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Storydwellers: A Narrative Approach to Teaching Scripture to Adolescents

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STORYDWELLERS: A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING SCRIPTURE TO ADOLESCENTS

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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Ministry

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STORYDWELLERS: A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING SCRIPTURE TO ADOLESCENTS

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

JAMES ARCHER LAYTON JR.
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A narrative approach of teaching Scripture to adolescents is an integrative methodology that draws from both narrative theology as well as developmental psychology. It considers both the narrative of the Bible and the psychosocial development of people during adolescence, which happens narratively. A narrative approach to teaching Scripture to adolescents offers the redemptive narrative found in the Genesis to Revelation story as a possible world by which adolescents can interpret their lives.

When constructing their identity through the lens of the Christ event, adolescents are grafted into God’s story as active agents in his redemptive plot for the world. To inhabit the world of Scripture is to embody a new identity as adopted children of the triune God and participate in the interlocking of heaven and earth through Christ. The goal of a narrative approach is to help youth see they are not just viewers, but both characters and co-authors in the midst of a redemptive saga produced by God. The great task of those who teach Scripture to adolescents is to help them discover that God has invited them to be active agents in the epic drama presented in Scripture. A narrative approach invites adolescents to reconstruct their past, perceive their present, and imagine their future autobiographically in light of the biblical narrative.

As adolescents psychosocially write themselves into the biblical drama in consort with the triune God, and the larger believing community, the way they view themselves and interact with the world becomes congruent with God’s revealed reality. Ultimately, it is by the enactment of Scripture that adolescents are fused into the family of Christ and ushered onto the world stage where they live out their identities as God’s saints within the biblical drama of redemption.

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To Cyndi, whose life is an act of poetic beauty
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PART ONE

THE PSYCHOTHEOLOGICAL STORYWORLD OF ADOLESCENCE
INTRODUCTION

A re-enchantment fell upon him . . . for at that moment he had a sensation not of following an adventure, but of enacting a myth. - C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra*¹

“Story,” N.T. Wright assesses, “has a well-documented role within the analysis of cultures and worldviews, and it is time biblical scholars took it more seriously.”² Taking Wright’s advice, this essay aims to take the role of story in the process of teaching Scripture to adolescents more seriously by offering a narrative approach. A narrative approach is an integral methodology that draws from both narrative theology as well as developmental psychology.³ It considers both the narrative of the Bible and psychosocial development during adolescence, which happens narratively.⁴ According to Michael Nakkula and Eric Toshalis at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, a narrative approach recognizes that “The core meaning of adolescent development lies fundamentally in the interpretation adolescents make of themselves and their worlds.”⁵

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³ Narrative criticism, according to N.T. Wright, “is a response to an increasing awareness in both the scholarly community and with the wider Bible-reading public that the Bible in general, and a good bit of the New Testament in particular, is emphatically not simply a list of doctrines to be believed or commands to be obeyed. It consists, at a far more fundamental level, of stories, narratives,” in Mark Allan Powell, “Foreword,” in *What is Narrative Criticism?: A New Approach to the Bible* (London: SPCK, 1993), ix.
⁴ Chap Clark defines adolescence as “a psychosocial, independent search for a unique identity or separateness, with the end goals being a certain knowledge of who one is in relation to others, a willingness to take responsibility for who one is becoming, and a realized commitment to live with others in community,” in *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 9. Although there are no definitive educational markers, for an approximation Michael Nakkula and Eric Toshalis describe adolescence “roughly as the period of transition to middle school (starting with the sixth grade) through high school and the transition to work or college,” in *Understanding Youth: Adolescent Development for Educators* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2006), xi.
⁵ Nakkula and Toshalis, *Understanding Youth*, xi.
light of this, a narrative approach to teaching Scripture to adolescents offers the redemptive narrative found in the Genesis to Revelation story as a possible world by which adolescents can interpret their lives. When constructing their identity through the lens of the Christ event, adolescents are grafted into God’s story as active agents in his redemptive plot for the world. In essence, to inhabit the world of Scripture is to embody a new identity as adopted children of the triune God and participate in the interlocking of heaven and earth through Christ.

Carole Peterson, of Memorial University of Newfoundland, points out that adolescence is when individuals typically begin to piece together their smaller stories, collected from childhood, into a larger life story to form their identities. Similarly, Monisha Pasupathi and Kate C. McLean, leading researchers on the narrative development of adolescent identity, state that “From a research standpoint, it is during adolescence when identity begins to be formed, using the precursors from childhood and setting the stage for consolidation in adulthood.” Developmental researchers have discovered that adolescence is when youth try to figure out who they are by fashioning

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together storied episodes collected during childhood to craft a life story. In other words, adolescence is when people begin to knit together the metanarrative of their lives.

Narrative identity, according to Dan P. McAdams, professor of psychology at Northwestern University, is “an individual’s internalized, evolving, and integrative story of the self.” This stage of identity development can be perilous for adolescents to navigate. Pasupathi and McLean liken the challenge that adolescents face during the process of identity formation to the main character in Joyce Carol Oates’ short story, “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” They explain, “In this story, the protagonist, poised between childhood and adulthood, navigates a series of encounters with relatively little awareness of either her childhood past or her potential adult futures. Her choices are risky and her future, at the end, looks dark.” Oates has captured a critical dilemma among contemporary youth. Like Connie, the beautiful, egocentric, fifteen-year-old protagonist who is searching for meaning, today’s youth are growing up in a world that, according to leading ecumenical theologian, Robert Jenson, “has lost its story.”

Without a story, identity is blurred and there is an absence of hope. Daniel Johnson, professor of sociology at Gordon College, describes:

It is only by means of narrative that hope is experienced in the first place…for the experience of hope has a narrative structure built right into it… When people hope, they lay a story arc over a certain span of history, one that identifies the limitations of the present, offers a vision of how those limitations may be

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10 Ibid., xix.

overcome in the future, and furnishes grounds for expecting that future will be realized.\(^\text{12}\)

Fostering hope is only one aspect of narrative identity formation. According to McAdams, narrative identity is formed through the integration of a “reconstructed past, a perceived present and imagined future.”\(^\text{13}\) Consequently, the way adolescents view their past, understand their present, and envision their future affects their self-view and the way they interact with the world. Furthermore, the narration of a life story is not simply a construct that happens solely in a person’s mind without outside influences, but rather it is formed within the narrative ecology of a person’s social and cultural contexts. McAdams writes, “Life stories are psychosocial constructions, coauthored by the person himself or herself and the cultural context within which that person’s life is embedded and given meaning.”\(^\text{14}\) In short, the making of a life story is a psychological process influenced by the cultural context in which a person lives. Therefore, in light of McAdams’ research, the cultural stories presented to an adolescent influence the construction of her life story and ultimately shape her identity.

There are several activities that can aid adolescents in the process of piecing together their life stories. One classroom-friendly activity incorporates the use of autobiography. McAdams highlights that by composing *Confessions*, “Augustine was able to construct a unified view of himself and his place in God’s creation. With this new

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vision of himself, he was able to return to his life with direction and purpose.”

Further, George Stroup, the former J. B. Green Professor Emeritus of Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary, writes that Augustine’s *Confessions* are a paradigm of “when personal identity has been reconstructed by means of the faith of Christian community.”

Although a classroom exercise in autobiography involving adolescents would be extensively shorter than *Confessions*, autobiographical-based activities offer reflective space for students to cultivate a unified view of themselves as they find their place in God’s story and ultimately gain vision and purpose for their lives in the drama of redemption.

Broadly speaking, narrative psychologists recognize that narrative theory can be used to help youth move from childhood to adulthood in the healthiest way possible. Although this is highly important, and parents, pastors, and educators undoubtedly share this goal, this essay analyzes the narrative construction of identity during adolescence as a pedagogical tool to help adolescents view themselves as people woven into the narrative of Scripture. A narrative approach to identity formation assumes that narrative identity is constructed psychosocially during adolescence in tandem with ideological stories embedded in the larger developmental ecology. To help people gain perspective of their place in God’s epic of salvation, the teacher’s role, within the vast expanse of God’s grace, is to help graft the narrative thread, which forms the core of a person’s identity, into the biblical story.

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15 McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 32.

The narrative universe of Scripture sets the theological scaffolding for a Christ-centered worldview. Building upon the narrative theory of development, for youth to journey from a pointless present with a bleak future into a purposeful present with a hopeful future, they must write the story of their lives within the narrative universe presented in Scripture. Embedding their lives into any other narrative ultimately falls short of the redemptive ramifications displayed in the Bible. As adolescents participate in the unfolding drama of God’s restorative work in the world through Christ, the biblical story offers the narrative elements needed to enter into the fellowship of the redeemed. Before delving into the world depicted by the biblical narrative, this essay theologically explores the process of identity construction during adolescence.
“The past and the future are both real. The present is a psychological illusion,” explains Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert. “The present is just the wall between yesterday and today. You know, if you go to the beach, you see water and you see sand, and it looks like there's a line between them, but that line is not a third thing. There's only water, and there's only sand. Similarly, all moments in time are either in the past or in the future which is to say the present doesn't exist.” According to the theory of narrative identity, what Gilbert proposes as the “wall” between the past and the future is the psychosocial space where a person’s identity is constructed. “Narrative identity,” writes Dan P. McAdams, “is an imaginative reconstruction of the personal past linked to an imaginative anticipation of the future.” In other words, the present is a psychosocial construct that exists in the human imagination. From a psycho-theological standpoint, the psychosocial present is also the space where the human identity is co-constructed with

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the narrative of Scripture. Put simply, the imagination is the loom where the human and
divine stories are woven together. This chapter explores the process in which the personal
theological imagination develops with particular emphasis on narrative identity
construction during adolescence.

The Personological Trinity: Actor, Agent, and Author

“The question of identity reaches a crescendo of urgency in the modern world: *Who am I?*” writes Dr. McAdams, “One answer is this: *You are a novel.*” McAdams proposes that people are both authors and actors within the stories they construct of their lives. More specifically, humans are both the authors and actors within the screenplays they write, and each life is a unique psychosocial work of art enacted in the world. Humans are the stories they psychosocially construct and live out.

In the 1960s and 1970s, psychologist and personality theorist Silvan Tomkins developed a theory of personality which he referred to as script theory. According to Tomkins, people are essentially playwrights who draft scripts in which they are the protagonists. In this way, Tomkins proposed, people unconsciously organize and make sense of their lives, which sets the stage for how they act in the world. “Like Charlie Chaplin,” Tompkins writes, people “will write, direct, produce, criticize, and promote the

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4 Perhaps this is why isolation is so crippling to a person’s humanity. To be human is to be a psychological individual dwelling socially in the world. In a sense, the deeper a person ventures into isolation, the less human they become. Thus, isolation imprisons a person’s humanity.

scenes in which [they] cast [themselves] as hero.” In other words, a person’s identity is a psychosocial movie that they produce from the opening scene to the present scene starring themselves. In response to being asked if consciousness was like a movie in an individual’s head, John Searle, professor of philosophy at UC Berkley, responded, “We are the movie.” Professor Searle makes an important distinction. The story adolescents craft of their lives is not a tale that they write and edit that is consciously external from the reality in which they dwell. It is the reality in which they live, breathe, and act.

To understand how personality develops, McAdams proposes an integrative theory of personality development which consists of three layers that illustrate how personality thickens through time. The first layer develops in early childhood people become consciously aware of themselves as social actors on the world’s stage. From infancy to death, they are cast as characters within the fabric of society. By the time a person reaches their teens they have settled into “a stable conception of their performative styles” as social actors. Agency, the second personological layer, emerges during middle childhood. Building on the ability to understand what motivates

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7 When a narrative identity is produced psychologically yet is hindered sociologically the result is delusion. This is what makes Miguel de Cervantes’ Don Quixote so comical. On the other hand, when identity is produced sociologically but has not been constructed psychologically the result is immaturity. Children have narrative social identities, but do not yet have the cognitive capacity to fully form a psychological narrative identity and are, by default, still maturing.


10 Ibid., 275.
individuals, or *theory of mind*, which emerges around the age of four, people begin to perceive themselves reflectively as motivated agents on the social stage.\textsuperscript{11} During middle childhood, applying theory of mind to themselves, children come to understand their actions in light of their individual motivations, goals, and values for their lives. Becoming a motivated agent means developing an inspired life agenda.\textsuperscript{12} To be an agent in the world is to be both on the social stage and to realize that one has the power to make decisions that affect the direction of one’s story. This shift is like being given a *Choose your own Adventure* novel, when you have only previously read standard novels.\textsuperscript{13} During this stage, children realize that they are social actors who possess goals and motivations about where they want their lives to go in the future.

During adolescence and adulthood people take up a psychosocial pen and begin writing the story of their lives.\textsuperscript{14} The third, and final, personological layer emerges when individuals become the autobiographical author of their stories. With the emergence of autobiographical reasoning, adolescents gain the capacity to write a life story by weaving together recollected memories into a coherent narrative.\textsuperscript{15} Essentially, becoming an

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 277.

\textsuperscript{12} Katherine Turpin argues that “Conversion, then refers not just to a change in awareness and understanding, but to a change in both our intuitive sense of the way the world is (imagination) and our capacity to act in light of that intuitive sense (agency)” in *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 59.

\textsuperscript{13} *Choose Your Own Adventure* is a series of children’s books written from a second-person point-of-view, where the reader is given occasional agency of the protagonist’s choices that determine the plot’s outcome.

\textsuperscript{14} McAdams, “The Psychological Self,” 274.

autobiographical author is the process of constructing what developmental psychologists refer to as a narrative identity. In their preteens, adolescents launch their first full autobiographical project.\textsuperscript{16} This “rough-draft” results in what child psychologist David Elkind calls a “personal fable.”\textsuperscript{17} These three layers of personality continue to develop and are shaped by a person’s unique makeup and experiences over the course of adulthood. From a personological perspective, the human identity is a unique work of narrative art which is written and edited over the course of a lifespan.

If protagonists are the stories they live by, then it would be exegetically appropriate to ask what kind of stories the characters in any given biblical narrative are living. How are the characters social actors within the world of the text? What are their goals and motivations? What type of stories are they authoring for their lives? Is there tension between God’s narrative and the autobiographical narratives of the characters within the biblical text? What happens when the stories of the characters within the text are woven together with God’s story? These are the types of questions that Scripture asks of all those who dare to read it. These are the types of questions that beckon people to live out God’s story in their own social contexts. Grammatical, literary, and historical analysis of the Bible is futile unless it ultimately leads people to discover the message being spoken through the interaction of the human and divine story within the text. Scripture is a theological work of art which paints a picture of the psychosocial dance between the human and divine narratives. Only by asking narrative questions can the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 314.

\textsuperscript{17} David Elkind, “Egocentrism in Adolescence,” \textit{Child Development} 38, no. 4 (1967), 1031. The theological implications of the personal fable are discussed in chapter three of this essay.
reader imagine the possibilities of what it would look like if his or her story were to be swept up into God’s story.

**The Emergence of Autobiographical Reasoning**

According to Erik Erickson’s theory of adolescent formation, identity development is the primary psychosocial task of adolescence.\(^{18}\) Building from Erickson’s theory, McAdams proposes that identity formation during adolescence happens through the construction of a life story.\(^{19}\) Essentially, a life story is a personological construction that defines who the narrator claims to be by taking recollected memories and abstract knowledge from a person’s past and making them into a coherent autobiographical view of self. Although children have the cognitive ability to formulate life episodes into stories, they do not possess the cognitive ability to formulate an overarching story of their lives until adulthood (See Appendix A). It is during adolescence when a person begins the journey of writing the psychosocial story of their life because the adolescent mind gains the cognitive power of autobiographical reasoning.\(^{20}\)

Autobiographical reasoning, as Bluck and Habermas define it, “is the processes of self-reflective thinking or talking about one’s life and the self in an attempt to relate one’s


\(^{20}\) The process of self-reflection that involves linking the personal past and present to the narrative of Scripture I refer to as “theological autobiographical reasoning.” Also, just as autobiographical reasoning “begins when children first begin sharing their experiences with others,” theological autobiographical reasoning begins when a person first begins sharing their religious experience with their faith community. See Robyn Fivush, “The Stories We Tell: How Language Shapes Autobiography,” *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 12, no. 5 (1998): 483.
personal past and present.” The onset of autobiographical reasoning during adolescence is like giving a young person a cognitive laptop with a hard drive chock full of autobiographical memories and video editing software where they can begin constructing the story of their life. Before the emergence of autobiographical reasoning, people have a series of temporal memories without a cohesive metanarrative of their lives.

The cognitive skills essential for the formation of a theological narrative identity that emerge during adolescence are attributed to global coherence. The four aspects of global coherence that lead to the formation of a life story are temporal coherence, causal coherence, thematic coherence, and a cultural concept of biography. Temporal coherence is the ability to place memories in a progressive order by using contextual clues of the memory. Causal coherence refers to the ability to understand why actions and personality changes happen within the larger context of a person’s life. It is the ability to link life scenes with extended narratives in a way that realistically explains the motivation behind a person’s actions.

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22 Marv Penner gives a summary of the narrative identity process during mid-adolescence: “A practical outcome of this new level of thinking is that for the first time in their young lives they become aware of their personal narrative. At this point, the adolescent is able to look back over the ‘snapshots’ of childhood memories and begin to weave them together in his or her own story. When those snapshots are marked primarily by pain and disappointment, the story that emerges tends to read like a tragedy. A series of memories where love was absent, relational attachment (belonging) was negative or unavailable, and feelings of worthlessness or insignificance were common result in a story line that often expresses itself in low self-esteem or even self-loathing,” in “Welcoming Wounded and Broken Adolescents in the Family of God,” in *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, 44.

23 Habermas and Bluck, “Getting a Life,” 748.

24 Ibid., 750-751.
The CBS television series *Criminal Minds* is based on an elite group of FBI profilers who are able to anticipate a suspect’s next move by figuring out what motivates them to kill people. In the show, expert profilers use the cognitive power of causal coherence to capture serial killers. Causal coherence is crucial for the formation of a narrative identity because it is the cognitive function necessary for understanding character motivation in stories. If you understand a character’s story, you can understand and even anticipate a character’s actions. A study testing the ability of preadolescents, older adolescents, and young adults to comprehend a short story found that only the older adolescents and young adults were able to interpret the protagonist’s motives by taking into account the character’s biographical experiences in addition to their present situation.\(^{25}\) Although preadolescents were able to comprehend a character’s motivation in light of their present circumstance, they lacked the ability to place a character’s actions within the metanarrative of a story, thus demonstrating a lack of ability to ultimately place their own lives within a larger narrative.

If causal coherence is the ability to comprehend what motivates people in the context of their life story, then thematic coherence is the ability to recognize themes in a person’s narrative.\(^{26}\) Or, in McAdams words, when “a person is able to derive a general theme or principle about the self based on a narrated sequence of events.”\(^{27}\) By gaining the cognitive tool of thematic coherence, the adolescent brain has achieved the capacity


\(^{26}\) Habermas and Bluck, “Getting a Life,” 751.

\(^{27}\) McAdams, *The Redemptive Self*, 65.
to interpret the metanarrative of their lives as well as the metanarrative of the Bible. From a psycho-theological standpoint, adolescents are developing the cognitive maturity to imaginatively weave their lives into the metanarrative of Scripture. In short, it is during adolescence that the human imagination gains the cognitive capacity to develop a theological narrative identity. From a hermeneutical standpoint, thematic coherence is the cognitive tool necessary to form an understanding of the metanarrative of Scripture. From a psycho-theological perspective, global coherence is necessary to form a biblical narrative identity.

Lastly, narrative construction is also influenced by a cultural concept of biography or “the normative cultural notion of the facts and events that should be included in life narratives (for example: birth, affiliations with or transitions from family, institutions, and geographical locations).”28 In other words, when constructing the autobiography of their lives, adolescents do not decide which events become identity shaping memories completely on their own. They are influenced by what the larger culture has socially dictated as normative personality shaping events. For North American adolescents this may include successfully completing high school by the time they are eighteen and attending a reputable four-year university. In the dystopian universe of Veronica Roth’s novel Divergent, sixteen-year-olds are expected to choose one of five diverse factions, determined by aptitude and societal values, to join for the rest of their adult lives.29 This ceremony is a culturally dictated concept of biography because every teenager has a

28 Habermas and Bluck, “Getting a Life,” 750.
social expectation to live up to in the process of choosing a faction, which in turn affects the trajectory of his or her life. Likewise, events and memories that are considered crucial in the process of identity formation influence how people tell their stories in any given culture.

In their seminal study of the emergence of a life story, Habermas and Bluck conclude that in the emergence of the life story during adolescence, “The ability to thematically interpret complex texts and an awareness of the necessity to interpret past events begin to develop in mid- to late adolescence and may continue into adulthood. These cognitive tools are necessary for autobiographical reasoning and thereby for the emergence of the life story.”

In regard to the hermeneutical aspects of identity construction, autobiographical reasoning is crucial for two reasons. First, it is the cognitive tool essential for viewing a life narratively. Second, it is also the cognitive tool necessary for understanding larger themes in literary texts and therefore the larger story of the biblical narrative. Since autobiographical reasoning allows people to comprehend the narrative of their lives as well as the overarching narrative of Scripture, and adolescence is when autobiographical reasoning emerges, adolescence is also the time when a person is cognitively capable of forming a theological narrative identity by viewing their lives in the context of Scripture.

Adolescence begins a person’s developmental journey towards a coherent life narrative by integrating and interpreting their personal past. The psychosocial phenomenon of a child embarking on the process of developing a narrative conscience

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during adolescence is what Sun poetically terms as “the loss of narrative innocence.”\textsuperscript{31}

The cognitive abilities acquired and social factors faced during adolescence act as an inciting incident in the life story of the adolescent. If the major conflict in the adolescent story is the struggle to find identity, then resolution of this conflict is the formation of an adult narrative identity, also known as identity achievement.

Aside from a person’s psychological complexity and the stockpile of significant recollected memories, there is another editing consideration; the story must play by the rules of the larger ideological scripts that are culturally dictated. Much like the Marvel Studios screenwriters whose scripts must fit cohesively into the metanarrative of the Marvel cinematic universe, adolescents must also fit their narrative identities within the larger cultural scripts in which they live. Societal pressures such as being asked by adults what vocation they would like to pursue also fuel an interest in biographical activities during adolescence.\textsuperscript{32} According to Fivush, “Autobiography is . . . the way we make sense of what happened, and this is fundamentally a social-cultural process.”\textsuperscript{33} The next section examines the convergence of narrative identity construction and culture.

**Cultural Frameworks of Identity Construction**

If autobiographical reasoning emerges during adolescence, then what influences the type of autobiographical sense people make of their lives? The stories people tell


\[\text{Habermas and Bluck, “Getting a Life,” 753-54.}\]

about themselves and enact are not simply the product of psychological creativity. These stories have frameworks which are dictated both socially and culturally.\textsuperscript{34} Culture does not leave one empty handed when constructing a life narrative, it provides a person with a cultural life script from which to guide one’s story. Essentially, a life script is a compilation of the culturally shared expectations about what life events are important and when they should happen.\textsuperscript{35} When a person should attend college, get married, have children, and retire are all common elements dictated in the cultural life scripts of industrialized western society. A culture’s prescribed script has such a strong narrative pull that if a life story diverges from the life script the narrator is compelled to explain such a deviation.\textsuperscript{36}

In addition to a suggested structure, culture also gives autobiographical interpretative assistance. The cultural interpretive frameworks given to individuals are referred to as master narratives. Master narratives are “schematic representations that contain abstracted information about the cultural standards that individuals should follow and use to position themselves while constructing/sharing autobiographical narrative.”\textsuperscript{37}


\textsuperscript{36} Fivush, Habermas, Waters, and Zaman, “The Making of Autobiographical Memory,” 332.

\textsuperscript{37} Avril Thorne and Kate C. McLean, “Telling Traumatic Events in Adolescence: A Study of Master Narrative Positioning,” \textit{Connecting Culture and Memory: The Development of an Autobiographical Self} (2003), 169. Also, according to Gerard Loughlin, “A master story or grand narrative is a tale which comprehends everything, telling us not only how things are, but how they were and how they will be, and our place among them. Such stories tell us who we are,” in \textit{Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology} (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8.
In other words, they are the pre-existent sociocultural forms of interpretation. They are the formulas people often use to tell their life stories. A master narrative is the story behind a person’s story.

In contemporary methods of interpretation, the Bible is often thought of as something that humans incorporate into their lives, or something that people fit into a culturally constructed master narrative. However, Scripture is not intended to be fashioned into human lives. The primary function of Scripture is to act as a theological master narrative in that its purpose is to interpret life for humans. If the Bible is not used as the master narrative by which a person lives, then another master narrative supplants Scripture as the text by which people interpret their lives (for example individualism, nationalism, consumerism, etc.). A life enacted to the beat of the biblical narrative is often counter-cultural. Throughout history, Christians have tried to interpret the Bible within the context of a culturally mandated narrative framework. This practice is dangerously misleading because the biblical narrative is not intended to be fashioned into the human narrative. Scripture is intended to be the framework by which humans understand their lives. When in proper balance, people do not interpret how Scripture fits into their lives, but rather Scripture interprets life for God’s people. The life stories of the saints are embedded within the biblical narrative, not the other way around.

Since the development of a narrative identity is a psychosocial construction, as opposed to solely a social construction, both the individual as well the social context in which they live, influence a person’s story.38 From a social science perspective, the Bible

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could be categorized as simply another cultural text—one of the many factors in social construction. From a theological perspective, the Bible stands apart from other cultural artifacts in that it is authored by God-inspired writers who invite their audiences to view reality from God’s perspective. Keeping the above in mind, the canon of Scripture is a theo-cultural text that functions psychosocially like other cultural texts. As a result, identity construction that happens in consort from within the biblical text is a psychosocial process.  

Fivush and associates write, “In a very real sense, autobiographical narratives are the point at which the individual and culture intersect.” Since Scripture is both a theological and a cultural construct, in a very real sense autobiographical narratives are also the point at which the individual and the narrative of Scripture intersect.

**Ideological Scripts, Adolescence, and Scripture**

“Ideology,” writes James Loder, professor of Philosophy and Christian Education at Princeton Seminary, “is a genuine hunger that calls for an interpersonally constructed worldview, a place in the concrete world. Thus, ideology becomes an anchor of identity. . . the adolescent is continually in the process of constructing an ideology, a worldview, a sense of cosmic meaning and the place of humanity in it.” According to Loder, the ideological hunger that emerges during adolescence is “the basic hunger for a

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39 In addition, because of its duel nature, identity construction with a biblical text is also a pneumatological process as well.


fundamentally religious ideology or theology because this alone covers all the dimensions of existence that the adolescent is confronting and supplies a new foundation for trust.” With the onset of formal operations and abstract thinking during adolescence, the construction of an ideology is now possible. During adolescence there is a hunger, a drive, that initiates an ideological quest for meaning. McAdams explains that in order to define who they are, adolescents seek an abstract system of beliefs and values—an ideology—that puts the self into context. This ideological setting for identity grounds the life story within a particular ontological, epistemological, ethical, and religious “time and space.” Typically, the ideological setting, the fundamental beliefs and values, for a person’s life story is established by the end of adolescence or early adulthood. During adolescence, people begin to look for moral navigation systems by which to guide their lives, anchors by which to dock their identities, and philosophical seas upon which to sail their life stories. Like all people, adolescents live out their stories within the milieu of ideological settings. Like all social actors, “A person’s moral, religious, and political values situate his or her life story within an ideological context or frame. The story makes sense only if the reader understands the background values and beliefs.” Without an ideology people have no moral compass by which to enact their lives. Adolescents can

42 Ibid., 215.
43 Ibid., 214.
45 McAdams, The Redemptive Self, 139.
only make sense of who they are, and how to live their lives, in the midst of an ideological setting. Without an ideology, whether sacred or profane, adolescents are left staring into the void of all the cosmos wondering who they are and how they should live their lives. They are social actors without anchors by which to dock their identities. They are motivated agents without moral or religious navigation systems to guide their course. They are sailors drifting aimlessly in the philosophical sea of stories that cover the earth.

Cultural life scripts may implore editorial influence of the adolescent life story, but they do not help answer life’s deepest questions. Ideological scripts, on the other hand, address issues of morality, truth, beauty, and justice. In his essay, “Script Theory,” Tomkins describes the ideological scripts that people acquire. These are, religious scripts as well as a variety of national secular ideologies. These are the scripts of great scope that attempt an account, guidance, and sanctions for how life should be lived and the place of human beings in the cosmos. They conjoin affect values, the actual, and the possible in a picture of the “real.” As such they represent faith, whether religious or secular.

Religious or not, adolescence is a period of life where people try to make sense of the world and figure out how they should live in the context of an ideology. They do this by sifting through and participating in the religious scripts being embodied by the ecology of social systems of which they are a part.

The final scene of Star Wars: The Last Jedi features an orphan slave on the planet Canto Bight, where the rich go to gamble at casinos and race tracks. One of the stable

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48 Ibid., Italics original.

49 Star Wars: The Last Jedi, Directed by Rian Johnson (Lucasfilm Ltd., 2017), DVD (Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2017).
boys, encountered by resistance fighters earlier in the film, uses makeshift action figures to recount to his friends how the Jedi Master Luke Skywalker took a final stand against the Supreme Leader, Kylo Ren and the First Order. Interrupting the story, their boss scolds them and tells them to get back to work. One of the orphans steps into a stable, summons his broom with the Force and looks up into the starry sky. Holding out his broom like a Jedi Master, he wonders where his life fits into the epic narrative unfolding in his universe. In a world where orphans are forced into slave labor, people get rich off war, and evil empires rule by exploitation, he hopes his life will become part of the revolution that liberates the galaxy. In essence, this is how adolescents, now equipped with new cognitive powers, begin to negotiate the stories which will offer the ideological framework for how they will live their lives.

Although adolescents author their stories within an ideological script and live out their stories on a stage with an ideological backdrop, not every ideology can offer transcendent hope. In *The Logic of the Spirit*, Loder writes,

> Only an ideology that deals with one’s own death and potential nonbeing in the light of that which is truly transcendent and holy will be strong enough to meet the intensified needs of this period . . . The Christian ideology not only provides an adolescent reconstruction of trust; it does what the original trust could not do: provide a reason to live that affirms life itself, not by repression but in the face of death itself.\(^50\)

The ideological script for followers of Christ is the ideological worldview depicted in the biblical narrative. To live out the story of Scripture is to live with the biblical narrative as the ideological backdrop of one’s life. It is within the ideological setting of Scripture that a Christian lives out God’s Kingdom in the world.

\(^{50}\) Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit*, 215.
During adolescence, people begin to hunger for the answers to life’s deepest questions. As Loder poetically puts it, they “put a face into the emptiness of the universe to overcome the cosmic loneliness that now appears.”\(^{51}\) To fill the void, adolescents look to the ideological scripts embedded in their sociocultural settings. The biblical narrative is an ideological script which paints a picture of reality from a God’s-eye-view so that readers may see themselves in light of the biblical narrative. To embrace a biblical worldview is to embrace the biblical narrative as the ideological script by which people craft their identities and live their lives. An honest exploration of Scripture engages the deepest questions of human existence in a way that leads young people to a greater understanding of who they are and how they should live in the world. Nakkula and Toshalis point out that, “When adolescents implicitly ask what kind of person they should be, in what or whom they should place their trust, or what kind of world they should make, the answers we construe and imagine with them help co-construct who they become and the way they approach the world, even if those answers are patently rejected.”\(^{52}\) In light of this, it is the role of the teacher, pastor, and youth worker to help students encounter the biblical story in ways that lead them to find meaning, purpose, and belonging in Christ as they peer into the cosmos and wonder how their lives fit into it all.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 95.

\(^{52}\) Nakkula and Toshalis, *Understanding Youth*, 3.
CHAPTER 2
WEAVING TOGETHER THE ADOLESCENT AND DIVINE

The famous cognitive psychologist, Jerome Bruner identified two distinct types of knowing: paradigmatic and narrative. Paradigmatic knowing mainly deals with knowledge of cause and effect, science, and rational discourse. When people think in paradigmatic mode, the aim is to find the logical, empirical proof, theories, and crafted arguments. In other words, to know something paradigmatically is to understand true logical arguments like mathematical proofs or scientific methods. Although humans may be able to identify observable patterns about God and the divine-human interaction, God is neither a scientific theory nor a carefully crafted argument. God is a motivated psychosocial being. The creator of the universe possesses majesty that goes beyond paradigmatic modes of human expression and experience. Therefore, theology cannot be paradigmatic in approach.

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2 Vanhoozer writes, “Theology is not merely theoretical, a matter of information and the intellect, but also theatrical, a matter of forming, transforming, and performing ‘habits of the heart’ that lead to action (i.e. works of love).” In *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), xiv-xv.
The other type of knowing, Bruner describes, is narrative knowing. This is essentially what people learn from stories. Narrative explains why people do things. According to Bruner, stories begin with an intentional, motivated agent. Whether it is agents Tony Stark and Bruce Banner who want to use artificial intelligence powered by an alien gem to create a global defense system called “Ultron,” or a Samaritan woman at a well in ancient Israel who is searching for value and meaning in life, people use narrative mode to explain what motivates actions. If someone wants to know why an adolescent is going on a mission trip to Nicaragua, then the first step is understanding his or her story. If someone wants to understand why a student’s parents are getting divorced, there is a story there too. Bruner explains that stories are mainly about the “vicissitudes of human intention.” In other words, stories are about motivated characters that experience some sort of conflict as they pursue some end.

The physical and biological world is the setting in which this psychological reality exists. If a person wants to learn about the physical or biological world, then they engage in paradigmatic modes of thought. If someone wants to learn about psychology, then they must go beyond the setting and engage in narrative modes of thought. Although it is possible to understand paradigmatic truths about God, for example, “God is love,” the

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3 In an interview, Bono, the famous Irish singer-songwriter stated, “I look to the Scriptures for poetic truth as well as the sort of historical stuff. I’m interested in—and of course there was—a historical Jesus,” in Interview with Gay Byrne, *The Meaning of Life with Gay Byrne*, RTÉ One, June 25, 2013. Using Bono’s language, the “poetic truth” is the narrative truth and the “historical stuff” is more paradigmatic.

God of Scripture cannot be known through paradigmatic arguments (1 Jn 4:8). ⁵ Since Scripture is narrative in form, the goal of biblical theology is to view the Bible as a narrative appeal to the human and divine experience—not to simply know about God. Stories have the ability to be plausible and lived out (what Bruner refers to as verisimilitude), and paradigmatic facts do not. Facts do not motivate, stories do. As narrative, Scripture possesses verisimilitude and therefore is meant to be imagined and lived, not simply heard and known.

On the other hand, stories do not work well to explain the scientific details of the physical world, which is why going to Scripture to answer paradigmatic kinds of questions poses problems. For example, Scripture does not tell readers the chemical compound of materials, or if a vegetarian diet is biologically the healthiest alternative for humans. These are paradigmatic questions best explored through scientific inquiry. What Scripture can explain is who authored life and what role humans have in the cosmos. When readers approach God’s Word from a paradigmatic standpoint, then they ask the Bible to answer questions that its writers were not attempting to answer. Narrative explains how to live in the world, not how the physical or chemical world functions. Since Scripture is narrative, it explains how to live in the world, not the science behind the world in which people live.

⁵ N.T. Wright points out the narrative way of knowing God was the natural way most first century Jews understood God: “For most Jews, certainly in the first century, the story-form was the natural indeed inevitable way in which their worldview would find expression, whether in telling the stories of YHWH’s mighty deeds in the past on behalf of his people, of creating new stories which would function to stir the faithful up in the present to continue in patience and obedience, or looking forward to the mighty deed that was still to come which would crown all the others and bring Israel true and lasting liberation once and for all,” in The New Testament and the People of God (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 39. All future Scripture references in this work are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.
In light of this, learning Scripture must not be thought of as the comprehension of doctrines or biblical principles. Since humans understand themselves narratively and the Bible is a narrative expression, reading Scripture is an appeal to a narrative mode of thought.\textsuperscript{6} Trying to fit either humans or the Bible into a paradigmatic paradigm is neither within the scope or function of the human mind nor the nature of Scripture. As Bruner writes, “When telling our own stories, we must be able to identify our motivation and the deviation of the cultures canonical pattern,” and when reading Scripture, one must be able to identify the motivation of the characters within its pages and the deviations from the culture’s canonical pattern.\textsuperscript{7} The canon of Scripture is a story about how God broke into the canonical patterns of human culture with a new divine way of living.

Teaching Scripture using a paradigmatic mode may be an effective way to help students understand certain biblical truths, but it does not invite them to become active agents within the biblical drama in a way that affects them psychosocially. Humans understand their identities narratively and Scripture is narrative in form, therefore to strip the Bible of its narrative by reducing it to paradigmatic principles is to sterilize the text of its narrative power to shape a person’s identity. Paradigmatic approaches to teaching Scripture to adolescents are particularly missing the mark because adolescents are beginning to construct their identities narratively. If Scripture is not offered as a possible text in which to shape their identity, then they turn to other ideological texts for the task of meaning-making.


\textsuperscript{7} Bruner, \textit{Actual Minds}, 49-50.
Ultimately, teaching Scripture paradigmatically falls short because God’s Word is primarily a narrative composition. To engage Scripture is to allow God’s Word to tug at the imagination and suggest an alternate way of dwelling in reality. Stories, not propositions, have the power to simulate social experience. Stories by nature are proposed ways of living in the world. Scripture, because it is narrative, simulates the social experience of what it looks like to live as a follower of Christ within the world of the reader. With Scripture, humans are given a mental model of what it looks like for their stories to be woven together with the divine story. If “Stories teach us how to be human,” then the biblical story teaches us God’s way of being human in the world.

In describing his view of child development, developmental psychologist Urie Bonfrenbrenner states,

The recognition of the possibility of relations between settings, coupled with the capacity to understand spoken and written language, enables [the developing child] to comprehend the occurrence and nature of events in settings that he has not yet entered himself, like school, or those that he may never enter at all, such as the parent’s workplace, a location in a foreign land, or the world of someone else’s fantasy as expressed in a story, play or film.

Elkind states that adolescence is when people gain the ability to imagine “what might be.” In this way, adolescents have the mental capacity to recognize God’s reality expressed in Scripture. Helping students envision the proposed world of the text is the

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first step in teaching Scripture, but the ultimate goal is to help people inhabit the reality of the Bible’s imagined way of life. The purpose of understanding God’s Word is to help people enter into God’s story. The ultimate concern of a narrative approach to teaching Scripture is for youth who sit on the sidelines of God’s redemptive story to enter into it and become active agents in the biblical drama.

A common theme in the life stories of highly generative adults is an event happening in the early chapters that convinces the protagonist that they are chosen. The goal of biblical theology is not the production of generative adults (although this is often a byproduct), but a key aspect of a psychosocial narrative switch is the notion of chosenness. In light of this, how do teachers engage students with the narrative of Scripture in a way that they come to understand that they are chosen to be a part of God’s story? At the end of the Jesus Storybook Bible, British author Sally Lloyd-Jones invites children to begin thinking of themselves as active agents within the biblical drama. She writes, “Because, you see, the most wonderful thing about this Story is—it’s your story, too!” In Simply Christian, N.T. Wright points out, “God intends to put the world to rights; he has dramatically launched this project through Jesus. Those who belong to Jesus are called, here and now, in the power of the Spirit, to be agents of that putting-to-rights purpose. The word ‘mission’ comes from the Latin for ‘send’: ‘As the father sent McAdams, The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By-Revised and Expanded Edition

Sally Lloyd-Jones and Jago, The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers his Name (Grand Rapids, MI: Zonderkidz, 2007), 351.
me,’ said Jesus after his resurrection, ‘so I am sending you’ (John 20:21).”¹⁴ A person becomes motivated by the biblical story when he or she embraces the metanarrative of the Bible as the ideological story arc of their narrative identity.

**The Nexus of Reality**

Writers create a universe in which they are the author of its reality or, as Marvel editor Steve Saffel explains, “Reality is whatever the writer wants it to be.”¹⁵ Further, J.R.R. Tolkien proposes that every fantasy writer “hopes that the particular quality of this secondary world . . . are derived from Reality,” or that their work has what he calls the “inner consistency of reality.”¹⁶ Tolkien explains that the ultimate reality of human history is depicted in the Christian story, the “Great Eucatastrophe” of the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ.¹⁷ Because it is a divine production, the story depicted by the writers of Scripture is different than other stories—it is the story through which life is accurately interpreted.¹⁸ The French reformer John Calvin argued that “We can only

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¹⁷ Ibid., 84.

¹⁸ Stroup writes, “Narrative theology is not simply a matter of storytelling. Narrative theology does recognize, however, that Christian faith is rooted in particular historical events which are recounted in the narratives of Christian Scripture and tradition, that these historical narratives are the basis for Christian affirmations about the nature of God and the reality of grace, and that these historical narratives and the faith they spawn are redemptive when they are appropriated at the level of personal identity and existence.” George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 17.
interpret our experience correctly when we view it through the lens of Scripture.”¹⁹ In short, Scripture is the lens which allows people to see clearly the truth about themselves and the world in which they live.

In the Marvel Universe there is an artifact called the M'Kraan Crystal. The crystal is described as the “nexus of reality” because it contains the linking point of all the different realities in existence.²⁰ If stories are “the grid through which humans perceive reality,” as Wright points out, then another way of viewing Scripture is by considering it the nexus point of all realities (or stories) in existence.²¹ As, biblical scholar Richard Bauckham succinctly puts it, “The biblical story is a story about the meaning of the whole of reality.”²² One of the fathers of narrative theology, Hans Frei, writes,

Long before a minor modern school of thought made the biblical “history of salvation” a special spiritual and historical sequence for historiographical and theological inquiry, Christian preachers and theological commentators, Augustine the most notable among them, had envisioned the real world as formed by the sequence told by the biblical stories.²³

In God’s world, the nexus point of reality, and all narratives, is Scripture.

Not only does the Bible depict a possible reality for people (like all stories), but it trumps all storied realities. Another one of the fathers, George Lindbeck writes, “A scriptural world is able to absorb the universe. It supplies the interpretive framework

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²⁰ *Gambit & The X-Ternals* vol. 3, “To the Limits of Infinity” (Marvel: May 3, 1995).


²² Richard Bauckham, “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story” in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 48.

within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality.”

In comparing the Bible to *The Odyssey*, literary scholar Auerbach, observes:

> The Bible’s claim to truth is not only far more urgent than Homer’s, it is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims. The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy. All other scenes, issues, and ordinances have no right to appear independently of it, and it is promised that all of them, the history of all mankind, will be given their due place within its frame, will be subordinated to it. The Scripture stories do not, like Homer’s, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.

The autocratic nature of Scripture makes all other stories subject to the reality which it presents. Expert screenwriter, Robert McKee states, “Story isn’t a flight from reality but a vehicle that carries us on our search for reality, our best effort to make sense out of the anarchy of existence.” And the vehicle which transports adolescents from an egocentric anarchy of abstracted existence into the reality of Christ is the biblical sequence.

Professor of Preaching, Michael Pasquarello, writes “Christianity claimed to tell a universally encompassing story, and posited as a correlated notion the universal possibility of finding one’s place in the narrative.” Unlike other stories, the biblical story is a true story that offers humanity an authentic picture of reality to be read above and over the narratives spun by self and culture. A narrative approach to teaching

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Scripture to adolescents recognizes that adolescents, like all people, understand their lives in the context of a story. The narrative which encompasses their lives, the plot which makes their storyline make sense is the biblical drama. Adolescents only find their true place in the world when they find their place in the biblical story.

The Neverending Story: Reader Response During Adolescence

*The Neverending Story*, a fantasy novel by Michael Ende, tells the story of an early adolescent, Bastian Balthazar Bux, neglected by his father after the death of his mother. To escape pursuing bullies, he stumbles into an antique bookstore where he steals a mysterious ancient book. To withdraw from his unfortunate reality, he cuts class, hides in the school attic and finds himself captivated by Fantastica, the story-world of the ancient novel. He is amazed to discover that he is not simply a passive reader but has an important mission to fulfill—only he can save the fairy people who live in the world of the text from the darkness that threatens their realm. In the middle of the book, Bastian’s story and the story of the novel merge and Bastian becomes a protagonist in the universe of Fantastica. In the end, he returns to the human world and reconciles with his father.

The implicit message Ende illustrates in his novel is that stories are “neverending” in that people imaginatively interact with the world of the text in the process of reading even after the cover is closed. The ability that stories have to engross people to the point of making them feel like they are a part of them and to invite reader-participation is known as narrativity.28

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“Every text,” says the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, “displays possibilities for inhabiting the world. The meeting between text and reader is a meeting between the whole of the text’s claims, the horizon which it opens onto, the possibilities which it displays, and another horizon, the reader’s horizon of expectation.”

He further explains, “When a reader applies a text to himself, as is the case in literature, he recognizes himself in certain possibilities of existence—according to the model offered by a hero, or a character—but, at the same time, he is transformed; the becoming other in the act of reading is as important as the recognition of self.” In the case of The Neverending Story, when Bastian reads the novel, he is presented with a new possibility of existence and by the end of the text he is transformed. Consequently, he lives in the human world differently. New Testament professor Mark Allen Powell compares entering the story-world of a narrative with going to the movies. “Once inside the theater, we may find ourselves involved with a view of reality distinct from that of the world in which we actually live. Nevertheless, it is possible for our encounter with this simplified and perhaps outlandish view of reality to influence us, an effect that may continue to make itself felt long after we leave the theater and return to the real world.”

For the German literary scholar, Wolfgang Iser, meaning is co-constructed between the text and the reader. To explain the process of how a reader connects the text with his or her own experience, Iser uses the analogy of star gazing: “The impressions


31 Powell, What is Narrative Criticism? 90.
that arise as a result of this process will vary from individual to individual, but only
within the limits imposed by the written as opposed to the unwritten text. In the same
way, two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of
stars, but one will see the image of a plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The
‘stars’ in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable.”32 Further, N.T.
Wright proposes that meaning, or what he refers to as worldview articulation, is projected
independently from both the reader and the author. In proposing a critical realist reading
of the biblical texts, Wright states:

A critical-realistic reading of a text will recognize, and take fully into account, the
perspective and context of the reader. But such a reading will still insist that,
within the story or stories that seem to make sense of the whole of reality, there
exist, as essentially other than and different from the reader, texts that can be read,
that have a life and set of appropriate meanings not only potentially independent
of their author but also potentially independent of the reader; and that the deepest
level of meaning consists in the stories, and ultimately the worldviews, which the
texts thus articulate.33

In a similar vein, Joel B. Green, professor of New Testament Interpretation, explains that
“In this interpretative space, at the intersection of reader and text, lies the potential for
meaning as the text points us beyond ourselves and presses us to see what we could not
otherwise imagine.”34 In other words, when the emerging world of the reader collides
with the proposed world of the text, the reader is given an opportunity to understand, and

32 Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Pietism from Bunyan


34 Joel B. Green, “The (Re-)Turn to Narrative,” in Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching:
(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 27.
ultimately experience, life in a way that was previously beyond the confines of his or her imagination.

Nakkula and Toshalis point out that adolescents are in the process of building their theoretical imaginative thinking skills. This theoretical imaginative process

. . . requires holding onto and pulling together a history of information gleaned from multiple contexts and transforming that knowledge into possibilities for what might be. Envisioning the possible based on lessons from the past and an experience in the present constitutes the core of theoretical imagination . . . Rather than simply recalling facts and connecting the historical dots of past experience, the theoretical imagination allows for the unique creation of historical meaning as a foundation for building and supporting future possibilities.35

As they engage with texts, adolescents co-construct and imagine a storied reality in consort with the text. With this in mind, what storied possibilities does the biblical text offer adolescents?

Like all stories, Scripture possesses the ability to propose a new way of living in the world. However, as Auerbach concludes, “Far from seeking, like Homer [or The Neverending Story], merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.”36 When they actively engage with the biblical story, adolescents are invited to fit their own lives within the pages of the biblical narrative and feel themselves to be elements in “its structure of universal history.” New Testament scholar Alan Culpepper suggests that readers “dance” with the author in the act of reading whether they want to or not. In this way they adopt the author’s perspective

35 Nakkula and Toshalis, Understanding Youth, 4.

36 Auerbach, Mimesis, 15.
of the story. Although every text may offer a dance, it is ultimately up to the reader to accept. Once accepted, the act of reading is the process of entering into an imaginative dance—and sometimes a wrestling match—with the author where meaning is negotiated and either ignored, obscured, or inhabited. If “The core meaning of adolescent development lies fundamentally in the interpretation adolescents make of themselves and their worlds,” as Nakkula and Toshalis propose, then a narrative approach to teaching Scripture to adolescents offers the redemptive narrative found in the Genesis to Revelation story as a possible world by which to interpret their lives. If Michael Root, professor of Systematic Theology at The Catholic University of America, is correct and the Christian story is ultimately “the story of the reader’s redemption,” then as youth dance with, wrestle, and imagine the ancient biblical texts they find that they are reading the story of their own redemption.

Flipping the Scripture: The Story of St. Ignatius of Loyola

The life of Ignatius of Loyola demonstrates an example of a person whose narrative identity switches from active agency formed by chivalric romance literature to agency within the biblical drama. When he was a boy, Ignatius left his father’s castle in Loyola to become a page for one of his father’s noble friends. Much like Miguel de Cervantes’ Don Quixote, Ignatius allowed books of chivalry to “take possession of his

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38 Nakkula and Toshalis, Understanding Youth, xi.

The stories that laid the cultural frames around his narrative identity were the adventures of chivalrous knights like El Cid, the knights of Camelot and The Song of Roland. These texts projected a proposed way of living in the world which he enacted. At the age of seventeen, young Ignatius joined the army and lived by the sword, even running a man through, for denying the divinity of Jesus. Church historian Bruce Shelly describes Ignatius as a person who had, “grown into little more than an engaging ‘playboy,’ spending his days in military games or reading popular chivalrous romances, his nights pursuing noble adventures with local girls.”

All this changed during the Battle of Pamplona in 1521 when Ignatius was shot by a cannonball which broke one of his legs and seriously injured the other. This event became the inciting incident that would change the plot trajectory of his life. While recovering from his wounds, Ignatius read De Vita Christi by Ludolph of Saxony. In this text, Ludolph paints a picture of the life of Christ depicted in the Gospels, with excerpts from the Church Fathers. In his work, Ludolph proposes that readers imaginatively place themselves at the scene of the Gospel stories. Perhaps Ludolph suspected what Sestir and Green’s research seems to conclude over half millennia later; reading narrative leads

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43 This activity later became the basis for some of the contemplative prayer activities developed by Ignatius.
to the merger of self with the characters. During his recovery, Ignatius stopped identifying himself as a servant of the court and began to identify himself as a servant of Christ, following the example of spiritual leaders like Saint Francis of Assisi. While reading about the life of Christ, Ignatius discovered a new life trajectory. Now he envisioned himself not within the metanarrative of chivalry at his core, but the metanarrative of God’s redemptive acts in Christ as the centerpiece of his story.

Ignatius came to believe that people possessed the agency to choose between God or Satan. He believed that “By a disciplined use of the imagination man can strengthen his will so as to choose God and his ways . . . by proper discipline the imagination could strengthen the will and teach it to cooperate with God’s grace.” In other words, Ignatius of Loyola believed that the imagination is the dwelling place of God’s grace. When people allow God’s story to take up residence in their imagination, they are set on a collision course with the grace of God. Indeed, in his vivid imagination, lying in a convalescent bed, grace found Ignatius. He no longer saw himself as a chivalrous playboy, but a protagonist in God’s story. During those bedridden days he had a psychosocial narrative switch and his identity became enmeshed with the divine. The plot progression of his life story was swept up into the plot progression of the biblical drama. His story became encamped on the fringe of the biblical drama and he was no longer a military hero at the center of his own fabricated fable; he was a saint, embedded in the reality of Christ’s story. The societies of Christ, schools founded, and those transformed

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45 Shelley, Church History in Plain Language, 275.
by his ministry and the ministry of Jesuits for the past several hundred years attest that through the life of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, God has established more heaven on earth. Although people possess the psychosocial agency to choose which story to live their lives by, it would be a fallacy to presume that entering into the biblical story happens by sheer human will. The final section of this chapter briefly examines the role of the Holy Spirit in narrative identity construction.

**Supernatural Aid: The Role of the Holy Spirit**

In their essay, “Development of the Life Story in Early Adolescence,” psychologists Kristian Steiner and David Pillemer note that, “Adults have the ability to think back over the life course and create a story that links current circumstances to past events . . . When reporting their life stories, adults link past selves to the current self, making coherent meaning out of their lives.” On the day of Pentecost, while onlookers gazed in confusion, the Apostle Peter brought meaning to the miraculous outpouring of God’s Spirit on the followers of Christ which manifested itself in the speaking of foreign tongues (Ac 2). Filled with the Spirit, Peter uses autobiographical reasoning to bring global coherence to his memories of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus with what was foreshadowed through the prophet Joel and King David about the last days. Employing these cognitive faculties, he forms a coherent redemptive interpretation of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost for his fellow Jews and the citizens of Jerusalem.

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That day, the Holy Spirit worked in conjunction with Peter’s narrative ecology to weave together the story of Israel with the story of Christ which narratively grafted Israel into a new relationship with God in light of the Christ event. His understanding of the story of Israel, the resurrection of Jesus, and his experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit were not unconnected memories or episodes in his mind, but rather the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel. That day Peter’s identity, and Jews from every nation, found new definition in the person Christ. This was a breathtaking psychotheological symphony. It was the Holy Spirit working in conjunction with the psychological design of the human mind. When the sermon ended, thousands of lives were written into the narrative ecology of the biblical story and entered into the fellowship of believers (Ac 2:41).

During early adolescence, around the age of twelve, people gain the ability to link together single life events and craft them into a meaningful story of their lives. It is also during early adolescence that people gain the cognitive capacity to begin forging their life story with the Christ story in a way that defines their identity as intricately woven into the narrative ecology of the adult believing community. Early adolescence is the developmental drafting table where the psychotheological symphony towards narrative identity construction in Christ can begin. This symphony can only be performed in consort the Holy Spirit working within the narrative ecology of the adolescent where the miracle of identity transcendence in Christ happens.

\[47\] Ibid., 2.
Eugene Peterson, professor emeritus of spiritual theology at Regent College, points out that in the fourth and fifth centuries Christian scholars recognized the Spirit is in the business of “pulling our lives into God’s life.”\footnote{Eugene Peterson, \textit{Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading} (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 27.} Further, theologian and ethicist Stanley Grenz writes that, “The biblical narrative links the unique relationship that Jesus enjoys with the Father to the Holy Spirit.”\footnote{Stanley J. Grenz, \textit{The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei} (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 315.} What these scholars have rightly observed is that the process of inhabiting the biblical story is a work of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, people cannot be drawn into the biblical plot or live out God’s redemptive story in the world. The Holy Spirit both incites and infuses the human narrative with the divine. Stanley Grenz explains that the Spirit gives people a personal identity outside themselves in Christ; he writes:

\begin{quote}
. . . The Spirit places humans “in Christ” and thereby bestows on them personal identity \textit{extra se in Christo} insofar as the Spirit incorporates them into a transcending narrative—the Jesus story, the narrative of God acting in the crucified and resurrected Messiah. The sense of self for those who are “in Christ” therefore, emerges from a particular “emplotment,” to cite Ricoeur’s term. Being “in Christ” entails participating in the narrative of Jesus, with its focus on the cross and resurrection (cf. Rom 6:1-14). It involves retelling one’s own narrative, and hence making sense of one’s life, by means of the plot of the Jesus narrative. Consequently, those who find their identity “in Christ” come to understand themselves by viewing their lives through the lens of the language of the “old life” and the “new life” that lies at the heart of the New Testament interpretation of the significance of Jesus’ coming.\footnote{Ibid., 329.}
\end{quote}

Grenz identifies three important aspects of forming an identity in Christ. First, the Holy Spirit places people in Christ, a bestowed personal identity, which is simultaneously both
outside themselves and in Christ (*extra se in Christo*). Identity construction in Christ is not simply a psychosocial construction, it is a psychosocial-theological construction because, through the Spirit, identity construction happens on a theological level in partnership with the Triune God. Second, the Spirit incorporates people into the Jesus story—a story that transcends time and space. Third, self for those in Christ is “emplotment” in the narrative of Jesus. What Grenz points out is that constructing a narrative identity through the plot of the Jesus story is an act of the Holy Spirit which happens by hearing or reading the Jesus narrative then constructing a life story outside themselves in Christ. This transcendent leap from the human narrative into divine narrative happens in tandem with the Spirit.

The Trinitarian nature of God allows for human identity construction with God to take place. When God came into the world through the person of Christ he entered into human social reality. With his death he removed the barrier between the human and the divine. In the crucifixion, the curtain that separated the human and divine narratives was torn and made it possible for humans to exist on the stage of the world as an actor both theologically and sociologically. The Christ event, followed by the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church, made identity construction with God the Father a psychosocial reality for God’s people.

Since Christ is the only person who is both fully human and fully divine, he is the only person adequately equipped to bring together the human and divine stories. The advent of Christ began when the Holy Spirit fused with the human biological process of pregnancy. In so doing, God made the fusion of the human and divine identity possible (*Mt 1:18, Lk 1:35*). Likewise, the work of the Holy Spirit in the developmental process of
adolescents makes identity construction in Christ possible. The ultimate boon of Christ’s journey was the gift for humanity to participate in identity construction in communion with the triune God.

During early adolescence people gain the cognitive and social tools to begin drafting a life story, thus, it is during early adolescence the people are able, through the Holy Spirit, to sketch out a narrative identity in Christ. This happens through the “emplotment” of the Jesus story. The adolescent is powerless to construct an identity in Christ without the aid of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the maestro, the sacred conductor, who synchronizes human stories with the divine symphony of redemption. It is the Holy Spirit which helps fuse the adolescent identity with Christ. Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit that empowers people to live out God's story presented to them in Scripture and imagined in their social contexts.

One way in which the Trinity can be understood is by using a personological metaphor. Christ the Son is the expression of God as social actor in the world (Jn 1:14; Rom 1:3; Col 1:15). The birth of Christ depicts the dramatic entry of God stepping onto the world’s stage as a human entering into sociocultural life (Mt 1:23). When the Holy Spirit enters the story, the earthly ministry of Jesus officially begins, and the audience can

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51 The advent, atonement, and ascension of Christ are the supernatural welding points that forever fused together heaven and earth once again. It is only through Christ that the human and divine stories are woven back together. Also, the atonement of Christ has an autonoetic nature in the sense that the crucifixion can be experienced as part of a person’s narrative continuity through autonoetic consciousness.

52 Vanhoozer writes, “The New Testament authors expected their audience to participate in what God the Father was doing in the Son through the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 15:31),” in Faith Speaking Understanding, 36.

53 Eugene Peterson indicates that the orthodox Christian community realized by reading the Scriptures that God has “a stable and coherent identity” in Peterson, Eat this Book, 26.
view God as both a social actor in Christ and motivated agent in the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{54} The Spirit is upon Jesus from his wilderness temptations to his eventual death at Calvary, strategically propelling his ministry forward (Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22; Jn 1:32). God the Father is the autobiographical author of the person of Christ. In Matthew’s Gospel, the Father narrates, on several occasions, crucial aspects of Jesus’ personhood, “This is my Son, whom I love” (Mt 3:17, 17:5). By offering editorial assistance, the Father is authoring the personality of Jesus. This autobiographical comment from the Father is the core of Jesus’s identity as well as the central motivation for all that Jesus does. In the interaction of the Holy Trinity, Scripture offers glimpses of God’s narrative identity.\textsuperscript{55}

Along similar lines, Jesus can simultaneously exist as both fully human and fully divine because he has both a psychosocial narrative identity as the person of Christ and a theosocial narrative identity in the Holy Trinity. Because God has woven himself into human psychosocial reality by the Holy Spirit through the birth of Christ, people can also be woven into theosocial reality through the death and resurrection of Christ by the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{56} In this way, the theological implications of the incarnation of Christ are essential to the narrative identity construction of youth in Christ. According to Grenz, one finds her identity when she retells her “own narrative and hence [makes] sense of one’s life, by

\textsuperscript{54} Ray Anderson, professor of Theology and Ministry writes, “There is an \textit{ex nihilo} which stands between the act (Word) of God and its source. This means the act of God is contingent upon the Spirit of God for its power and source. The ministry of Jesus is thus the ministry of the Father working in him through the power of the Holy Spirit,” in Ray S. Anderson, \textit{The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 20. Italics original.

\textsuperscript{55} Anderson writes, “A theology of Pentecost is the beginning point for a theology of Jesus Christ because the Holy Spirit reveals to us the inner life of God as the Father of Jesus, and Jesus as the Son of the Father.” Ibid., 24.

\textsuperscript{56} Loder discusses the transformation of the human spirit as being “ultimately grounded as spirit in God’s Spirit,” in \textit{The Logic of the Spirit}, 248.
means of the plot of the Jesus narrative.”

Since a person begins constructing the rough draft of their life story in early adolescence, which is edited throughout life, adolescence is also the psychosocial launching point for a redeemed identity in Christ.

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PART TWO

INHABITING THE BIBLICAL STORY
CHAPTER 3
THE CALL OF THE CHILD

Stories, and the symbolic worlds they project, are not like monuments that men behold, but like dwelling-places. People live in them. – Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience”

Weary of sitting next to her sister as she reads a book that seems boring, Alice is jolted out of her monotony when she catches a glimpse of a talking white rabbit who pulls a pocket watch out of its waistcoat to check the time. Chasing the rabbit down its hole, Alice finds herself trapped in the bizarre world of Wonderland. At this point, Alice’s story is caught up in what literary theorists call the inciting incident. Simply defined, the inciting incident is when a protagonist gets swept up into a larger story by an unexpected event. Robert McKee states that:

When you look at the value-charged situation in the life of the character at the beginning of the story, then compare it to the value-charge at the end of the story, you should see the arc of the film, the great sweep of change that takes life from

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one condition at the opening to a changed condition at the end. This final condition, this end change, must be absolute and irreversible.\(^3\)

Thus, when a character is incited to participate in a story-arc, it is the beginning of their transformation process. Eventually, the way the character views and interacts with the world is permanently changed.

Take for example the story of Jacob depicted in Genesis 25-33. Jacob inhabited a story in which deceiving people was the only possibility. His name, his perceived identity given to him by his parents, is a Hebrew idiom which denotes deception. They named him Jacob because he came into the world grasping for the things he did not have, literally clenching his twin brother’s ankle, just seconds away from gaining a firstborn’s inheritance. His life reflected the story he inhabited. When he grows older, he scams his brother, Esau, into trading his birthright to him for a bowl of stew. Later, his mother masterminds a plan that successfully swindles his blind and aging father into giving him Esau’s blessing. Enflamed with anger, Esau holds a murderous grudge against Jacob. Running for his life, Jacob flees to live with his uncle, Laban, who eventually tricks him into marrying his eldest daughter, a woman that he did not want to marry, and also robs him by changing his wages ten times. Years later, Jacob deceives Laban by running back to his homeland with his family in tow. It was as if Jacob viewed himself as a person who lived in a world that had robbed him of God’s best and he had to take for himself the good things that God had not given him. Consequently, Jacob inhabited a narrative where his role was to manipulate people to take hold of the things that he thought God had held

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back from him.

Jacob’s story climaxes on his journey back to his homeland. After sending his entire family and all his assets across the river where he is camped, Jacob has a wrestling match with God that lasts through the night and ends with a blessing and a new identity from God at daybreak. From that point on, Jacob is no longer one who deceives people by trickery, but Israel, because he “struggled with God and with humans and overcame” (Gn 32:28). Thus, God gives Jacob a new identity where he is no longer a victim of the world, denied of good things, but rather a triumphant recipient of God’s generosity. As the sun rises over his encampment, Jacob, now limping from a wound he suffered during the match, walks into the horizon of a new story in which generosity and reconciliation are now possible. This is embodied in his generosity towards, and reconciliation with, his brother Esau as the day unfolds. Thus, Israel, formally known as Jacob, wields an identity that is embedded within God’s story where his past is interpreted in light of God’s sovereignty, his present involves being a protagonist in the unfolding of God’s redemptive plan for the world, and his future is securely sealed within God’s promises. Likewise, for adolescents to construct their narrative identities within the biblical drama, they must be incited into the biblical story arc by psychosocially grappling with God through the Scriptures.

**Through the Biblical Looking Glass**

“Whether it be THE WIZARD OF OZ . . . or SNOW WHITE AND THE THREE STOOGES,” writes Robert McKee, “no story is innocent. All coherent tales express an
idea veiled inside an emotional spell.”

In other words, all stories express ideas and values. Stories are worldviews with plots and Scripture is a biblical worldview in story-form. N.T. Wright points out that Jesus’ stories “were ways of breaking open the worldview of Jesus’ hearers, so that it could be remoulded into the worldview which he, Jesus, was commending. His stories, like all stories in principle, invited his hearers into a new world, making the implicit suggestion that the new worldview be tried on for size with a view to permanent purchase.” Hearing the Jesus stories, and all of Scripture, is an invitation to become estranged from one’s worldview to embrace a new one. According to Loder, “By puberty the young person is ready to accept as part of his or her self-reflection a transformational narrative or myth about his or her own culture, self, and society.” Since Scripture is true myth, by puberty—the beginning point of adolescence—the young person is ready to accept as part of their self-reflection the transformational narratives about Christ.

In his book The Implied Reader, Iser discusses the “virtual dimension of a text.” A text’s virtual dimension “is the coming together of the text and the imagination.” In regard to the virtual dimension of the biblical narrative, reading the Scriptures is the overlap of the imagination with the nexus of reality. Put differently, it is the virtual overlap of the human dimension of the imagination with God’s dimension depicted in the

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4 Ibid., 129.


biblical text. It is the place where human stories and the true story of the world collide. Like Alice peering into the looking glass, readers imagine the possibility of leaving their world behind and entering into God’s new story. If a literary text is “something like an arena in which reader and author participate in a game of the imagination” and the virtual dimension of a text is the union of text and imagination, then reading Scripture is the holy arena where the reader wrestles with the Logos, God.

For the storyteller to invite the reader to perceive reality in a new way, they must first defamiliarize their audience with their worldview. The ultimate function of writing techniques and strategies Iser claims, “is to defamiliarize the familiar . . . to set the familiar against the unfamiliar.” New Testament scholar James L. Resseguie explains further:

Defamiliarization suspends, twists, turns on its head the familiar or everyday way of looking at the world by substituting a new, unfamiliar frame of reference . . . In the New Testament, the point of view of the dominant culture—the religious authorities, the powerful, the wealthy, among others—shapes the norms and values of society, and it is their ideological perspectives that Jesus and the narrator make strange. The actions and sayings of outsiders—for example, widows, Gentiles, Samaritans, sinners, tax collectors, and, in general, the marginalized of society—deform and make strange the commonplace point of view expressed by the religious leaders, wealthy landowners, and the powerful.

Jesus uses the narrative technique of defamiliarization in his parables. He takes patterns and themes familiar to his first century Palestinian audience and sets them against the

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9 Iser, The Implied Reader, 275.

10 Ibid., 288.

unfamiliar. Thus, the prototypical antagonist becomes the hero that demonstrates true love for his neighbor, a poor widow—the biblical archetype of destitution—gives the richest gift, and in a plot twist which rises above cultural norms, a disowned father celebrates the return of his rebellious son (Lk 15:11-32; 21:1-4; 10:25-37). Jesus sets the familiar against the unfamiliar so that his audience can begin to see the cracks on the lenses of their worldview and realize the virtual dimension of what love, generosity, and grace look like in God’s new world.

As Resseguie states, “Narrative point of view . . . exists to persuade the reader to see the world in a different way, to adopt a new perspective or to abandon an old point of view. By making strange our firmly held assumptions, values, norms, beliefs, and expectations, the text allows the reader to see a new self—indeed to become someone else.”12 As adolescents engage in self-reflection and look for a story to shape their identity, the biblical story offers a true story of redemption and hope in Christ that stands above and against all other stories. In a world where alternate stories vie to define reality for youth, it is only within the biblical story that teens can discover who they truly are, to whom and where they ultimately belong, and how they are called live in the world.

Texts that create uncertainty are like thorn bushes which entangle the reader in a way that prompts them to reexamine themselves. When entangled by a text, “we simply want to understand more clearly what it is in which we have been entangled.”13 Iser continues, “Once the reader is entangled, his own preconceptions are continually

12 Ibid.

13 Iser, The Implied Reader, 290.
overtaken, so that the text becomes his ‘present’ while his own ideas fade into the ‘past;’ as soon as this happens he is open to the immediate experience of the text, which was impossible so long as his preconceptions were ‘present.’”

Why did the disciples ask Jesus to explain his parables after the crowds had left (Mt 13:36)? Because they were entangled by them. Their own preconceptions were fading into the past and they were open to the immediate experience of the Kingdom of God depicted in Christ’s parables. Likewise, how can those who care for youth help them become entangled by, and ask transformative questions about, the biblical stories? How can teachers and pastors help students’ false preconceptions about their identities become reconceived within God’s perception of reality?

“Literary criticism,” writes Mark Powell, “regards the text as a mirror; the critic determines to look at the text, not through it, and whatever insight is obtained will be found in the encounter of the reader and the text itself.”

Meaning is found in the struggle between the text and reader. A text is a mirror that readers can choose to enter into to engage with the projected world of the story. Thus, reading Scripture is an engagement with the world of the reader and the biblical world. As N.T. Wright puts it, “The gospels, then, were written to invite readers to enter a worldview. In this worldview, there is one god, the creator of the world, who is at work in his world through his chosen people, Israel. Israel’s purpose, say the evangelists, is now complete, and her own long

14 Ibid.

bondage ended, in Jesus.”

In conclusion, Iser remarks that “It is only by leaving behind the familiar world of his own experience that the reader can truly participate in the adventure the literary text offers him.” Likewise, it is only by leaving behind his or her familiar world that the reader can participate in the adventure the biblical texts offers. For the adolescent, entering the biblical looking glass means leaving behind their world and entering into the literary universe of the Bible. In so doing, he or she begins the process of dwelling in God’s story.

**Leaving Kansas: Entering the Narrative Arc of Scripture**

On the wall of the Los Angeles Christian School assembly room is a mural depicting the story arc of the biblical narrative. The words “Once upon a time” burst forth from a spacy nothingness over a scarlet ribbon tied to the Triune God represented by Borromean rings. The ribbon glides playfully through scenes from the biblical story and finally sets the viewer’s eye on a mystical depiction of the New Creation. Under the “Once upon a time” is an actual doorway through which students can enter and exit the room. The symbolism of the doorway is profound. When you walk through the doorway, the narrative of a person’s life crosses paths with the narrative of Scripture.

Viewing Scripture as a grand narrative through which Christian identity and practice is formed dates back to the early church. In the second century, Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, proposed the *regula fidei* or “rule of faith,” a Christ-centered summary

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of the grand narrative presented in Scripture.\(^{18}\) Preaching professor Michael Pasquarello elaborates that the function of the regula fidei was to serve “the church's hope of articulating and authenticating a world-encompassing story or metanarrative of creation, incarnation, redemption, and consummation. [Irenaeus’] aim was to assist Christian communities that were striving to tell their stories of faith in the construction of a unifying worldview, an embracing, overarching narrative of salvation in Jesus Christ.”\(^{19}\) The precedent that Irenaeus set for the Church in the second century is the precedent for a narrative approach to teaching the Bible.

The doctrinal and ideological backdrop of a narrative approach is the metanarrative of Scripture. While recognizing the literary diversity of the biblical texts, New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham concludes, “Thus, while not all Scripture is generically narrative, it can reasonably be claimed that the story Scripture tells, from creation to new creation, is the unifying element that holds literature of other genres together with narrative in an intelligible whole.”\(^{20}\) Further, Joel Green points out that even the parts of Scripture that appear to be non-narrative are actually fixed into the larger story-arc of the Bible:

Not only is the overwhelming portion of the Bible cast as narrative, but even lists of precepts (“You shall . . .”) and the formulation of truth claims (“God is . . .”) appear and are rooted in the ongoing narrative of Israel’s life with God. To read Genesis-to-Revelation as Scripture requires something more than the turning of pages and the movement from one book to the next, Leviticus to Numbers,


\(^{20}\) Bauckham, \textit{The Art of Reading Scripture}, 39.
Malachi to Matthew. This ‘something more’ demands of our learning to account for the grand narrative plotted therein, from creation to new creation.\(^{21}\)

Pasquarello writes that, “Interpretation has become simply a matter of fitting the biblical story into another world . . . rather than incorporating that world into the story of God narrated by Scripture.”\(^{22}\) Perhaps this is what Duvall and Hays have noticed in their preface to the 2012 revision of *Grasping God’s Word*, when they point out that they have “shifted the tone slightly from ‘the Bible as a deposit of static truth that must be mastered and applied’ to ‘The Bible as God’s great story that is to be understood and lived out.’”\(^{23}\)

Nevertheless, Michael Gorman, professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at St. Mary’s Seminary, uses the term “narrative embodiment” to describe the final process of interpreting Scripture.\(^{24}\) The goal of the interpretation (reading) process is not to interpret Scripture in light of the personal myths that people construct of their lives, but rather to allow their lives to be interpreted by the story Scripture tells. Scripture is not intended to be fashioned to fit into human lives—human lives were intended to be fashioned into the world as portrayed by Scripture. The goal of a narrative approach to teaching Scripture is not to teach youth how to interpret the Bible, but rather how to view the Bible as a text that interprets their lives.

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A narrative reading of Scripture assumes that God wants more than a simple “fusion of horizons.” It assumes that God wants people to enter into and set up camp within the horizon that forms when God’s world and their world collide. Scripture incites followers of Jesus to live in a world where the story-arc of their lives fades into the story-arc of God’s narrative. If Scripture is “the chief point of imaginative contact with God,” as Garrett Green, professor of religious studies indicates, then interpretation is complete when the story of the world presented in Scripture is the world by which the reader lives.25 Joel Green writes, “Our task is to align ourselves, to inscribe ourselves, into the biblical narrative, so that our sense of past, present, and future is congruous with the story of the universe found in Scripture.”26 The place where the metanarrative of human life is overcome by the metanarrative of Scripture, is the place where identities are embedded into God’s narrative. As adolescents construct their identities, it is the task of teachers and youth pastors to help them find their place in the biblical narrative in a way that forges the core of who they are with Christ’s narrative. Essentially, a narrative approach to reading Scripture that takes into consideration the personal stories that people craft of their lives invites people to ask, “How does the story-arc of my life, which I am in the process of narrating, fit into the story-arc of Scripture, which is God-narrated reality?”

The inhabitable and experiential power of story is illustrated in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). In these games players enter into an elaborate virtual universe and participate in an evolving epic battle against evil. The


26 Green, “(Re-)Turn to Narrative,” 33.
universes that MMORPG storytellers invite players to experience are ones where characters have identities that are deeply embedded in creation myths, history, and complex cultural and social structures. In each case, the users participate as heroes in an unfolding drama. One MMORPG user stated, “I’m living inside a medieval saga. I’m one of the characters in the novel, and, at the same time, I’m one of the authors.”²⁷ For some, the world that the programmers have elaborately produced is one where players can have a virtual identity that is more alluring to them than their perceived identity in reality. In a survey of thirty thousand MMORPG participants, twenty percent considered the MMORPG world to be their “true home” and earth to be a “place they visit from time to time.”²⁸ In these extreme cases, players may perceive their lives to have little meaning or value, but in the MMORPG universe, they have an opportunity to enact a story in which they are heroes and their lives have eternal relevance in an unfolding epic drama. Unlike other stories, the biblical story is a true story that offers humanity an authentic picture of reality to be read over and above the narratives spun by self and culture. In the biblical story, all lives have ultimate meaning and value and all people are invited to enact the unfolding epic drama of Christ, which echoes redemption into eternity.

Inhabiting the Biblical Story

An IMAX slogan reads: “See a movie or be part of one,” as an invitation to experience a movie in a way that goes beyond passive visual and audio digestion. In the

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same way, a slogan that captures the essence of a narrative approach to reading Scripture might be: “Read the Bible or be part of it.” Eugene Peterson pinpoints the ultimate purpose of the Bible when he writes, “God’s word is written, handed down, and translated for us so that we can enter the plot.” Of course, simply adding surround sound and a screen that engulfs the audience does not make you part of a movie, it only makes it feel more real. You can only truly become part of a story when you inhabit the story and it becomes a part of the narrative ecology of the self. To enter the plot of Scripture is to inhabit the text in a very real way. Entering into the biblical plot effects psychosocial reality. When a person inhabits a text, they live in the world differently. When a person reads the Bible they are incited to psychologically take up residence in the biblical themes and plot structures and socially live them out in the world. Again, the purpose of reading Scripture is not to fit its narrative substructures into the metanarrative of human lives, but rather human lives are to become narrative substructures within the metanarrative of the Bible. Although it is possible to be a passive consumer of the Bible, the biblical story is not simply meant to be read; it is mean to be inhabited.

The postliberal theologians at Yale constructed a narrative theology which views the biblical story as a world to be inhabited. Using this paradigm, and the advances in theological and identity research since the proposal of this construct, this essay employs a psychotheological framework for forming a narrative identity in Christ during

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29 Eugene Peterson, *Eat this Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 20. Reading this quote in light of McAdams brings to mind theological narrative identity development “A person defines him- or herself by constructing an autobiographical story of the self, complete with setting, scene, character, plot, and theme. The story is the person’s identity,” in “Unity and Purpose in Human Lives,” 151.

30 For example, Hans Frei and George Lindbeck.
adolescence. Like the Church’s identity, the adolescent identity is a story-constituted identity. To be clear, the act of inhabiting a story-world is not existentialism, mysticism or aloof philosophical theory, it is a common ontological occurrence that happens to all people. As the prolific philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, illustrates,

All of us, when children, inhabited the worlds of stories we read or were told in such a way that our perceptions, our imaginations, our emotions, our actions, our descriptions, were shaped thereby: a story about wolves at the bottom of the stairs led us to ‘hear wolves’ at the bottom of the stairs at night, stories about Superman led us to run about wearing a cape over our shoulders. The same is true, though perhaps less obviously so, for us adults: we all live story-shaped lives. The issue is not whether we will do so; the issue is rather, which are the stories that will shape our lives?

Stories, by nature, are inhabitable whether they weave a web of lies that ensnares the audience or they paint an accurate picture of the richness and depth of life. To truly know a story is to indwell it, and to know Scripture is to indwell the biblical story. Wolterstorff distinguishes this type of habitation as “conformative.” Highlighting Frei’s point, Wolterstorff writes, “The recovering of the authority of Scripture in the life of the Christian community must include recovering the practice of inhabiting the world of the biblical narrative in conformation mode. More than that: the story that most decisively shapes our lives must be the biblical story.” In the same way, to inhabit the world of the biblical narrative, the story that most decisively shapes the lives of adolescents must be the biblical story.

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32 Ibid., 212.

33 Loder, The Transforming Moment, 25.

34 Wolterstorff, “Living Within a Text,” 212. Italics original.
Peterson recognizes that imaginative reading must be participatory. He refers to participatory reading as “receiving the words in such a way that they become interior to our lives, the rhythms and images becoming practices of prayer, acts of obedience, ways of love.” In other words, participatory reading is reading that grips people at the core of their identities and effects psychosocial change. People inhabit the biblical story in a conformative way when they lose themselves and enter into the story. Participatory reading or listening is the beginning of transformative identity construction in Christ. Arguing this from a theoretical standpoint is one thing, but examining this in practice is another. The practice of being incited into the biblical story, or helping others find themselves in it, is not achieved using the IMAX approach. Goliath screens, enchanting pixel imagery, or engulfing sound effects may enhance a person’s experience of a story, but they do not help people inhabit them. Inhabiting the biblical story is a process that involves imagination and creativity in tandem with God. Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit working in concert with the human imagination that fuses the life story within the biblical story. No matter how grandiose or interactive the experience of the biblical story might be, an adolescent can only form a core identity in Christ when the Holy Spirit fuses their narrative identity within the story presented by the authors of Scripture.

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CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVE CONFLICTS DURING ADOLESCENCE

A scene in Neil Burger’s *Divergent* (2014) depicts the film’s protagonist, Tris, exploring a room filled with thousands of her own reflections. In her serum-induced psychological aptitude test, which all sixteen-year-olds are required to take in her dystopian society, she is confronted with legions of self-images. The test determines which of the five factions she is best suited for as an adult contributor in her society. In other words, the test is designed to help Tris determine who she is and how she will live in the adult world. Tris’ test results are the same for many adolescents today— inconclusive. Rather than a clear-cut life-path and identity, Tris is faced with the daunting task of finding out who she is in a world where she does not seem to fit into preconceived categories. When Tris looks into a mirror with seemingly infinite reflections, she is forced to confront the false self to find her true identity. Likewise, according to Susan Harter, Professor of Psychology at University of Denver, adolescence is a time when people look into the psychosocial mirrors of the world and ask, “What is my true self?”1

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And, like Tris in *Divergent*, the adolescent search for meaning and purpose can be a formidable process.

According to the renowned developmental psychologist Paul H. Mussen, “Without a strong sense of identity, the adolescent faces virtually insurmountable odds in attempting to cope with the social demands made at this time. . . In many ways, the question ‘Who am I?’ is the central problem of adolescence.”² On a similar note, Kate McLean and Moin Syed, editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Identity Development*, indicate the commonly held belief among developmental researchers: “Identity both begins and ends in adolescence.”³ Undoubtedly, the question of identity looms in minds of adolescents and is an eminent challenge to overcome on the journey towards adulthood.⁴ In essence, adolescence is the transition process from a lack of inner self to a place where self is defined by a core identity. Since adolescents have not yet arrived into adulthood, they do not have a core self to draw from when being in the world. Lacking a core identity, the adolescent self is expressed differently depending on the environment; this results in what Harter describes as “multiple selves.”⁵ Referring to the lack of inner self, psychologist and educator Madeline Levine writes, “The ‘false self’ becomes particularly problematic in adolescence as teens are required to confront the normal

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proliferation of ‘selves’ . . . and figure out who is the ‘real me.’”\textsuperscript{6} Another way of thinking about how a person with multiple selves functions is by considering a form of self-deception which Stroup refers to as a “cover story.”\textsuperscript{7} If Harter’s theory is correct, then the adolescent identity functions like a newscast motivated primarily by perceived viewer ratings. In this way, adolescents have a different cover story depending on the anticipated audience. In light of the midadolescent tendency towards egocentric abstraction, the particular cover story an adolescent chooses as their lead is sometimes an egocentrically abstracted form of self-deception.

What about the adolescent growing up in the context of a Christian community? In \textit{The Promise of Narrative Theology} Stroup writes, “What a person believes about Jesus cannot be separated from how he or she lives in the world.”\textsuperscript{8} However, what if how a person lives in the world is in constant flux with their environment? How then can a person’s beliefs about Jesus effect how they live in the world? This is the paramount challenge faced by those who lead adolescents toward a life of discipleship in Christ. Loder proposes that only the Christ narrative is strong enough to truly meet an individual’s developmental needs during adolescence.\textsuperscript{9} Likewise, Stroup writes that, “The narrative identity of Christian individuals and communities is reinterpreted by means of


\textsuperscript{7} George W. Stroup, \textit{The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church} (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 127.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 14.

the narrative identity of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ For Christians, identity is defined by union with Christ. Finally, Grenz points out that, “Paul describes the mystery of the Christian life by means of the simple designation ‘in Christ.’ According to this metaphor, believers are constituted by their participation in Christ’s own life, and their identity emerges from union with Christ. Because Jesus Christ is the eternal Son, those who are united with him share in the Son’s relationship to God.”¹¹ Essentially, the goal of Christian spiritual formation during midadolescence is to move from a lack of inner self to a self-defined by a core identity in Christ.

Christian adolescents gain the strength to meet to the demands of this journey through the ideological teachings about Christ in relation to who they are in the context of the New Testament writings. In regard to how reading the Bible shapes identity, Eugene Peterson writes, “Every word I hear, everything I see in my imagination as this story unfolds, involves me relationally, pulls me into participation, matters to my core identity, affects who I am and what I do.”¹² Thus, when engaging in a reading of the text which entangles the psychosocial universe of the imagination, youth are beckoned into participation with God’s story in a way that runs to the core of their identity which in turn dictates how they live in the world. In so doing, the adolescent story becomes interlaced with Christ’s story.

¹⁰ Stroup, The Promise of Narrative Theology, 259.


Constructing their identity through the lens of the Christ event, adolescents are grafted into God’s story as active agents in God’s redemptive plot for the world. From a biblical point-of-view, to inhabit the world of Scripture is to embrace a new identity as adopted children of God and participate in the interlocking of heaven with earth through Christ. As the great Scottish philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre perceptively points out, “It is often and perhaps always through conflict that the self receives its social definition.”

If the primary psychosocial task of adolescence is identity construction, and the self is defined through conflict, then perhaps this is why the path towards adulthood is a road riddled with trials. The remainder of this chapter will explore some of the psychosocial trials faced during adolescence in light of the psychotheological task of identity construction in Christ.

In The Construction of Self, Harter argues that “The transformation of the self requires strict obedience to the tenets that will ultimately ensure the approval of God. Eventually, religious adherence to dogma and ritual will allow one entry into the kingdom of heaven, however it is defined by one’s version of the afterlife.” The Apostle Paul argues the opposite. A highly devoted man who stringently observed the Jewish dogma and rituals of his time found that they were insufficient for authentic transformation (Phil 3:1-14). In his letter to the Christians in Ephesus, he poignantly articulates the shortcomings of religious dogma and fervent ritual: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not

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by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8-9). Nowhere in the Pauline corpus does it argue that through self-control one could obey the law more stringently. According to Paul, this is impossible. For Paul, approval from God and authentic transformation come only from Christ. It is not earned, it is given to all who recognize their inadequacies and look to the cross for salvation. In doing so people find their true selves. For those in Christ, true self-behavior happens when they live “according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4). As adolescents begin to recognize their false self, adult believers can help them gently set their gaze upon the cross—where false selves are put to death and true selves are set free.

From Egocentric Abstraction to Christocentric Construction

Every author has an audience in mind. During adolescence, one must not forget which section of the audience is sitting in the front row. When considering the narrative aspect of identity construction, one must not underestimate the gravity of the imaginary audience on adolescent self-view and behavior. Like the rowdy groundlings that stood in the pit at the Globe Theatre to watch Shakespeare’s plays, for the adolescent author, an imaginary audience, a projection of their own self-absorption, has crowded the front row during this time in a person’s life.

Building upon the Piagetian theory of intellectual growth, Elkind formulated the concept of adolescent egocentrism. “Toward the end of childhood,” Elkind writes, “The emergence of formal operations thought (which is analogous to propositional logic) gradually frees the child from his egocentrism with respect to his own mental constructions.”15 The same mental construction that sets a child free from a lower form of

egocentrism also entraps them in a higher form of egocentrism. Unlike a child, the adolescent has the ability to conceptualize possibilities, even contrary-to-fact possibilities. Egocentric abstraction means that adolescents are actors performing for themselves. They are acting in the world for an audience that fills the stadium of their mind’s eye.

Two distinct and related constructs that result from adolescent egocentrism are what Elkind calls the imaginary audience and the personal fable. According to Elkind, formal operations allows a person to conceptualize their own thoughts as well as the thoughts of others.\(^\text{16}\) However, because the adolescent “fails to differentiate between the object towards which the thoughts of others are directed and those which are the focus of his own concern,” or “fails to differentiate what others are thinking about and his own mental preoccupations, he assumes that other people are as obsessed with his behavior and appearance as he is himself. It is this belief that others are preoccupied with his appearance and behavior that constitutes the egocentrism of the adolescent.”\(^\text{17}\) Formal operations allows adolescents to conceptualize possible worlds or realities. It also allows them to conceptualize the thoughts of others. Unfortunately, at this stage a person lacks the ability to differentiate between the thoughts of others and their own concerns. Therefore, the adolescent “assumes that other people are as obsessed with his behavior and appearance as he is himself.”\(^\text{18}\) It is this belief that creates the egocentrism of the

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\(^{16}\) Ibid., 1029.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 1029-30.
adolescent person. Adolescent egocentrism is a cognitive construct which is expressed in the psychosocial behavior of the adolescent. In essence, when a child becomes a young adult, they begin acting for an imaginary audience.

This phenomenon poses a challenge for youth. Imagine the bewilderment and awkwardness of an actor who thinks they are performing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* when in actuality they are entering a live performance of *Hamlet*. Their costume would look silly and the lines they memorized in anticipation would not fit with the dialogue. Likewise, “Gatherings of young adolescents are unique in the sense that each young person is simultaneously an actor to himself and an audience to others.”19 In essence, an adolescent social gathering is not unlike a cosplay attended by clusters of characters from different story worlds.

At this period in life, in addition to the good news that in Christ sins are forgiven, it is also relevant to tell adolescents the good news that in Christ there is no shame. Referencing Helen Lynd’s research, Elkind points out that, “The notion of an imaginary audience also helps explain the observation that the affect which most concerns adolescents is not guilt, but rather shame, that is, the reaction to an audience.”20 For adolescents, seeing one’s self as a failure, or shame, is the central focus over guilt or realizing failure. Since guilt is sin-focused and shame is self-focused, the Gospel is best articulated in a way that deals with identity rather than behavior. The most important thing is not telling young people that Jesus died for the risky behaviors in which they

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19 Ibid., 1030.

20 Ibid.
have engaged. That only deals with failure. The most important thing is telling youth the
good news that they do not need to engage in risky behaviors because they are children of
God through Christ. This deals with the core issue of shame. At the core of the Christian
identity is a life free from the bondage of shame. A gospel that is tethered to a core
identity in Christ sets adolescents up for the holy business of finding their stories in the
unfinished narrative of God’s redemption of the world through Christ.

The counterpart of the imaginary audience is the personal fable. Simply put, it is a
story that an adolescent “tells himself and which is not true.”21 Along with comparing
them to “rough-drafts” of a person’s narrative identity, McAdams describes personal
fables as “grandiose fantasies about accomplishment, fame, or notoriety in the future.”22
During the preteens, adolescents launch their “first full autobiographical project.”23 An
adolescent’s personal fable can either lead to a sense of bravado resulting in brashness, or
a sense of shame resulting in timidity. Worse than an actor imagining himself in the
wrong play is the actor who falsely thinks his role is either more significant than the other
roles, or not important at all in the story. This is the tragic effect of the personal fable
crafted by the early adolescent.

How can adults help adolescents navigate egocentric abstraction? The director for
the confused Hamlet actor would want him to realize which story he is actually

21 Ibid., 1031.

22 McAdams, The Art and Science of Personality Development (New York: Guilford Press, 2015),
314.

23 Ibid., “It is during the transition to adolescence, moreover, that individuals begin to see in full
what makes up an entire life, from birth through childhood, career, marriage, parenting, and so on, to death.
They also develop facilities of autobiographical reasoning, learning how to derive personal meaning from
autobiographical events. Their first efforts at imagining their own life stories may be unrealistic, grandiose,
and somewhat incoherent. But autobiographical authors have to start somewhere.”
performing so he could enact the role intended for him (in anticipation of the actual audience). For an actor who has the ability to differentiate between the real and imaginary audience, a simple conversation will usually suffice. However, if the actor is inclined to rehearse for an imaginary audience, a solution must go beyond the bounds of a direct conversation. “Adolescents,” explains Elkind, “regard their fable as an unalterable truth, and we should not challenge it head-on even when it is clearly self-destructive. Such an approach will only entrench them in their position. Arguing with someone else’s reality simply does not work.”

Elkind suggests an alternative; he proposes verbalizing one’s own personal fable experience. He writes, “It is often helpful to these young people if they can learn to differentiate between the real and the imaginary audience, which often boils down to a discrimination between real and the imaginary parents.” Instead of rejecting an adolescent’s personal fable, it must be revised in light of reality. “Revising the fable and bringing it into line with reality” Elkind writes, “is part of maturing, of slowly finding out how much we are like everyone else rather than different from them. Only in finding out how much we are like other people, paradoxically, can we really discover our true specialty and uniqueness.” Likewise, revising the fable and bringing it into line with the reality of the biblical narrative is part of maturing in Christ. Paradoxically, believers only discover their true specialty and uniqueness in Christ when they lose their stories in the biblical story. Elkind explains, “In a way, the imaginary


26 David Elkind, All Grown Up and No Place to Go, 45.
audience can be regarded as hypotheses—or better, as a series of hypotheses—which the young person tests against reality. As a consequence of this testing, he gradually comes to recognize the difference between his own preoccupations and the interests and concerns of others.”

If Scripture is the nexus of reality, then Scripture can be used as a measuring stick from which adolescents test their perception of reality.

Confronted with this task, one must not ignore the role of the adult believing community in order for the adolescent identity to blossom into one that is consistent with biblical reality. In regard to self-deceiving narratives, Stroup writes “in the absence of the ‘other,’ be it person or community, there would be no one to listen to and challenge the self-deceiving narrative by which a person interprets the past, acts in the present, and anticipates the future.” Like the self-deceiving narratives, the imaginary audience and the personal fable must also be confronted. Practically speaking, adults can begin by first asking young people, what they think others think about them. They might then ask what they think the biblical narrative tells them about what God thinks about them. For example, when identifying with David in the story of David and Goliath, one could read the first half (the conflict) and ask, “What would you do if you were in David’s shoes (1 Sam 17)?” Then one could read how David overcame Goliath and ask, “How did David overcome Goliath?” Lastly, comparing David’s story with the adolescent’s story ask, “How did David’s response measure up with your response? The adolescent with an inflated self-view, who thinks she could defeat a giant in her own strength, would

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measure her pretentious fable against David’s story, who defeated a giant in God’s strength. The adolescent with a deflated sense of worth would measure her fable of worthlessness against a shepherd boy who trusted that he could be used by God as an active agent to overcome a God-defying giant.

If the adolescent mind were an online social network, egocentric abstraction would allow adolescents to control the synaptic posts that shape self-view. Egocentric abstraction can be either a mental flurry of pompous selfies or a series of vicious comments that troll the adolescent’s view of self. Since adolescents are going through egocentric abstraction, having an imaginary audience hands a bullhorn to a false audience that spins distorted stories about self-worth and value. In light of this, the job of those who are ministers of God’s Word is to help youth enter into Christocentric identity construction. This happens when adults help adolescents view their stories—their identities—in light of the Christ-narrative. It is the role of the community of Christ to wrestle with God’s Word in a way that calibrates personal fables with the reality of the Christ story depicted in the Gospels. Egocentric abstraction can lead to magnified shame or magnified audacity. A narrative reading of Scripture grabs the egocentric bullhorn that abstracts the adolescent’s life and negotiates true self in place of false identity by allowing the Holy Spirit to shape her personal story.

**Soteriology During Adolescence**

Two master narratives that have permeated industrialized culture are the
redemption and contamination narratives. A contamination narrative is spun when a person interprets an episode in their life story as a “fall from grace.” Contamination narratives are not just bad things that happen in a person’s life but an exceptional category of negative life experiences. According to McAdams:

In contamination, there first exits something that is very, very, good. The protagonist of the story tastes the sweetness of life; enjoys the goodness; experiences the beauty, the truth, the excitement, the wonder. And then—and often quite suddenly—it is all lost. Spoiled. Ruined. The turn toward contamination is especially devastating because that which preceded the onset of the bad was itself so good. The contrast can be almost unbearable.

A contamination sequence is an event that triggers a seemingly unending bleakness that darkens a person’s entire story. It is paradise lost. It is venturing east of Eden. McAdams identifies the glaring contamination sequence in the Genesis story as well as the contamination theme maintained throughout the Old Testament:

For the first humans in Genesis, the story begins in happiness, goodness, and innocence, but sin becomes the ultimate contamination. Once sin enters the story, furthermore, there seems no getting back to the original goodness. Innocence lost is lost forever. Human actors seem doomed throughout the Old Testament to repeat their contaminations again and again. One step forward, two steps back. Around and around. Forty years wandering were the Israelites, and getting nowhere—lost . . . in the wilderness.

One way to view the biblical conflict is recognizing not only that humans have sinned, but that humanity is stuck in a contamination sequence as a result of sin. When humanity

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31 Ibid., 186.

32 Ibid.
decides to define good and evil on its own terms, civilization is ushered into a story-arc where brokenness mars the horizon of existence.

Tomkins poetically describes the psychosocial event of selfishness as when “heaven and hell had an unholy wedlock until death do them part.” In the Genesis account, east of Eden is the setting for this unholy wedlock. The biblical story is about how humanity, which is stuck in a contamination sequence of its own construction, is transformed by the redemptive acts of God through Christ. Chapter three of Genesis captures the scene in which the human and divine script is set into a contamination sequence. It is an ancient Israelite narrative explanation about how the world became a place where it is possible to paradoxically taste both heaven and hell. The Genesis narrative addresses the nature of contamination—a sequence in which the human project is stuck. Like being exposed to a virus, when a person walks into a contamination sequence, his narrative identity is infected. Consequently, the lens through which he views himself is tainted.

The human mind has the capacity to spin stories about the self and about other people; stories where one stars as the hopeless victim, the vengeful villain, or the self-righteous hero. The problem with these stories is that they have tragic endings. When one writes her story as a tragedy, her narrative identity is fused with tragedy. On the other hand, Christian spirituality is the process by which a person recognizes that he is an active agent in God’s story of redemption and then engage all of life in light of this redemptive process. From a psychosocial perspective, conversion is a switch in narrative.

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Conversion is the process by which people give up the rights to their own stories and begin to allow God to have production rights over them.

In addition to high levels of depression and anxiety or a stagnated life, in some cases those who are stuck in contamination sequences have plots that regress.34 People who live stories with regressive plots eventually become trapped in an endless cycle of misfortune not unlike the self-condemned tragedian depicted in Lewis’ *The Great Divorce* who is unable and unwilling to be a protagonist in any other genre than tragedy.35 Those ensnared in a narrative of despair can only find hope by entering into a narrative of redemption. When a protagonist is stuck in a contamination sequence, they do not interpret their past as redeemed. Consequently, they are incapable of imaging a hopeful future. “If only this problem could be repaired, the author imagines, things might turn out right and good.”36 For those stuck in a contamination sequence, or a “fall from grace,” grace must find its way back into their story. To enter into a redemptive sequence, grace must fall back into their lives. Theology teachers are tasked with helping students to re-author their lives in view of the biblical drama. In essence, to be a follower of Christ is to give up the rights of one’s story. To follow Christ is to sign over one’s story to God and allow God to begin telling it in a new way. God is the most ingenious producer who will one day completely decontaminate the past in light of the grand redemptive narrative depicted in the Bible.


Inhabiting Redemptive Stories

John begins his Gospel by telling his readers that “The Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14). Another way of thinking about what John is proclaiming is that God authored himself into the world’s sociocultural script by becoming a human. In the narrative study of lives, the central idea “is that human lives are cultural texts that came to be interpreted as stories.”

If human lives are cultural texts and Scripture is the act of God entering into human culture, then Scripture has the power to weave the human narrative with the divine, and human lives are the mediums with which the divine author writes the biblical story.

To use another Lewis reference, in his novel The Horse and His Boy, Aslan, an allusion to Christ in the universe of Narnia, helps the protagonist Shasta come to view his hard-knock life in light of the reality of Aslan’s gracious protection. In psychological terms, Shasta experiences a narrative switch from viewing his life as a contamination sequence to viewing his life redemptively. As a result, Shasta stops living a life characterized by bitterness and begins enacting his role within Narnia’s redemptive story. “Roles,” Brofenbrenner writes, “have a magiclike power to alter how a person is treated, how she acts, what she does, and thereby even what she thinks and feels. The principle applies not only to the developing person, but the others in her world.” This begs the question, how can youth workers help students to understand their roles within God’s

37 Ibid., xx.


redemptive story? The children in *The Chronicles of Narnia* struggle with one fundamental problem through the metanarrative of the book series—discovering their role in The Emperor-Beyond-The-Sea’s redemptive plan for Narnia.\(^{40}\) In the beginning of each novel, the main characters are oblivious to their roles or even that their lives really matter. Likewise, children are psychosocially unaware of their roles in the adult world, and if they never find their role, they become adults who drudge through life without a sense of deeper meaning or purpose. Adolescence is the journey a young person embarks on to understand their purpose in the larger narrative of the world in which they live.

Social science has discovered over the past several decades that in order for a person to thrive and be committed to others in selfless relationships (also known as integration), they must conceptualize their personal narratives in light of a redeemed past and a hopeful future. Research shows that middle-aged adults who view their lives as a series of redemptive sequences show a stronger commitment to the well-being of others. “By conceptualizing their own lives as tales of redemption, middle-aged adults may sustain the hope or confidence that is needed to weather short-term setbacks while reinforcing long-term commitments to improving the lives of others.”\(^{41}\) The goal of biblical identity construction is not simply self-improvement or generativity but rather to view one’s life in light of the ultimate redemptive act in history depicted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When this happens, the other psychosocial areas of life begin to


align, and broken people begin living the lives God dreamed up for them from the beginning (Eph 2:10).

McAdams defines redemption as “a deliverance from suffering to an enhanced status or state. It is the move from darkness to light.”\textsuperscript{42} The psychological definition for redemption is that “Bad things end up making good things happen in the long run.”\textsuperscript{43} In other words, redemption is a deliverance from suffering to a better world. The effect of redemption is that the protagonist is set free to cast his or her life onto a progressive plot trajectory. From a developmental perspective, biblical redemption is classified as religious redemption. “Religious conceptions of redemption,” McAdams points out, “imagine it as a divine intervention or sacred process, and the better world may be heaven, a state of grace, or some other transcendent status. The general idea of redemption can be found in all of the world’s religions and many cultural traditions.”\textsuperscript{44} The primary difference between redemption in the biblical story and all other religions is that in the biblical narrative the God of Israel goes to great lengths to redeem humanity, in all other religions humans go to great lengths to try to achieve a redemptive state. To be clear, the biblical story is not a new way of viewing oneself in relation to one’s past and achieving a new psycho-religious identity. Rather it is living in the reality of how God has acted redemptively through the person of Christ and, in so doing, has set the story of the world on a progressive plot towards ultimate redemption.

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\textsuperscript{42} McAdams, \textit{The Redemptive Self}, 125.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., xiv.
Again, McAdams points out that the biblical story is full of redemption sequences.

Examples of stories that encode the sequence of early suffering followed by (promised or actual) deliverance to a better state are legion in the Judeo-Christian tradition: Abraham and Sarah suffer infertility into old age until God sends them Isaac, their son; the Israelites suffer through Egyptian captivity and 40 years of wandering until God delivers them to the Promised Land; Christ is crucified but raised up on the third day. Today, personal stories of conversion—moving suddenly from a bad and sinful state to a good and godly one—are a staple of many Christian communities, a traditional paragon of which is the New Testament’s story of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus.  

Allowing Scripture to interpret one’s life story is the act of viewing one’s past in light of God’s redemption sequences and imaging a future in which the story of humanity is ultimately restored. The biblical drama depicts a series of God’s redemptive actions within the world leading up to and beyond God’s redemption through Christ. The biblical drama is a story where the world is transformed from a graceless wasteland into an abundant grace-filled wonderland.

In Christian redemption, God takes bad things and ends up bringing ultimate good from them. The centerpiece of the biblical drama is ironically the worst event in history with the best possible outcome. History’s greatest redemptive plot twist is the resurrection of Jesus. The God of Scripture is an expert in redemption and does some of his best work in the midst of death and hopelessness. Human tragedies are inciting incidents through which God writes people back into the biblical story of redemption. God is an artist who has an incessant habit of taking horrific events and crafting them into breathtaking stories of redemption. Revelation suggests that when God is done authoring

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history, the result will be stunning. Those who are active agents in God’s redemptive story will be woven into God’s ultimate redemption for the world. The lives of the saints are subplots within God’s grand redemptive narrative. The stories of God’s people will one day be completely woven into the grand finale where Jesus, the embodiment of the Author, appears once again on center stage. In the words of John the Revelator, God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev 21:4).

Stroup writes, “The narrative identity of Christian individuals and communities is reinterpreted by means of the narrative identity of Jesus Christ.”46 In other words, for someone to find their core identity in Christ they must first gaze upon the narrative identity of Jesus of Nazareth. But what about the adolescent person? As stated before, Loder identifies puberty as the developmental point at which an individual is ready to accept a transformational narrative or myth about the self.47 Referring to the Christian story Root writes, “The task of soteriology is, then to show how the reader is included in the [the Jesus story] and how the story then is or can be the story of that reader’s redemption.”48 Therefore, it is during adolescence that a young person is ready interpret their life story in unison with Christ’s redemptive story.

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46 Stroup, The Promise of Narrative Theology, 259.

47 Loder, The Transforming Moment, 130.

As referenced before, Grenz states that Christian identity as child of God emerges during participatory union with Christ.\(^49\) The defining moment in the biblical narrative as well as the defining moment for all of humanity is God’s restorative action through the person of Christ. When people read or hear about God’s restorative act through Christ they are learning about their own redemption. Essentially, the Christian story is the story of the adolescent’s redemption.

**Atonement with the Father, New Life, and the Ultimate Boon**

Equipped with abstract and autobiographical neurological abilities, teens possess the capacity to imagine how the death of Christ intersects with their lives in a new way. The cross of Christ is the crossroad between the human and divine narratives. Without the cross, the intersection of the human and divine narratives is not possible. In the crucifixion the boundary between the human and divine narratives is breached. The cross is the place where God the Father abandoned God the Son (Mk 15:34). As communion with the Son and the Father were torn apart an opening was made for all of humanity to be adopted into eternal communion with the triune God. Or, as N.T. Wright puts it, “From now on, access into the presence of the living God is open to all through the death of his son.”\(^50\) This was Christ’s vocation. God’s greatest terror and sorrow was also God’s greatest delight. When Jesus died on the cross, the horrifying sound of Christ, the forsaken Son, crying out to “Abba,” the Father, reverberated into eternity and made it possible for anyone who believes to call God the “Abba” Father (Rom 8:15). What


pleased the Father and Son the most was to be broken apart so that those who believe
may be welcomed into their fellowship. Before an adolescent can understand the
metanarrative of their lives as woven into the biblical drama and their identities as
adopted members of the family of believers, they must first encounter the cross of Christ
in a way that pierces their imaginations. They must know that God, the one who created
them, is also God their “Abba,” Father. For only when people imagine Christ crucified,
God abandoning God for humanity, do they truly catch a glimpse of the depth of God’s
love.

The question of identity is the central conflict during adolescence. It bookmarks
the beginning and end of adolescence. The question “Who am I?” lurks in the minds of
adolescence and is the eminent challenge to overcome on the journey towards
adulthood.\textsuperscript{51} When adolescents encounter the cross of Christ, they discover their true
identity as children of God. The pinnacle of the adolescent journey is to know the
heavenly Father and the highpoint of identity construction is to find oneself in Christ.
Before the adolescent journeys back into the Promised Land they must know that God is
not only the God of their forefathers, as Jacob first understood God, but God is also their
God too. After Jacob wrestles with God and sees him face to face, Genesis explains that
“Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my
life was spared’” (Gn 32:30).

When adolescents take hold of Christ’s narrative and embrace it as their own, they
die to their old self and are given a new self. Their old identities die with Jesus during his

\textsuperscript{51} Paul H. Mussen, \textit{Psychological Development}, 281, and McLean and Syed, eds. \textit{The Oxford
crucifixion, and with the resurrection they are given new identities as adopted sons and daughters of God the Father. Professor of Ministry and Mission, Thomas Bergler writes,

The Good News of the Kingdom of God is not a self-help message that provides three easy steps to a better life. Self-help techniques keep the self firmly in charge. Rather, to accept the gospel is to submit to a death and resurrection process accomplished by God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus offered a stark choice: hang onto your life and lose it or lose your life and find true life in him.52

Again, what role do adults play in helping the young in our midst find true life in God?

Referring to the post resurrection Christ-encounter of two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Professor of Spiritual Transformation at Northern Seminary, Ruth Haley Barton points out that:

It was only after Jesus had taken time to listen deeply to their need—for comfort, for understanding, for perspective—that he offered any sort of perspective at all. And what he chose to do was to draw them into the biblical story, interpreting Scriptures to them in such a way that all of it started to make sense. Masterfully, he helped them to locate their own story in the context of the larger story of God's redemptive purposes in the world. What seemed hopeless from a human point of view was now imbued with profound spiritual significance. This ‘stranger’ was quickly becoming a friend, and more than just a friend—a spiritual companion with an uncanny ability to listen to their hearts' deepest longings and questions.53

To help youth locate their stories within the context of God’s larger story of redemption through Christ, adults must first listen deeply to the needs of young people in their communities. Adults must realize that adolescence is “a vital story that need[s] to be told” and must compassionately listen to the stories of the adolescents walking in their

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midst. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus explained his resurrection in the context of the entire biblical story. It was in this context he also invited these men to be part of the biblical story. It is the risen Christ who comes alongside people and helps them interpret their lives in light of the biblical drama. It is the role of Christ’s community to walk in step with how the risen Christ wants to interpret the biblical narrative for the young in their care. Wright comments, referencing the road to Emmaus, “Only with [Jesus] at our side will our hearts burn within us (verse 32), and lead us to the point where we see him face to face.” The ultimate boon of the adolescent journey is a core sense of self. For the Christian adolescent, this means having a core identity in Christ. The elixir of adolescence is to achieve a core sense of self and the Holy Grail of Christian adolescence is to achieve a core identity in Christ. The longing of every teenager is to know in the center of their being, above anything else, that they are a beloved child of God. The calling of every adolescent is live out of this adoptive identity in all aspects of their lives.

Since Christ is the only person who is both fully human and fully divine, he is the only person adequately equipped to bring together the human and divine stories. The advent of Christ began when the Holy Spirit fused with the human biological process of pregnancy. In so doing, God made the fusion of the human and divine identity possible (Mt 1:18, Lk 1:35). Likewise, the work of the Holy Spirit in the developmental process of adolescents makes identity construction in Christ possible. The ultimate boon of Christ’s

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54 Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, xiii-xvi.

journey was the gift for humanity to participate in identity construction in communion with the triune God.

Adults cannot simply tell a young person that they are a child of God and expect them to achieve identity diffusion. Adolescents must journey to the heart of God and find themselves there. It is not until they stare into the face of God and taste the mercy of God the Father for themselves that they will truly understand that they belong to God. This cannot be forced, manipulated, or programmed. It is the job of the adult community to do everything in their power to live out of the core of their identity in Christ and get on board with the unique way the Holy Spirit wants to bring the young in their midst into maturity. Adults must prayerfully discern their role in the lives of young people that God has entrusted them with. They must follow the lead of the Holy Spirit, who desires to propel them towards identity diffusion in Christ.

It is important to note that an identity in Christ is not something that can be earned. A comment in the margin of Starting Right, “Identity: given, not found,” reads:

Searching for identity is a theme as old as myths and fairy tales where young men are sent on a quest to parts unknown, in order to accomplish certain tasks necessary to receiving the reward . . . Christians understand identity theologically. For Christians, identity—the true self—is a gift, ours by redemption, not human development. While that identity is distorted by sin, Jesus restored our relationship with God—and in so doing, he made visible once more the outline of our true identities as God’s beloved.56

The search for identity is the process of discovering who one really is in Christ. In the beginning of Jacob’s story, he thinks God’s blessing is something that he has to earn

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through trickery or theft. In the end, he discovers that God desired to bless him all along (Gn 27; 32).

The Road Back

For adolescents, even after succeeding in the primary tasks of identity and autonomy the journey is far from over—they must also discover how they will relate to others now that they have achieved identity diffusion. In his commentary on the parable of the prodigal son, Wright highlights another dimension of the story: “One of the great stories of Israel’s past was of course the Exodus, when Israel was brought out of Egypt and came home to the promised land . . . ever since Ezekiel 37 the idea of resurrection had been used as a picture-language for the true return from exile.”\(^{57}\) For adolescents, the road back is a return from the temporary exile of identity construction. After identity diffusion, adolescents must travel back into the world in which they came to fulfill their commitment to community. However, due to the atomization of western society, many youth do not complete their journey towards mature adulthood. American cinema has heightened the refusal to return among adolescents in the United States. Ken Burke, professor of Dramatic Arts and Communication at Mills College writes,

American culture, with its role-modeling media images, has often given us an arrested adolescent who consistently avoids social responsibility and marital commitment. Our popular mythologies and ideologies are fraught with contradictions and lead to fictional structures that continually deny the necessity for choosing between individual and community priorities.\(^{58}\)

Burke argues that an unbalanced fixation on the initiation aspect of the hero in modern


American cinema has blinded viewers from the full journey of the hero which includes maturation into leadership and wisdom. The tragic result of initiation without return is an incomplete individuation process. Thus, the hero is trapped in a cycle of “self-destructive individualism” where the hero is unable to merge selfhood with commitment to community.\(^{59}\)

Whatever impedes the adolescent from crossing the final threshold into adulthood, often times they need a helping hand. It can be just as treacherous returning from the journey as the adventure itself. Rescue from without is necessary if the adolescent has been wounded by his journey and is incapable of self-extraction or if the adolescent does not realize that it is time to return, that he can return, or that others need his boon. As Campbell puts it, “The hero may have to be brought back from his supernatural adventure by assistance from without. That is to say, the world may have to come get him. For the bliss of the deep abode is not lightly abandoned in favor of the self-scattering of the wakened state.”\(^{60}\) For adolescents, the current North American landscape has made it increasingly difficult to cross the final developmental threshold into adulthood. Returning from the adolescent journey requires continued adult care and support for emerging adults on the brink of entering into adulthood themselves.

Although the adolescent returns, the child that left can never cross back over. Marked by their knowledge, the hero is forever a different figure. The trick to returning is to integrate that wisdom into human life and possibly share that wisdom with the rest of

\(^{59}\) Ibid, 3.

the world. This is usually extremely difficult. Campbell describes the hero’s final leap before they return from the adventure:

This brings us to the final crisis of the round, to which the whole miraculous excursion has been but a prelude—that, namely, of the paradoxical, supremely difficult threshold-crossing of the hero’s return from the mystic realm in the land of common day. Whether rescued from without, driven from within, or gently carried along by the guiding divinities, he has yet to re-enter with his boon the long-forgotten atmosphere where men who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete. He has yet to confront society with his ego-shattering, life-redeeming elixir, and take the return blow of reasonable queries, hard resentment, and good people at a loss to comprehend.61

Campbell’s concept of the hero’s threshold struggle is similar to Chap Clark's description of an adolescent entering the final leap into adulthood. In *Starting Right*, Chap Clark writes,

An older adolescent . . . is potentially ready to enter adulthood, but almost always still needs to be taught, led, and encouraged to make the final leap into an adult role as a capable, responsible, and interdependent person in the community. But, as noted earlier, we live in a culture that seems to deify youth and youthful irresponsibility and lack of commitment. Older adolescents stand on the threshold of making their mark on society and community but are often held back by systemic and environmental factors—parents who empower sloth and financial dependency, an educational system that treats the undergraduate curriculum as barely adequate preparation for graduate school, and media and advertising industries that make a far larger profit by appealing to the young to stay young (and the old to fight aging), to name but a few.62

The end of the adolescent journey should not be viewed by the adult community as something that naturally happens on its own without effort, struggle or support. The adult community in Christ should view entry into adulthood with the same care and reverence as the rest of the adolescent journey.

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61 Ibid., 186.

The author of Hebrews declares, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (2:14-15). Those in Christ have conquered death—the ultimate enemy. They are no longer in bondage to sin. As the Apostle Paul writes, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1). Once an adolescent understands that they are not simply a hero in their own story but also an actor in the biblical story, then Christ is no longer a theological concept to be pondered but a king to whom one’s life is to be committed. As the New Testament Scholar Darrell Bock writes in his commentary on Luke, “The plan of God is often a great theological abstraction until we can see just how we fit into it. Luke’s goal is to make our place in that plan clear. He invites us to see how we can have a relationship with God that is a journey of faith and a tour though life as it was meant to be lived.”

**Master of Two Worlds**

Stroup writes, “The real test of Christian understanding is not simply whether someone knows the content of the Christian tradition and can repeat it on demand but whether he or she is able to use Christian faith as it is embodied in the church’s narratives to reinterpret personal and social existence.” Boiled down to the most basic task, the

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64 Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 96-97.
goal of narrative criticism is “determining the storyline” of a biblical text to find meaning. In a similar vein, the primary goal of identity construction is to determine the storyline of one’s life, which is done by personal exegesis, in order to construct an identity. In light of these two tasks, the ultimate goal of a narrative approach to teaching Scripture is to determine where the storylines of the text and human lives become one. Michael McEntyre, associate Pastor of Youth and Young Adults, points out that the goal of theological reflection is to “align humanity’s story with God’s story in order for humanity to more clearly see the work of the kingdom of God.” The task of soteriology, as Root describes, is that,

The stories of Jesus and of the reader are related by the narrative connections that make them two sequences within a single larger story. These storied relations, rather than general truths the story illustrates, mediate between story and reader. The story is good news because redemption follows from the primary form of inclusion in the story. The task of soteriology is, then to show how the reader is included in the story and how the story then is or can be the story of that reader’s redemption.

For Christians, to live in Christ is to live in the overlap of heaven and earth. This is where the human story and divine story are woven together and lived out in tandem. When woven together, the redemption of the world through Christ becomes the metanarrative of an adolescent’s life.

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67 Root, “The Narrative Structure of Soteriology,” 266.
The primary goal for the Christian voyaging through adolescence is to discover the reality of who they are in Christ. It is to find themselves restored into relationship with God the Father. Being a “master of two worlds” is discovering what it looks like to live in the present world while in communion with God the Father through Christ. In Christ, people have a redeemed past, a new identity and a hopeful future. The Holy Spirit is what enables the believer to coexist in both a psycho-spiritual relationship with God in heaven and a psychosocial relationship with people in the world. When “walking in the Spirit” one is linked to both the human and the divine (Gal 5:16). Walking in step with the Spirit means a person’s story and God’s story are zip-locked together until the return of Christ.

Jesus’ resurrected body is both of heaven and of earth. Now ascended, Jesus is master of both the heavenly and earthly dimensions. As he declared to his disciples, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:18). In this, Jesus declared his full autonomy in both heaven and earth. When one’s identity is woven into Christ’s identity, their calling is woven into Christ’s calling. The Christian is called to move in the authority and power of Christ to bring about more of God’s kingdom into this world. In so doing, they not only find their lives, but end up becoming a part of God’s redemption plan for the world.
PART THREE

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN CHRIST
CHAPTER 5

CONFESSIONS OF THE ADOLESCENT SAINT

To write is human, to edit is divine. – Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*

In *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, George Stroup outlines terms which are helpful for articulating the narrative structure of the Christian faith. The foundation, the raw material from which people construct a personal identity, which includes their larger historical, social, and cultural worlds, is called a person’s chronicle. It is the sum total of uninterpreted events and experiences over the span of a person’s life. Tradition is the blueprint which provides the “symbols, myths, and categories for the interpretation of history.” It is the horizon through which a person remembers, interprets their chronicle, and ultimately makes sense of their life. The product of weaving together a chronicle in light of tradition is a person’s autobiography (See Appendix B). Since people are the

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3 Ibid., 109.

4 Ibid., 110.
stories they tell, a person’s autobiography is also their narrative identity. To account for
the complexity of the process of identity construction in light of tradition, Stroup uses the
term collision, as opposed to fusion of horizons, as a metaphor for the encounter of the
reader with the text. Thus, the interpretive task of a person is “to actualize the tradition in
the present, to enable the contemporary community to experience the power mediated by
redemptive events.”

Because adolescents possess autobiographical reasoning they can begin to take
their chronicles and interpret them through the lens of their tradition to form an
autobiography. In the Christian tradition a person’s spiritual autobiography is called their
confession of faith. Further, the primary way in which adolescents form autobiographies
is in the context of a community. Referring to McLean’s research, McAdams points out
that adolescents “author a narrative sense of the self by telling stories about their
experiences to other people, monitoring the feedback they receive from the tellings,
editing their stories in light of the feedback, gaining new experiences and telling stories
about those, and on and on, as selves create stories that, in turn, create new selves.”7 In
light of Stroup and McLean’s research, one way to help students form a narrative identity
in Christ is to give them safe spaces to write and tell their spiritual autobiographies where
the adult faith community can provide feedback.

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5 Ibid., 168.
6 Ibid., 90.
7 Dan P. McAdams, “Self and Identity,” in Noba Textbook Series: Psychology, eds. R. Biswas-
Diener and E. Diener (Champaign, IL: DEF publishers, 2018), accessed February 2, 2018,
Habermas and Bluck define autobiographical reasoning as “the process of self-reflective thinking or talking about the personal past that involves forming links between elements of one’s life and the self in an attempt to relate one’s personal past and present.” Put simply, it is the mental editing software by which the life story is formed. According to Stroup, memory or personal past, “provides Israel access to the redemptive power of Yahweh’s mighty acts.” Likewise, memory also provides Christians access to the redemptive power of God’s mighty acts through the person of Christ. Equipped with autobiographical reasoning, adolescents possess the self-reflective potential to link Christ’s redemption to their personal present. It is through the collision between personal story and Jesus’ story that personal identity in Christ is worked out. Empowered with autobiographical reasoning, adolescents possess the psychosocial capacity to interpret the redemption of Christ in ways that run to the core of their identity.

Further, Stroup writes, “To remember is to ‘actualize’ the past and ‘actualization’ is one form of interpretation. To actualize the past is to bring its redemptive power and significance to bear on the present situation.” Autobiographical reasoning is a necessary component of confession of faith or what Stroup refers to simply as confession. “Confession,” writes Stroup “is that ‘moment’ when the individual believer, supported by the community, is able to reconstruct personal identity by means of what is acknowledged and recognized to be truth about Jesus Christ.” Confession of faith is the

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9 Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 152.

10 Ibid., 167.
act of reinterpreting one’s identity in Christ. “Apart from the performance of confession, which includes the reconstruction of personal identity, faith is incomplete and not fully a reality.”

Equipped with autobiographical reasoning, adolescents can participate in a confession of faith which links Christ to their life story.

During adolescence, people begin the process of sifting through their personal history and begin constructing a meaningful identity or life story. McLean and her associates define life story as “an extended but selective autobiography of personal experiences and interpretations of those experiences that provide unity and purpose to the person.” The construction of a life story is an exegetical process. Many books about teaching the Bible describe in detail how to exegete Scripture, but discussion of identity exegesis is largely absent. A narrative approach to teaching Scripture might begin with exegeting the biblical text (although, for adolescents it is extremely helpful for at least some life exegesis to happen prior to biblical exegesis), but the task of exegesis is not finished until lives are interpreted in light of the biblical tradition. To help adolescents exegete their lives in light of the biblical narrative, adults must allow a space and a medium for youth to articulate their identities in Christ. These experiences allow youth to interpret (or reinterpret) their life story into the story of Christ.

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11 Ibid., 185.


13 Stroup defines personal identity as “a hermeneutical concept because it is primarily an exercise in interpretation . . . The identity of any person is an interpretation culled from the individual’s personal history,” in *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, 105-106.
The act of articulating a faith story within the context of the community of Christ is a restorative act. This is the primary psychosocial space where the Holy Spirit fuses human identity with Christ’s identity. The chief point of fusion for the follower of Christ is the Roman cross on which Jesus was crucified. It is a symbol which Jesus commands anyone who wants to be his disciple to take up daily (Lk 9:23). The cross of Christ is the place where all stories are ultimately put to death and a person’s true identity begins to appear. The Jesus story is unique because he has paved the way for each member of humanity to embrace an identity as co-child with Christ. This is the power of the Cross. In order for identity construction in Christ to happen, exegesis must include a hermeneutic of identity. To engage adolescents in a hermeneutic of identity construction in Christ, personal history must be interpreted through the framework of Jesus’ narrative by articulation in the form of autobiographical confession. As the Apostle Paul writes, “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved” (Rm 10:9-10).

Selves Creating Stories, Creating Saints

McLean and her associates define situated stories as “any narrative account of personal memory that is created within a specific situation, by particular individuals, for

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14 This element is so crucial that Jesus commissions baptism—a psychosocial space within the community where one can declare that their story has been grafted into God’s story and is now redeemed through Christ (Mt 28:19).
particular audiences, and to fulfill particular goals.”\textsuperscript{15} Likewise, autobiographical confession is a situated story within the community of Christ by believing individuals for believers to define their new identity in Christ. A person’s chronicle is full of situated stories but not all of these stories are used in life story construction.\textsuperscript{16} Studies have shown that 90\% of all self-defining memories have been shared at least once in the past.\textsuperscript{17} If this is the case, then this is also true for autobiographical memories related to self in the biblical story.

One way a person can develop their self-concept (beliefs about the self) is by telling stories about the self.\textsuperscript{18} How can an adolescent come to see themselves as adopted into the community of Christ? By telling stories in which they view themselves in light of the reality of Scripture. McLean and associates “propose that narratively induced self change happens through the incremental telling of situated stories to multiple audiences and in multiple contexts.”\textsuperscript{19} How do adults help adolescents view themselves as recipients of God’s grace through the crucifixion or see themselves as active agents in God’s redemptive purposes through the resurrection? Invite them to share their faith stories in increments, with a variety of audiences, in different contexts and even through multiple mediums. Adolescents form their identities in Christ in an emerging process, not

\textsuperscript{15} McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals, “Selves Creating Stories Creating Selves,” 263.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Avril Thorne, Kate C. McLean, and Amy M. Lawrence, “When Remembering is Not Enough: Reflecting on Self-Defining Memories in Late Adolescence,” \textit{Journal of Personality} 72, no. 3 (2004): 513-54.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
a single instance, and through autobiographical story telling or confessions. They do this by storying their collision experiences with Scripture as well as their enacted roles within the community of Christ. When adult believers become the ears of Christ for their developing brothers and sisters in the faith, they participate in the miracle of salvation. They become doulas for the youth being born again in Christ.

According to research, memories of experiences are forgotten for three reasons—they are not important, they were not told, or they were told to a distracted listener. Adults who care cannot make memories important, but they can help important memories become core memories in identity construction by being available, attentive listeners. In an article titled *Narrative Writing Exercises for Promoting Health Among Adolescents*, Elizabeth Tayler and her associates provide tips for implementing a narrative prevention program within a classroom setting. Although these tips are geared for helping adolescents overcome traumatic experiences, the developmental and pedagogical context is similar enough for these writing tips to be utilized for implementing adolescent confession in formal settings with youth. The following is a summary of their recommendations.

1. **Be flexible:** Since writing a narrative can pose a difficult task for adolescents, offering other options can assist the writing process. They offer drawing, poetry, and song as examples.

2. **Provide Support:** Engage in dialogue about the narrative in a supportive way with the writer.

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20 Ibid., 268.
3. Encourage writers to make narrative meaningful: Since there is a direct correlation between how meaningful the narrative is to the writer and the benefits they offer, then writers should be encouraged to craft a narrative about something that is especially meaningful to them.

4. Share your own stories with your writer: There is also a correlation between opening up to writers to build trust and rapport and the likelihood of the writer being willing to openly share they story. In light of this, adults are encouraged to share their stories. In doing so, the story does not have to be extremely personal. A memory that stands out to you as meaningful will suffice.\(^{21}\)

Christian educators and youth workers have come up with creative ways for adolescents to engage the biblical story.\(^{22}\) In addition to innovative, supportive, and encouraging ways to share and process the narrative of Scripture, those who teach youth must also find imaginative, compassionate, and reassuring ways to engage in autobiographical exegesis in tandem with God’s story. In so doing, those who work with youth are helping adolescents become written into Christ’s eternal kingdom.


\(^{22}\) See Michael Novelli, *Shaped by the Story: Discover the Art of Bible Storying*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse Press, 2013). Also, Don C. Richter writes, “Youth leaders need to resist moralizing and proof-texting and instead find creative ways for youth to encounter the Bible as Scripture (authoritative writings). We trust that the Bible will stake an authority claim on the lives of teenagers when we teach them to sing hymns of praise and psalms of lament; when we invite them to mime, paint, or sculpt a biblical scene; when we direct them in performing the role of biblical characters in plays and musicals. Simply by sharing the biblical story with teens, we provide them with life-preserving, narrative anchor in a sea of cultural flotsam jetsam,” in *Starting Right*, 72. Italics original.
The Master Wayfinder

A parabolic analysis of Disney’s *Moana* (2016)\(^{23}\) illustrates the complex psychosocial process of how autobiography is formed. This movie selection works particularly well because it is both rich in myth and follows the hero’s journey, which is the basic motif of adolescent identity construction.\(^{24}\) The opening scene begins with Tala, Moana’s eccentric grandmother, recounting the ideological metanarrative of their island community’s story to the children of the village, part of Moana’s tradition. The story depicts life created by the island goddess Te Fiti. According to legend, the world existed in peaceful harmony until a devastating curse was brought upon life by Maui, the trickster demigod who steals Te Fiti’s heart, rousing death and destruction to the islands. The legend also foretold that the ocean would one day choose someone who would voyage beyond the island reef, find Maui, sail with him across the ocean to restore Te Fiti’s heart, and bring restoration to the world.

The introduction of the film also chronicles Moana’s childhood. As the story progresses, the ocean gives Moana a jade stone, which turns out to be the heart of Te Fiti. Her childhood chronicle concludes with the opening song embedding Moana in a cultural life script. The basic script, at odds with Moana’s seafaring dreams, is that the island provides for everyone’s needs, and it is not necessary to voyage beyond the reef; therefore, Moana should live out her role as the chief’s daughter within the safe confines of the island. During her adolescence, disease threatens the island’s vitality by infecting


the coconut trees and causing the fish to flee from the island’s lagoon. Moana’s solution: break through the village’s cultural script by sailing beyond the reef to find fish.

The primary conflict in the film is that the larger metanarrative of Moana’s people has gravitational pull on Moana’s identity that calls her beyond the roll her parents and community have sketched. Moana wishes she could be the perfect daughter by fitting into the cultural life script prescribed by her parents and reinforced by her village, but also senses a greater calling to venture out to sea. She is torn. Does she write her life into the script her village has drafted for her by taking her place as village chief, or does she enter into the metanarrative of her ancestors by voyaging into the ocean? In short, Moana is faced with the question that confronts every adolescent “Who am I meant to be?”

After Tala reveals to Moana the village secret sealed in a cave, Moana encounters the ancient texts of her ancestors written on the sails of hidden ships. The texts reveal that her ancestors were voyagers. They were not confined to the island’s reefs but were called as a people to master the ocean and discover new islands. Tala explains that after Maui had stolen Te Fiti’s heart, her ancestors stopped traveling because monsters began appearing in the ocean. In light of the tradition of her ancestors, Moana reinterprets her chronicle. Situating her life into her ancestral metanarrative, she decides to follow the horizon of the ocean’s call. Immediately, she articulates her narrative identity, first to her grandmother, then to her larger community when she charges into a village meeting. With the sanction of her dying grandmother, as well as her mother, she becomes an active agent in the metanarrative of her ancestors by setting sail to find Maui and restore the world. However, it is not until the film approaches the climax, while singing “I am Moana,” that she fully embraces her identity. “I am Moana” is an autobiographical
articulation of Moana’s identity in lyrical form. In this moment, she literally sings her identity. She finds her way out of a tangled narrative ecology by authoring her chronicle into song. In so doing, she solidifies her self-concept which propels her into the triumphant climax of the film.

The film begins with text, the myth of her village, and ends with Moana’s life written into that text. In the resolution, Moana’s story becomes a tattoo over Maui’s heart signifying that her life has been permanently woven into the larger ideological tapestry of her people. In this way, Moana becomes a human story written into divine story, thus completing the task of identity construction and finding her true calling. Because she has found her way, she herself has become a “master wayfinder” and, in turn, reconciles the major conflict of the film by becoming a village chief that leads her people to venture in the way of redemption.

When navigating through a complex narrative ecology to plot a coherent life story, a key element in constructing a narrative identity in Christ is the articulation of autobiographical confession. Autobiographical faith articulation plays an integral role in the process of identity construction. It happens over a period of time through both casual conversations and formal declarations of faith; through informal messages to classroom writing exercises. Whether adults are asking intentional questions or youth are sharing unscripted testimonies, autobiographical articulation is the beginning of adolescent faith. The ultimate hope is that young people successfully navigate adolescence and become mature members of the local church that lead their communities to venture in the way of God’s redemption through Christ.
Heroes or Saints?

In *Improvisation*, Samuel Wells draws a distinction between the Greek hero as proposed by Aristotle and the Christian saint as proposed by Thomas Aquinas. While heroes are always at the center of the story, the saint is “always at the periphery of a story that is really about God.” While the hero's story is told to celebrate the virtues of the hero, the saint’s story celebrates faithfulness to God. The icon of heroism is the soldier who envisions a world where resources are limited (an economy of scarcity) and therefore violence is necessary in order for good to prevail. While the icon for the saint is the martyr, who imagines the world as a place where Christ has fought and secured ultimate good. While “the soldier faces death in battle, the martyr faces death by not going into battle.” The martyr’s sanctity, “has no place in any story except that of Christ’s redeeming sacrifice and the martyr's heavenly crown.” In the hero’s story, victory depends on the hero. The hero makes the story come out right. If the hero fails, there is no victory. Since success is dependent on the hero, “The hero fears failure, flees mistakes, and knows no repentance.” On the other hand, the saint’s failures ultimately highlight God’s victory. Since Christ has secured victory, “The saint knows that light only comes through cracks, that beauty is as much (if not more) about restoration as about creation.” Finally, while the hero stands alone against the world because he has

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26 Ibid., 43.

27 Ibid., 44.

28 Ibid.
learned to depend on himself, the saint learns to depend on God and the community of saints to live faithfully.

Continuing with the *Moana* analogy, Maui embodies similar characteristics to the prototypical Aristotelian hero. Maui is the hero of his own story. His body is ornamented with an expanding tapestry of mystical Polynesian tattoos that attest to the victories that he has won. His tattoos inscribe him at the center of his own epic. Maui’s opening song “You’re Welcome” is a sardonic celebration of his accomplishments and virtue. Out of brokenness, he has spent his life stealing and fighting with the false assumption that humanity is living in scarcity. As a result he steals fire, lassoes the sun, harnesses the breeze, pulls islands out of the ocean, kills a mythical eel and buries it to provide coconut trees, etc. When asked to restore the heart to Te Fiti, he expresses fears of failure, and unapologetically runs from making things right. When Maui finally agrees to help Moana, he depends on his own mystical powers (his magical fishhook) for victory and views Moana’s role as insignificant in his battle against evil. For Maui, she is merely bait or a decoy.

Moana, on the other hand, is more Disney saint than Aristotelian hero. She is not the hero of her own tale; her story sails upon the periphery of the master narrative of her tradition. She does not trust in her own strength, her story is caught up in the redemptive tide of the ocean. Her success is dependent on Maui, the ocean, and her village. Not blinded by self-centeredness, she realizes that the ultimate triumph is not in the violent defeat of Te Kā, the lava demon of Earth and fire, but in her restoration. Her journey is not one of self edification—but that of self-sacrifice. The distinction between the Disney saint and the Christian Saint is that they are working under different metanarratives.
However, what Moana has done for her universe, Christ has done for ours. Therefore, the Christian saint is not tasked with bringing salvation, they are caught up in the redemptive tidal wave that has been tearing through history since the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God. Likewise, the interpretive framework for the identity of the adolescent saint hinges on the articulation of their life story in light of the Jesus story. Like the martyr described by Samuel Wells, the adolescent saint “has no place in any story except that of Christ’s redeeming sacrifice and the martyr’s heavenly crown.”

The Aristotelian hero has been resurrected and individualized in the philosophical movement popularly referred to as postmodernity. Postmodernism is the breakdown of story, it is a societal attempt to allow everyone to be the center of his or her own story. At best it allows individuals to live under the illusion that they are atomized demigods living in a self-published narrative universe where their stories become subplots in an imaginary ideological metanarrative from which identity and ethic is crafted. The problem with this is that it places ultimate hope in self, and when the postmodern self fails, its ideological façade crumbles and is left without a redemptive story. When stories without a true metanarrative break apart they become just as empty as the voids from which they were crafted. The biblical story teaches that the world’s redemption does not rest on the shoulders of human demigods but has been secured with the death and renewal of Christ.

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29 Moana has brought about redemption in her universe but not in the sense that the movie depicts a soteriological metaphor.

30 Wells, *Improvisation*, 43.
CHAPTER 6
DINNER AND A STORY: A NARRATIVE TEST RUN

Michael Bamberg’s article, “Form and Function of ‘Slut Bashing’ in Male Identity Construction in 15-Year-Olds,” analyzes a moderated group discussion between five fifteen-year-old boys narratively constructing their identity. In this dialogue, they craft a story world and place one of their female classmates as a character in their tale. They establish the girl as unintelligent, irresponsible, and insecure, and cast her as person who engages in promiscuous behavior to gain acceptance among her peers. As a result, the boys place her at the bottom level of the social hierarchy in their story and label her as “a slut”—a title they imply she earned.1 Depicting their classmate as the prototypical kid who is “unstable, maladjusted, and irresponsible,” they narratively position themselves as “smart, mature, cool, and thereby not as children.”2 Ultimately, they cast themselves at the top of a moral hierarchy in their story world, and the nameless girl at the bottom. At the expense of violently slandering their peer, they portray themselves as heroes in a false story.

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2 Ibid., 345, 349.
As a result, they narratively articulate the answer to the question “Who am I?” and embody an identity that is “deprived and deficient” and drastically different than the Kingdom narrative depicted in the Gospels. How would one go about helping adolescents with a similar ideology reinterpret their identities in light of the biblical narrative? One approach would be to tell them that it is wrong to put down a classmate to gain an inflated sense of moral identity. However, according to Elkind, this may only serve to entrench them in their current perception of the world. Another, more effective, approach would be to offer them a different story. In so doing, a new horizon of existence is placed before them and a new way of living dawns upon the horizon of their lives. Perhaps Luke 7:36-50 is an appropriate narrative to offer in contrast to the story depicted by the teenage boys in Bamberg’s study. This is the account of a nameless woman who crashes the party of a self-righteous religious leader who has crafted his own story and has cast her at the bottom of his social hierarchy.

The Human and Divine Stories: A Panoramic View

A popular hike in Mammoth, California is a short trek to the Panorama Dome. At almost 9,000 feet the dome offers a 360-degree view of the Mammoth Lakes Basin. To the west, from the treeless summit, one can gaze upon the Mammoth Crest towering in the distance like a great wall and the southern section of Mammoth Mountain. A look below offers a breathtaking view of a majestic waterfall cascading into the Lakes Basin surrounded by lofty pines. To the east, with the town of Mammoth Lakes below, one can

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drink in the spectacular view of the White Mountains jutting out from the Long Valley Caldera. If you want to gain your bearings in Mammoth Valley, this is one of the best and most accessible spots. Likewise, if you want to help students get a sense of where they are in relation to the grand narrative of Scripture, a strategic place to start would be giving them a panoramic view of the storyline of Scripture. One potential starting point is Samuel Wells’ revised theodramatic version of N.T. Wright’s Five-Act Play. Wells makes a major adjustment to Wright’s work by placing the church in the fourth act as opposed to the fifth act. His logic; “It is not the church’s role to make the story end well. . . the church lies within the story, rather than at the end of it.” Similarly, it is not the job of adolescents to make their stories end well, that is the work of God. The adolescent identity is securely sealed within God’s story. However one portrays the metanarrative of the Bible, it is important to set this at the backdrop of biblical pedagogy because the metanarrative of Scripture places God at both the beginning and the end of the story and offers adolescents a story to join and a drama to enter.

Not only is keeping the master story of Scripture in view an important interpretive skill when approaching individual books and passages in the Bible, it also sets the stage for God’s children to find their proper place in the drama of Scripture. In so doing, lives are positioned as subplots within the larger narrative reality of God’s story. Offering the grand narrative of Scripture counteracts both the modern metanarrative where the plot

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4 If viewing Scripture as a five-act play, one can take Wells’ acts (Creation, Israel, Jesus, Church, and Eschaton) and place them on a Freytag Pyramid, *Improvisation*, 53-55 (see Appendix C). In this way, Creation is viewed as exposition, Israel as the rising action, Jesus as the climax, the Church as the falling action, and the Eschaton as the denouement. Or, for a brief and accessible book, see Lesslie Newbigin’s, *A Walk Through the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

5 Wells, *Improvisation*, 52.
progression of the world is pursued without God, and a postmodern metanarrative where, according to Loughlin, “We have to be our own story-tellers, our own little masters.”6 Getting the metanarrative of Scripture in sight offers adolescents an alternate way of living and understanding their world. In a postmodern context, accepting the metanarrative of Scripture means relinquishing full control of one’s story. As one enters into Luke 7:36-50, the larger story of God’s redemptive purposes in Christ must be kept in the theological periphery.

Along with a panoramic story-arc of Scripture, a narrative approach puts thematic coherence into practice by helping students gain an encompassing view of their lives. The placement of a life into God’s story requires both an honest look at the metanarrative of Scripture as well as a reflective look at the story-arc of one’s life. Biblical exegesis and identity exegesis are both essential scaffolding for the psychosocial fusion of God’s story with the adolescent story. One way to engage students in identity exegesis is through life story reflections that are geared towards inviting adolescents to recount key scenes in their life narrative and imagine how their life will develop in the future.7 Articulating core memories and editing them coherently helps students think reflectively and thematically about their lives. Again, the primary goal of identity construction is to

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6 Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 9. Loughlin also mentions that the modern narrative is humanly authored and the postmodern narrative is authorless, 29.

determine the storyline of one’s life. The primary goal of identity construction in Christ is to determine the storyline of one’s life with Christ’s story as its centerpiece.

**Narrative Criticism for Adolescents**

The biblical narratives cannot be taught simply as literature or dogma and arrive at what the authors were intending to convey. For example, to engage Luke’s Gospel in the way he intended, readers must rush to the makeshift manger along with the shepherds to catch a glimpse of the newborn Messiah (Lk 2:16). They must pour out their lives at the feet of Christ along with the woman with the alabaster jar (Lk 7:38). They are to be gripped by compassion for a stranger who was mugged and left for dead on the side of the road along with the Samaritan (Lk 10:33). They must cry out to Jesus for mercy along with the blind beggar along the road to Jericho (Lk 18:39). They are to bear the weight of the executioner’s crossbeam along with Simon from Cyrene (Lk 23:26). They must find themselves, by God’s grace, declaring the righteousness of Jesus along with the centurion who witnessed his death (Lk 23:47). Along with authentic encounters with God’s Word, it is through communion with the saints, and the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, that adolescents realize that the stranger who they have encountered during their journey towards adulthood is actually the risen King (Lk 24:31). Luke is not telling Christ’s story simply so that his readers can be entertained by it, he is telling the story so that his readers can be consumed by it. It is told to cement faith in the story of Christ (Lk 1:4).

Telling a story is different than reflecting on a story. Aside from simply reading the text, there are a number of effective and creative ways to retell the biblical stories that help students hear and see what is happening. Many of these practices employ the use of
performing and visual arts or creative writing activities. That is not the emphasis of this project. The emphasis is on helping adolescents reflect on the biblical story in ways that summon them to articulate their lives into the biblical stories and view their stories in light of the reality of Christ’s kingdom. Again, the most basic task of narrative criticism is “determining the storyline” of a biblical text to find meaning.\(^8\) Referring to composition criticism, N.T. Wright suggests that “It makes good sense to ask of [the Gospels], as it does of a Jane Austen novel or a Shakespeare play: What story was the author telling, and how did he or she go about it?”\(^9\) One way to analyze the Gospel stories is by asking the same questions literary scholars ask when analyzing elements of a story. Jonathan Pennington, professor of New Testament Interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, points out that when analyzing the Gospels, “Breaking the story into discrete units or scenes helps one read it more slowly and thoughtfully and begin to arc the plot.”\(^10\) This is true when both exegeting a text as well as exegeting a life.

When and where does the story take place? Is there a time of day, a time of year, specific scenery, weather, or location described? If so, is there any symbolism or relevance to the story’s setting? Identify the characters in the story. Are there any traits or personal history of the characters that is revealed? Identify the protagonist. What character, or force, stands in opposition to him or her? One should be aware of the author’s use of indirect characterization. Is the author showing, rather than telling, the

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reader things that give insight into the personality of the character? Is there any dialogue between the characters? Are there any private thoughts or feelings described? What effect do the characters have on one another in the story? What do the characters do in the story? How do they behave? Does the author highlight a physical characteristic or an element of clothing that is of particular interest?

The Gospel writers often show rather than tell what a character is like. In this way, the evangelists paint a picture in prose that is more powerful than a direct characterization. Based on the details in the story, try to discover the motivation of the actors within the story. Character motivation is the driving force behind why the character interacts with their world in a particular way. Ask, What does the main character want more than anything else? What do the secondary characters want more than anything else? What potential conflicts or struggles might exist between the characters? How is the character using her agency to try to get what she wants? Often the character’s ideology or even narrative identity is revealed when identifying character motivation. Lastly, the plot elements are what the authors are inviting readers to experience along with the characters. Ask about what series of events, conflicts, or crises happen in the story. What is the main conflict or struggle in the story? What is the climax or turning point in the periscope? What are the falling actions or events occurring from the time of the climax to the end of the story? How does the story conclude? Is there a resolution, a triumph, or a cliff hanger? How is the problem or conflict resolved? ¹¹

¹¹ A Freytag Pyramid can be implemented for vertical analysis of biblical books as well as individual stories within Scripture.
Commenting on Luke 24:13-32, Tim Mackie observes that, “Only when we submit ourselves to Jesus’ upside down kingdom epitomized by the cross can we truly experience the real Jesus.”\(^\text{12}\) Since the way people make sense of themselves is mediated through “talk that is socially interactive and locally managed for the purposes of identity construal,” adults must make space for narrative identity construction in Christ to happen through social interaction and guided spiritual autobiography.\(^\text{13}\) Along with guided autobiography, adolescents can be invited to ask which character they most identity with in the text and why. When reading Luke 7:36-50, students can be asked if they have ever lifted themselves up at the expense of others. They can reflect on how Simon classifies people and determines their value in contrast to the way Jesus classifies people and determines their value. Finally, they can reflect and articulate how Jesus’ story influences the way they view themselves and others.

**Writing a New Story: Narrative Identity Exegesis and Luke 7:36-50**

During his ministry in Galilee, after a series of healings and teachings demonstrating the inbreaking of God’s kingdom into the world, Jesus is invited to a dinner party at the home of Simon the Pharisee (Lk 7:36-50). In the preceding stories, Jesus heals a centurion’s son on the brink of death, raises a widow’s only son and restores him to his mother, and is declared a prophet (Lk 7:1-16). The story immediately before illustrates Jesus’ association with and reception by sinners and introduces the Pharisees’


\(^{13}\) Bamberg, “Form and Functions of ‘Slut Bashing’ in Male Identity Constructions in 15-Year-Olds,” 334.
rejection of God’s purposes through Jesus (7:29-30; 34). Luke 7:36-50 features a reoccurring motif of the religious leaders’ disdain for Jesus’ association with toll collectors and sinners; for the religious authorities, this was the most appalling feature of Jesus’ ministry. The story also broadens the contrast of between the religious authorities, who are revolted by Jesus, and sinful people, who are drawn to Jesus. Luke 7:36-50 taps into the larger theme of Jesus’ mission to seek and save the lost (Lk 5:32; 19:10). In telling this story, Luke paints a picture of Jesus’ forgiveness and embrace of those who are labelled as outcasts and invites readers to respond to this grace in radical and meaningful ways as well as view others with the compassion and empathy of Christ himself.

This passage features three prominent characters: Jesus, Simon the Pharisee and a sinful woman. The story opens when Jesus, the protagonist of Luke’s Gospel, is invited over for a dinner party at Simon the Pharisee’s house. While reclining at Simon’s dinner table, an unnamed woman crashes the party wets Jesus’ feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses his feet and anoints them with perfume (Lk 36-38). This woman, the victim of town gossip, has a reputation of being morally loose (Lk 7:37). Uncovering her hair would have been perceived as a promiscuous gesture by Simon the Pharisee along with his conservative company and would have been seen as justification for their character judgment.\footnote{Craig S. Keener, \textit{The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament}, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 199.}
Luke gives his readers a glimpse of Simon’s private thoughts when he questions the rumor he heard about Jesus and says to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner” (Lk 7:39). A few verses later, the reader learns that Simon has been extremely rude to Jesus. He did not greet him properly or offer him the normal gestures of hospitality for Jewish guests in the ancient near East (Lk 7:45-46). Simon’s disdain for the sinful woman is reflected when he speaks to himself. Perhaps Simon wanted to appear virtuous by inviting Jesus over for dinner rather than to respond to his ministry with honor and worship.\(^\text{15}\) Regardless of his motivation, Luke evokes dramatic irony by describing how an “expert” in God’s Word fails to recognize the embodiment of God’s Word eating at his table. Simon the Pharisee is blinded from the truth by the false narrative he crafted in which he was at the top of the social hierarchy and the unnamed sinful woman was at the bottom.

The deep humility of the woman kissing Jesus’ feet is contrasted with Simon’s posture of superiority over the woman. The major point of tension is Simon’s extreme rudeness contrasted to the extreme adoration of the uninvited woman. A woman, who is overcome with God’s forgiveness and grace, responds by pouring out the full expression of all she has and knows as an act of worship to honor Jesus. In contrast, Simon, a man imprisoned by judgement and arrogance, seeks to exclude Jesus to dishonor him. The parable Jesus tells illustrates Jesus’ desire to both affirm and honor the woman’s stunning act of worship and expose Simon’s extravagant rudeness and lack of compassion—the

\(^{15}\) Ibid.
sign of a truly sinful person. Jesus simultaneously calls out Simon who, although an expert in the Law, has lost sight of the entire biblical story, and affirms a woman forgiven by God’s generous love. Like the Prodigal Son, this woman has returned to her father. Like the older brother, Simon the Pharisee is gripped with judgment rather than joy (Lk 15:11-32). In regard to the underlying theme, Klyne Snodgrass observes that,

Underneath this narrative are questions of identity. Most obvious is the identity of Jesus. To the Pharisee, Jesus could not be a prophet since he did not understand what kind of woman touched him, but, with some irony in the narrative, Jesus shows that he is a prophet because he knows what is in the Pharisees heart, and more than a prophet because he announces forgiveness of sins. The identity of the woman is at issue. The Pharisee is sure she is a sinner; Jesus is sure she is a forgiven sinner. The Pharisee’s identity is also in question. Is he as pure and right before God as he thinks? Directly related to issues of identity are issues of value and honor. Jesus’s understanding of the value and honor of people is at direct odds with that of Simon. The sinner woman is better than the Pharisee.¹⁶

In this story, readers get a glimpse of the identity of Christ and in so doing are able to simultaneously see a nameless woman encountering grace and the self-righteous religious leader being exposed. Where the boys in Bamberg’s study labeled their peer as “slut” within the tale they wove, Christ has labeled her “beloved daughter” within his Father’s story. Like the self-righteous religious leaders depicted in the Gospels, the boys have shamefully labeled their unnamed classmate a sinful woman. The reality is that in God’s kingdom she is neither confined by her actions, nor defined by her past, because Christ has forgiven all. In light of the Jesus narrative, the identity status of the boys is not dependent on being holier or more mature than their peer, but rather rooted in their status as image bearers of God. Jesus levels all moral hierarchies by welcoming everyone to his

table to participate in the story of the world’s redemption through his death and resurrection. When adolescents glimpse the identity of Christ and his body broken at the climax of human history they can begin to find their place in it. They too can become holy saints basking in Christ’s grace and feasting in the presence of God.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION: THEOLOGICAL IMAGINEERS

All people understand their identities in light of texts. Ideological texts and master narratives set the context for people’s stories to be lived. The question is not whether adolescents will grow up to be adults whose lives are shaped by texts; but which texts will shape the lives of the youth in one’s care. The charge Deuteronomy gives to ancient Israelites is to raise their children in a way where God’s story shapes their identity. When the author of Deuteronomy recounts God’s command to “Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds,” he is referring to God’s story (Dt 11:18). Israelites bow down to other gods when they hand the rights of their stories over to anything other than Yahweh (Dt 11:16). Perhaps if the life of any follower of Christ were examined, from Saint Paul to Mother Theresa, one would be able to track a shift in authorship—from self as author to a co-authorship with Christ—which is another way to describe the theological miracle popularly known as conversion. Understanding the psychosocial aspects of how a person moves from being an agent within their own story to an agent within God’s story is the pedagogical underpinning from which one teaches the narrative of Scripture. A narrative approach to teaching Scripture allows the young people to see themselves not only as beloved children within their households and communities, but also as children of God, who have been chosen to be a part of God’s redemptive story for the world.

In the film Saving Mr. Banks (2013), Walt Disney seeks out the film rights to Pamela “P. L.” Travers’ Mary Poppins novels. Uncompromising, Travers refuses to hand over the rights to her beloved stories. Toward the end of the film, upon learning Travers’

1 Saving Mr. Banks, directed by John Lee Hancock (Walt Disney Pictures, 2013).
real name, Disney finally realizes what lay behind Mrs. Travers’ stubborn possessiveness with her novels. The *Mary Poppins* stories are actually based on her story, which is riddled with painful memories from her childhood of losing her father (the inspiration for Mr. Banks in her novels), first to alcoholism and finally to tuberculosis. To trust someone with her novels, she ultimately has to trust someone with her story. Essentially, *Mary Poppins* is a psychosocial projection of Mrs. Travers’ narrative identity. Upon realizing this, Walt Disney flies out to London to convince Mrs. Travers to trust him with her story and greets her with the following dialogue, marking the climax of the movie:

Give her to me, Mrs. Travers. Trust me with your precious Mary Poppins. I won’t disappoint you. I swear that every time a person goes into a movie house—from Leicester to St. Louis, they will see George Banks being saved. They will love him and his kids, they will weep for his cares, and wring their hands when he loses his job. And when he flies that kite, oh! They will rejoice, they will sing. In every movie house, all over the world, in the eyes and the hearts of my kids, and other kids and their mothers and fathers for generations to come, George Banks will be honored. George Banks will be redeemed. George Banks and all he stands for will be saved. Maybe not in life, but in imagination. Because that’s what we storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again. Trust me, Mrs. Travers. Let me prove it to you. I give you my word.2

*Saving Mr. Banks* is ultimately a story about a woman who struggles to trust her producer with the rights to her story. Similarly, the spiritual journey of those who follow Christ is one of learning how to trust God with the rights of their stories. Walt Disney’s vision for Mrs. Travers’ story must be the theology teacher’s vision for the stories of those they teach. A theology teacher is a storyteller, a biblical *imagineer,* who beckons her students to trust God with their stories. The God of Israel, the producer of all life,

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2 “My Own Mr. Banks,” in *Saving Mr. Banks,* directed by John Lee Hancock (Walt Disney Pictures, 2013).
uses human tragedy as the setting from which the grand story of redemption is told. Only when people trust God with their broken stories can they be truly redeemed.

Adult believers who desire the youth in their care to come to saving faith must ask, and help navigate, questions that address the deepest constructs of narrative identity. Scripture stakes a claim on the world and on people’s lives that runs deeper and truer than all other stories. As the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Only in the Holy Scriptures do we get to know our own story.”3 The question that remains after the biblical drama is told and lives are examined is: where do you find yourself in God’s story? The story that remains to be written and professed, after the Bible is heard and lives are interpreted, is the adolescent life plotted within God’s story. In the biblical story, the multiple selves of adolescence become enfolded into a single differentiated self as God’s adopted child. The imaginary audiences that arise out of egocentric abstraction take a seat to Christ. The lenses through which students view the world crack and shatter to unveil the beauty and wonder of God’s redemption, and the narrative by which adolescents author their lives becomes a story produced by the Holy Spirit. In so doing, the adolescent identity, which is embedded in the psychosocial confines of time and space, hovers over the edge of eternity and Christ alone becomes the blessed hope by which adolescents interpret the whole of reality.

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Table 1. Milestones in Development of Narrative Identity

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<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Developmental emergence</th>
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<td>2-3</td>
<td><strong>Autobiographical memory.</strong> Young children begin to remember personal events as things that have happened to them, or as things they have done. These episodic memories become attached to the self—“my” little memories about “me.” Parents often encourage children to talk about these memories, and through conversation, the memories may become solidified or elaborated.</td>
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<td>3-4</td>
<td><strong>Theory of mind.</strong> Children come to understand that people are motivated agents who have minds containing desires and beliefs, and who act upon those desires and beliefs. Stories are fundamentally about the exploits of motivated agents (characters) played out over time. Therefore, the folk psychology of motivation provided by theory of mind lays the cognitive groundwork for telling intelligible stories.</td>
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<td>5-6</td>
<td><strong>Story grammar.</strong> By early grade school, children have a clear, albeit implicit, understanding of how a story should be structured. A story should begin with a motivated agent who seeks to accomplish goals; the goal striving is thwarted or complicated in some manner, revealing a conflict and ushering in suspense; the story should build to a climax, and then it should be resolved. Stories should have a clear beginning, middle, and ending.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td><strong>Cultural script.</strong> Children and adolescents learn what a human life typically contains and how the life course is typically sequenced and structured. They come to understand that there are periods or stages in life—birth, schooling,</td>
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leaving home, getting a job, marriage, having children, retirement, and so on. Different cultures offer different scripts for living a life.

12-25 *Autobiographical reasoning and advanced storytelling skills.* Adolescents and emerging adults gain proficiency in deriving personal meanings from autobiographical events. For example, they may string together events to explain a development in their own lives (*causal coherence*: Habermas & Bluck, 2000), or they may derive a theme that organizes their life as a whole (*thematic coherence*). They may come to understand particular scenes in their life stories as providing *lessons or insights* (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Over time, they may use sophisticated narrative devices to make sense of their lives, such as foreshadowing and flashbacks.


**APPENDIX B**

[Diagram of Chronicle (Memories), Tradition (Biblical Story), and Autobiography (Confession of Faith)]
APPENDIX C

*Samuel Wells’ Five Act Summary on a Freytag Pyramid with the role of the adolescent saint.

The adolescent saints are subplots within the Church within God’s true story of the world.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


