from the parents on specific plans. “The church, after all, is but a branch grafted onto the old tree called Israel (Romans 11:11-24).”\(^{15}\) Since we are all grafted together, the church needs to work with parents to equip them for this part of the faith

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\(^{15}\) McKnight, “I Am Church,” 220.
journey. Churches cannot expect parents to know what to do or how to do it but can help by giving them the tools, so they can create a plan for their adolescent daughters.

**Creation of a Parenting Course**

In order to encourage parents, churches need to offer a course in parenting. Such a course would need to include key principles and practices. In particular, there are four helpful principles that parents can follow to encourage their adolescent daughters in their faith journey. The first is for both parents to practice their faith. The purpose of this is for the adolescent daughter to see her parents’ practice and understand that this is an important part of life.\(^{16}\) By practicing their faith, parents then will be able to have discussion and be involved in faith development. The second principle is for both parents to be in relationship with their daughter(s), especially the father.\(^{17}\) The reason for this is that when both parents are yoked together and in relationship with their daughter, she will realize how valuable and important she is.\(^{18}\) This will help with her self-esteem and her self-worth. This also will help her as she discovers her own unique identity as a beloved child of God.\(^{19}\)

The third principle is to resist giving up on an adolescent girl’s journey of spiritual formation. Although she will wrestle and even wander from the process, the adolescent daughter needs to discover and develop a faith walk on her own and not be forced.\(^{20}\) While it may be difficult at times for the fruits of the Spirit to take root, they cannot be pulled

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17 Clark and D. Clark, *Daughters and Dads*, 43-44.

18 Ibid., 126-127.

19 Ibid., 85.

from the parents; rather, they must grow within the adolescent, as this transformation is the responsibility of the Holy Spirit. Moses wandered on the way to the Promise Land (Joshua 5:6); similarly, the adolescent daughter may wander. God did not give up on Moses, and parents cannot give up on their daughters.

The fourth principle is that parents must encourage a daughter’s participation in a community of believers. Through participation in a faith community, the adolescent daughter will develop her own relationships with other women who can mentor her and help create a larger support system. Involving additional women can inspire her faith.

Local churches can offer a parenting class for the initial assisting of parents in these four principles. The idea based in Scripture is for parents to learn, to practice, and then to impart (Ezra 7:10). Once parents have been through the class, they should be partnered with other parents in the faith community to help them on their journey. In this way, parents will not be sent off alone to figure out how to parent their adolescent daughter.

The initial parenting course would be designed to be an hour long and taught during Sunday School for eight weeks. These classes would be led by a team of leaders. The main facilitator would be a pastor responsible for families and faith development but also would include members of the church who have expertise in different areas. Each

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21 Ibid., 20.

22 Ibid., 101.

23 Ibid., 96-97.


class would begin with prayer and then have a presentation lasting fifteen to twenty-five minutes on the topic of the day. The group then would read Scripture together as a class and reflect on the passages and discussion questions in a small group format at their tables. Ideally, there would be four people in a group, but groups should have no less than three people and no more than ten people to allow for a good dialogue. About ten minutes before the class is to end, the facilitator would gather all the groups back together to hear a key insight they learned and wanted to share with all the other groups. The class would end with prayer. Below is a suggested breakdown for each weekly session, its focus, beneficial teaching points, and points of departure for group discussion.

Week One: Introduction and General Information about Adolescent Girls

The first session in the series focuses on imparting general information that helps parents to intimately understand adolescent girls. This involves exploring the developmental stage of adolescence and what makes tween and teen girls unique. Here the importance of generational involvement in the faith development of adolescents also will be covered. The foundation for this is Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and Joshua 24:14-15, which is why these portions of Scripture are selected for this particular gathering.

Reflection on Deuteronomy 6:1-9 centers on the passage as an expression of the covenantal relationship between the Lord and Moses. The Exodus story is the root of the law, because “without that story, the law itself would wither and die, just as a tree will

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26 Leaders of the class would be given a copy of Hunter, *The DNA of D6*, to help them understand the importance of various generations involved in discipleship and faith development. When the Deuteronomy passage is explored, Hunter’s book may be a good resource to discuss the passing down to the generations.
wither and die when cut off from its roots.” Parents will learn how Moses was instructed to teach this covenant and story to the nation and how parents were to pass it on throughout the generations. Group participants will learn how this passage is an expression of God’s love and, like the Israelites, the people were reminded to remember who God is and their responsibility to pass on that knowledge to the next generation. The identity and essence of God is summed up in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which cannot be forgotten by the people of Israel or the contemporary Body of Christ.

Reflection on Joshua 24:14-15 centers on serving the Lord. Joshua was speaking to the people and challenged them to be faithful to God, who had been faithful to them. An important part of this passage is the command to serve. “The term appears nine times in verses 14-18 and five more times in the rest of chapter 24.” The term “serve” has two meanings. One is the “sense of ‘to be devoted to.’” The second “is in reference to the performance of rituals in the sanctuary (Num 8:11).” Parents will come to see how Joshua’s speech is a passionate plea to be dedicated and faithful to God and see themselves as similar to the people of Israel, challenged to serve God with integrity and truth. This is something that must be authentic and real and cannot be faked. Once they have this faith, they must pass it on to the next generation. The head of the household has a responsibility to decide for his family who they will serve, and Joshua makes it clear

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29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 125.
that he will serve the Lord. Parents have a responsibility to teach this truth and faith to their children, in order for them to learn it.

The primary teaching points focus on the brain development of adolescents and the unique nature of girls. To accomplish this, a psychologist and guidance counselor will be invited into the session as special guest leaders and parents will be asked to read articles in advance of the session regarding the adolescent stages of development.31 Discussion will encourage parents to think about what adolescence was like for them, what experiences their daughter has as an adolescent that differ from their own, and what they currently are doing to encourage their daughter’s faith development.

**Week Two: Understanding the Adolescent**

The second session of the series focuses on building a relationship with the adolescent daughter to understand what she experiences. This involves exploring methods to develop trust and a relationship. The foundation for this is Psalm 55:1-8. Reflection on Psalm 55:1-8 will focus on the prayer of an unnamed person taking refuge in God. The author is experiencing great anxiety and is searching for safety and continually calls upon God. The beginning verses of the psalm of lament describe a person who is wandering restlessly, filled with cares and anxieties. The psalmist is praying for help and a place of refuge.32 Parents will observe how, like adolescent girls, the psalmist is wandering and searching for a place of peace and refuge that can be found

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in God. There is a desire to be known by God and for God to hear the pleas and prayers of the psalmist. This is important in working with adolescents as they have a desire to be known for their identity, rather than what others think of them.\textsuperscript{33}

The primary teaching points focus on building a relationship with an adolescent, which takes time and work. This will require listening skills and developing the practice of holy listening. Parents will learn that holy listening means taking the time to listen to an individual and not interrupting or interjecting their thoughts or comments but hearing what the speaker is actually saying. To accomplish this, the youth group leader and advisors will be invited into this session as special guests also. Parents will be asked to read articles in advance on parenting.\textsuperscript{34} Discussion will encourage parents to explore their adolescent’s identity, what she likes and is doing in this community, and to consider how they spend time learning about their daughter—specifically, how they listen to gain understanding even when there is a disagreement about the adolescent’s behavior.

Week Three: Emotions

The third session in the series focuses on how parents need to realize that adolescents have a range of emotions. Parents must respond not out of anger, frustration, or with threats but out of love and logic. This will help build a relationship. The foundations for this session are Psalm 139:13-16 and James 1:2-6. Reflection on Psalm 139:13-16 centers on the psalmist’s understanding of God and the divine calling of each person. The person is woven together by God. Parents will observe how the psalmist knows that nothing happens by

\textsuperscript{33} Anthony, \textit{Spiritual Parenting}, 188.

accident, and each individual was fashioned by God for a specific purpose. While adolescents might frustrate parents, it is important for parents to remember that adolescents function this way for a reason. While there may be frustration at times, parents have to respond with love, knowing that their daughter was created a certain way by God.

Reflection on James 1:2-6 will explore trials from God’s perspective. A trial is not something to be happy about, and individuals should not be martyrs regarding their situation. The trials faced do not bring joy, but joy comes as a result of the growth that the trial brings. Parents will come to see how the trial allows a Christian to explore God’s presence and draw the Christian closer to God. God will not leave any believer alone to suffer, but each believer needs to take the time during difficulty to explore where God is leading through the time of trial. By seeing God’s generosity and presence, believers can then rejoice, not at the trial but at God’s faithfulness.

The primary teaching point focuses on how parents need to seek relationship with their adolescent. To accomplish this, a psychologist and guidance counselor will be invited into the session as special guest leaders and parents will be asked to read articles in advance of the session regarding the busyness of family life and what parents can do to help develop a relationship with their adolescent. Discussion will encourage parents to think about their relationship with their adolescent daughter. Such discussion questions include the following: “How do you respond to your adolescent when she does something

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you like?” “How do you respond to your adolescent when she does something you do not like?” “How do you have a conversation with your adolescent to explain your decisions?”

Week Four: Boundaries

The fourth session in the series focuses on boundaries. Parents learn that boundaries are not about punishment but about helping to set guidelines for what is an acceptable pattern of life. This is a way to help teach adolescents to make beneficial choices. The foundation for this is Romans 8:12-17 and Galatians 3:23-4:7.

Reflection on Romans 8:12-17 will center on being part of the Body of Christ, which comes with rights and responsibility.\(^{37}\) Individual lives are transformed by the Spirit.\(^{38}\) “To compare the Christian community to a family means one must bring the same expectations, love, and patience to fellow Christians in the church that one should also bring to members of one’s own family.”\(^{39}\) Parents learn that as a child of God each individual has a responsibility and privilege to live according to God’s laws. Individuals need to be guided by the Holy Spirit in the way that they conduct their life and learn how not to live according to the ways of the world. Parents need to set boundaries for their adolescents and help serve as a guide, just as the Holy Spirit guides each individual towards God’s goals.

Reflection on Galatians 3:23-4:7 will center on Paul changing the understanding of the law. Parents will be exposed to how various versions of Scripture translate


\(^{38}\) Ibid., 158.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 140.
paidagōgos differently: from disciplinarian (NRSV) to custodian (RSV), to tutor (NEB), to teacher and guide (NLT), to schoolmaster (KJV). The notion is that the law is there to support and guide a person through life and not to punish an individual. Parents should help to create boundaries that are not designed to be punishment but to teach and support as the adolescent discovers what she is capable of doing in life.

The primary teaching point focuses on the law God has given. Parents come to see how the law is not about punishment but about helping each person and wanting the best for each individual. Parents need to view discipline not as punishment but instead as helping to create a way of life that will bring out the best in the adolescent. To accomplish this, two parents of high school girls who have been involved in the church and have found the church to be a supportive environment will be invited into the session as special guest leaders. Parents will be asked to read articles in advance of the session on the importance of boundaries with teenagers. Discussion will encourage parents to explore the rules of the family, how they are created and explained, and what happens if someone breaks a rule.

Week Five: Guiding and Mentoring

The fifth session in the series focuses on parents needing to be on the journey with adolescents as a mentor, friend, and parent ready to guide when necessary and be present when problems arise. The foundation for this is Psalm 23 and 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12, which is why these portions of Scripture are selected for this particular gathering.


Reflection on Psalm 23 will center on the comfort that is provided by this familiar psalm. The psalmist knows that there will be circumstances that are threatening, and during those “valley of the shadow of death” moments the psalmist knows that God is near. The shepherd leads the sheep through the treacherous places, and yet the sheep do not fear.\(^{42}\) This image of a shepherd taking care of the flock reminds biblical readers of the new wholeness.\(^{43}\) The psalmist realizes that God is present in both good and dark times. The sheep need their shepherd to do everything for them. Parents are needed in the beginning of life to shepherd their infants and take care of their needs. They will learn that even as their daughter grows into a young woman they are still needed to guide and shepherd her through adolescence into adulthood.

Reflection on 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12 will center on Paul speaking to the importance of parents taking responsibility to encourage and support their children to grow in the faith. This is something that each person should be concerned with and not assume that someone else will take care of in place of the parent. Paul wanted to impress upon the church the importance of passing along the faith, so he employed the family image.\(^{44}\) Parents will come to understand that individuals cannot pass along faith to another person without there being a relationship. To be able to take on this responsibility, a mentor has to know the person and be in a caring relationship in order for the faith to be passed on. Just as a parent cares about the health of a child, a parent should be concerned about the faith and spiritual health of their children.


\(^{43}\) Ibid., 31.

The primary teaching point focuses on how parents need to be co-travelers on the faith journey. Parents should be along for the journey to help when trouble arises but also there for guidance through the dark valleys. The church needs to demonstrate to the parents how to relate and bond with their adolescent. Scripture shows that “God instructed Hebrew parents to be leaders in their kids’ lives.” To accomplish this, two parents of high school girls who have been involved in the church and have found the church to be a supportive environment will be invited into the session as special guest leaders. Parents will be asked to read in advance articles on tools for mentoring. Discussion will encourage parents to explore who is guiding and mentoring their adolescent daughter: “How do you shepherd your daughter?” “How do you encourage your daughter in her faith?” “How do you work on your relationship with your daughter?”

Week Six: Community

The sixth session focuses on the communal nature of raising an adolescent. Parenting does not happen in isolation. The adolescent girl needs and craves community. This section will discuss ways to help provide and encourage community that can be supportive to the adolescent girl. The foundation for this is Luke 2:22-52 and Acts 2:43-47. Reflection on Luke 2:22-52 centers on the community at the temple. Jesus was taken to the temple, and Simeon and Anna were present. These faithful saints of the community commented on the presence of God in their midst (Luke 2:30, 38).

45 Hunter, *The DNA of D6*, 16.
46 Ibid., 21.
“According to Luke, God has not rejected the temple.”\textsuperscript{48} Jesus grew up in a home that observed the temple traditions. The temple was where community took place and a place to watch and witness faith development and the movement of God. Jesus spent time in the temple teaching and sharing his ministry. It is important for parents to encourage and allow the faith community to be a part of the faith development of their adolescent. Just as Simeon and Anna mentioned the presence of God in their midst, adolescents need to see and experience God in their midst. The church needs to point out where God is active and alive in the community. Learning does not happen in isolation but together in a community. Although Jesus taught in the temple, parents will learn that for today’s adolescent faith teaching needs to happen in the home and also in the church.

Reflection on Acts 2:43-47 centers on the community in Acts, which was different from community today. “In all these activities of teaching, fellowship and sharing, breaking of the bread, and praying we see a well-rounded picture of the church, the marks of authentic embodiment of the Spirit in the community’s life.”\textsuperscript{49} The church community worked together to praise God and for the benefit of the community. Their life together was marked by the Spirit’s presence in their midst. While there may have been times of difficulty, the early Christian community worked together according to the Spirit. Parents will observe how the community was together working to share the good news and in that process added people to the faith.


The primary teaching points focus on community: from the beginning of Scripture with Adam and Eve, there has been community; and faith never has happened in isolation. Adolescent girls desire to be a part of a group, and the responsibility of the church is to help provide a safe community to develop and grow faith. To accomplish this, two parents of high school girls who have been involved in the church and have found the church to be a supportive environment will be invited into the session as special guest leaders. Parents will be asked to watch a thirty-minute webinar in advance on concrete practical ideas on how to partner with youth leaders who interact with their adolescent daughters.\(^{50}\) Discussion will encourage parents to explore the importance of the faith community in the life of their family and center around the following questions: “Why is it important to be involved in a church?” “Why is it important for adolescents to attend worship?” “What does it mean to welcome in the name of Jesus?”

Week Seven: How to Talk about Personal Faith

The seventh session focuses on helping parents to explore their own faith journey and milestones. There are events that have impacted their relationship with God. Parents need to get comfortable discussing this journey with others. If parents are not comfortable discussing this topic, the parents will struggle to pass on faith to their adolescent daughter. The foundation for this is Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and Philippians 2:1-11.

Reflection from Scripture centers on passing on the faith tradition. The passage from Deuteronomy 6 was explored during the first week but is explored again, as parents

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may be able to go deeper in their understanding after reflecting on parenting for several weeks. Reflection on Philippians 2:1-11 centers on Paul’s appeal to the church to remember their common understanding of Christ. Parents will see how Paul encourages them in their Christian commitment and affirms how Philippi “is building his call for progress and maturity upon those very faith and life experiences.” Paul blesses the people and reminds them how Christians are supposed to live. Paul knows that the standard Christians are called to live by is high, so he encourages and blesses them for the journey.

The primary teaching point focuses on parents being able to articulate their own faith. There is little hope that parents will be able to pass that faith on to their daughters, if they cannot express it. Parents need to communicate who Christ is to them and where God is moving in their life. To accomplish this, a pastor and member of the church who is involved in evangelism or feels very comfortable talking about their faith will be invited into the session as special guest leaders. Parents will be asked to read articles in advance of the session regarding how to share one’s faith. Discussion will encourage parents to explore their faith and who God is to them through these questions: “How can God become real to an adolescent girl?” “Did you have confusion about God when you were an adolescent?” “Did you have confusion about God as an adult?” “Give an example of God’s activity in your life today.”

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Week Eight: Conclusion and Launching into Adulthood

The final session in the series focuses on helping parents to navigate the adolescent’s life. Parenting is a journey with the adolescent, which is not always a smooth path and at times is complicated to navigate. This will help create a plan for how to set boundaries, how to respond with love and logic, and how to engage the support of a community. The foundation for this is John 15:1-17 and 2 Timothy 3:10-15.

Reflection on John 15:1-17 centers on Jesus telling the disciples that he is the true vine and each individual is a branch. “The reality behind the symbol is, as suspected, intimate friendship. Jesus invites to an abiding love of him.” The task of the master gardener, Jesus, was one of distinguishing whether a branch was being productive and how to appropriately deal with the branch. Each adolescent needs to realize that her faith is not determined by her parents but is dependent upon her own relationship with Christ. Parents need to help their daughter develop her own faith, so the daughter can be grafted into the vine. Branches are not grafted to one another but to Christ.

Reflection on 2 Timothy 3:10-15 centers on Paul speaking to Timothy to encourage him. Timothy was familiar with Paul’s life and his struggles. Paul reminds Timothy of what he has been through but then encourages him to live the Christian life. Paul does not want Timothy to give up in the midst of struggle but to have patience and endure through the trials. It is important for parents to encourage their adolescent’s faith journey. There will be times of struggle and challenges. Adolescents need encouragement, so they can persevere and develop a faith that will withstand hardship.


The primary teaching point focuses on developing a plan. Parents will create a plan that strategizes how to encourage their daughter on her faith journey. Some ideas will include participating in a mission trip together, reading a book and discussing it together, and asking adults to walk the journey with their adolescent to offer encouragement. Parents need to create a plan, because they cannot assume that faith development will happen by chance. To accomplish this, a pastor and a member of the church who works with college-age ministry will be invited into the session as special guest leaders. Discussion questions will center on how parents can encourage and explore their daughter’s faith journey: “How might the church hinder the faith of an adolescent girl?” “How can the church support your daughter in her faith walk?” “What concrete things do you plan to do in the next five years to encourage her faith development?”

**Development of a Program to Support Parents in Passing on Their Faith to Their Daughters**

Once the course is completed, there will be an opportunity for monthly gatherings where parents can talk with one another about their experiences. At these monthly gatherings, there will be an opportunity to be a support system for one another. These scheduled gatherings not only can be a time to refresh parents on what they learned about parenting but also a time to encourage them in this process. Parenting is not a responsibility that can be done in isolation but requires the community. Participating in monthly gatherings can provide support for the parents as well as an opportunity for other adults to come together to pray and encourage the adolescent girls. These monthly gatherings

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55 Bowen, “Be a Family By Equipping Parents,” 75.
gatherings also can explore additional material in the implementation of spiritual practices. This group might spend time reading McKibben-Dana’s *Sabbath in the Suburbs* to learn practical ways of practicing Sabbath time. In addition, each family should receive a copy of T. Smith’s *Seamless Faith* or another devotional type book to give practical examples of how to engage in faith rituals in the home.

The church needs to be a place that encourages and gathers parents into community. It is a challenging journey to help guide an adolescent through life. Parents need support as they help their daughters make decisions about faith. Hunter advises, “Become an encourager to other parents—start a connection study group committed to learning more, praying together, and covenanting to break this cycle.” By having parents walk the journey together, there can be an opportunity for support, reassurance, and learning from one another. It is important for a variety of members of the church to be encouragers for parents. A variety of encouraging adults can offer many different resources to the parents.

Parents need to be excited about the faith development of their adolescent daughters. This is an opportunity to see where God is moving and working in their lives. The parenting course and Bible study for adolescent girls are intended to work in tandem to accomplish this very goal. At First Presbyterian Church (FPC) in Moorestown, New Jersey, where I serve as associate pastor of families, both programs will be piloted together, with the parenting course launching in Spring 2018 and the Bible study for adolescent girls following in Fall 2018. Since some of the Scripture content overlaps, the

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57 Bowen, “Be a Family By Equipping Parents,” 76.
purpose is to ground parents in their own faith journey and teach them how to engage with their daughters. So when the group for adolescent girls begins, parents will know how to journey with them and encourage their faith development at home. Since FPC is currently in the middle of intense transition and is heavily focused on a pastoral search after losing its senior pastor of twenty years, this ministry strategy for adolescent girls and their parents has been pushed into 2018. The hope is that when the new senior pastor arrives, he or she will preach a Sunday sermon series on the importance of nurturing the faith journey of adolescents, so that the congregation will be awakened to embrace its role in the faith development of tweens and teens more vibrantly.

In light of the broader journey, and regardless how churches choose to engage adolescents girls and their parents in the faith journey, the first step is to help parents. This help begins by creating an opportunity for the parents to spend time in Scripture, not to prepare to teach but just to spend time in God’s Word. It is important for parents to be in the Scripture themselves, so they can walk alongside as their adolescent grows in faith. All congregations need to help youth nurture their own relationship with God and develop a way to connect with God individually.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Faith development is like chips and salsa. The way to eat the salsa is to use the chips. We do not sit down at a party and just dip our fingers into the salsa. Chips are important for eating the salsa, but chips by themselves are missing an important part. The chips are just one of the components. With respect to this discussion, the “chips” are the games at a youth group meeting or having fun with friends over coffee at a favorite cafe. “Chips” are a variety of activities that help build the relationship so that faith can be shared, but it is not the sharing of the faith. The “salsa” is the faith sharing. It is the moment or experience when there is a sharing of God’s Word and the ingredients of passing on faith. We can choose to have a little bit of a chip or many chips, but it does not pass on the salsa. As parents, we need to find a balance between the chips and salsa.¹

While the faith journey is a personal topic, it cannot be left in isolation. This topic of faith development can cause people to wonder if they have the “correct” faith. Faith is a topic that many tend to ignore or avoid having conversations about, because they view faith as a private matter or feel they cannot find words to express it, yet this is a topic that the church needs to equip parents to discuss. Congregations cannot leave parents to flounder on their own; rather, both must partner together in order to pass on the faith to the next generation. To encourage faith development, we need to find the right balance between chips and salsa that works for each adolescent girl. There needs to be a balance

¹ Concept shared with me by Rich Swartwood, director of PYOCA Camp, Conference, and Retreat Center. Swartwood was leading a training for the adults who would be directing a week of summer camp. He wanted to make sure the kids had fun while at summer camp but also wanted to make sure that we passed on the faith to the campers as well. “PYOCA” is a condensed term meaning “Presbyterian Youth Camp.”
between transmitting the faith and keeping youth interested. There also needs to be the right combination of adults interested and involved in the lives of adolescent girls.

Leaders who are willing to take risks can live out the biblical mandates to share the gospel. “Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age” (Matthew 28:19-20 CEB). As disciples, we are called to make disciples, which includes teaching the faith to the next generation. Leaders can help equip parents to have conversations about faith in the home. Leaders can train congregants to model their faith with adolescent girls.

Adolescent girls can make a profession of faith that will last a lifetime. The church needs to be prepared to walk the journey with them, answering their questions and discovering together. This journey is one that can begin at a young age and will continue for years. As this exploration of faith develops and grows, adult mentors and soul friends can assist and shepherd during the journey. Churches need to provide willing mentors to teach and share their faith journey but also be willing to be a co-disciple on the journey.

Churches should not assume that the parents can and will do this on their own. They must collaborate with parents. This can and should be done through several methods. There should be a parenting class offered for parents of adolescents, in order to help equip them for this time of transition. For a smaller church it may be a parenting class for all ages, which at different times discusses the unique aspects of parenting at different stages of life. For a larger church, it should be a parenting class on adolescents but also include parents who have older children. The parents of older adolescents can
provide wisdom and insight and be a reassurance for parents of adolescents. Churches also should start a small group for parents that can meet monthly. This would allow and encourage parents to share concerns that they have in their lives but also be an opportunity to pray for one another and especially for their adolescents.

Ultimately, churches need to be supportive of families. They need to develop avenues that help equip parents, so they can feel comfortable having faith conversations with the next generation. These conversations do not begin when someone becomes an early adolescent but need to start during childhood. Parents do not just wake up one day feeling comfortable talking about their faith. If parents begin practicing faith and spiritual disciplines when their children are young, the practices and rituals will become a normal part of the life of their adolescent. This will allow for natural conversations about God and the presence of God in the lives of the each member of the family. The local Body of Christ needs to help parents from the time that a child enters the congregation, whether at birth or as an elementary-age child. This means churches equipping the parents to have faith conversations at home. The local church can help by offering programs to pass on the faith through Sunday School and youth groups but also can surround the family with tools to have faith conversations.

The family of God needs to be involved in faith development. Parents, though, cannot do this alone. Instead, the entire church needs to be equipped to support this faith journey. There needs to be a variety of intentional adult relationships involved in the life of the adolescent girl. These relationships become friends on the journey. They should be
the “sticky faith” kind of adults, who intentionally work one on one with young people.\(^2\) These adults should not be youth group leaders or Sunday School teachers but just adults in the congregation who intentionally make youth feel welcomed and wanted at the church.

On a normal Sunday morning, my high schooler walks through the church and is greeted by many adults. I know that she is the exception and not the rule. Over the years, being the daughter of a pastor and having medical issues, she was listed on the prayer page and people sent her notes and cards telling her that they were praying for her. Many in the church feel a connection to her. As she has grown, she is still visible in the life of the church. People often say hello to her on a Sunday morning and, being an extrovert, she stops to chat with them. She feels not only welcomed but loved by the congregation.

In a similar way, churches need to look at ways to include adolescents in the life of the church and help them to feel that they are important. The leadership in the church should look for ways that incorporate youth into congregational life—and not in a token sense, but in a way that demonstrates that the adolescent is a valuable part of the Body of Christ. This may involve having adolescents participate in a small group Bible study designed for them, engaging them in worship through the public reading of Scripture, or including them in a vital part of church life that allows them to share their spiritual gifts. Church leadership should seek to discover what spiritual gifts adolescents offer to the faith community and then work to find ways to mobilize them to share their gifts in the community of believers.

\(^2\) As described in Powell, *The Sticky Faith Guide for Your Family.*
If churches do not start helping parents to become active disciplers of their adolescent girls, half of the next generation of the Body of Christ is at risk of being lost. The faith that parents demonstrate has a direct influence on the faith development of the adolescent. Many parents are comfortable talking about sports and school with their adolescent, but churches need to equip parents to talk about faith and their relationship with God. When churches help provide an environment where faith is shared comfortably and naturally, parents will learn how to model that in their homes. Churches need to foster an environment where adolescents and their parents can grow and are welcomed to explore their faith.
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