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Meaning-Making as a Formational Pathway for Christian Adolescents

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

MEANING-MAKING AS A FORMATIONAL PATHWAY

FOR CHRISTIAN ADOLESCENTS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

TIMOTHY C. PREWETTE

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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DMin Dissertation

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This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

Timothy Prewette

has been approved by
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for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation claims that Christian adolescents will flourish when using a narrative approach to both scripture and life as part of an intentional meaning-making process. Narrative theology offers the controlling story (worldview) needed by adolescents and aids in meaningfully framing life experiences. Chapter 1 identifies the problem of Christian adolescents abandoning the church and/or their faith as they move into young adulthood. Nuances of this exodus are explored, and a particular brand of adolescent faith is articulated, one which is lacking in both substance and relevance. Meaning-making is then characterized as an intentional, guided process in which Christians construct meaning in their life and faith. Chapter 2 examines a narrative approach to scripture and employs this lens in seeing the story of God's redemptive activity revealed throughout the Bible. The narrative shape of scripture will frame the meaning-making process for Christian adolescents. Chapter 3 surveys selected narratives throughout church history. The narratives envelop particular people and places in the story of the Church and reflect their participation in God's on-going redemptive activity as well as their identification with the biblical narrative. Chapter 4 seeks to express current narratives of the American evangelical church as well as those of postmodern culture. An attempt is made to find common ground between culture and church with regard to their respective values and stories. Chapter 5 provides a snapshot of adolescence through a psychological lens and through the lens of adolescent spirituality in America. The framework for adolescent meaning-making is constructed and fuses together the narrative shape of life with the narrative approach to scripture. Chapter 6

introduces meaning-making practices for Christian adolescents to address the neutered

brand of adolescent faith introduced in the opening chapter. Concrete ministry application

is then presented for church leaders and parents who desire to walk alongside adolescents

in their meaning-making journey.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Vignettes

Marcus grew up in a Christian home where his family was active in their local church and he believed everything his parents taught him about the Christian faith. During his teen years, Marcus participated in his church's student ministry: small groups, worship experiences, fun events, and service projects. In college, Marcus got involved in a campus ministry. He also was exposed to other worldviews, social pressures, freedoms, and questions about the Bible and life that he had never before faced. As his time in college progressed, Marcus felt increasingly distant from God and that his faith was weak. In time Marcus withdrew from campus ministry activities because he struggled to find any real meaning in his faith. After college, Marcus got married and settled into a career. He didn't have much of a faith after that, as the convictions of his youth seemed distant and unrealistic.

Kevin is a junior in a Christian high school. He likes his teachers, has a lot of friends, and is considered one of the nicest guys around school. Nonetheless, Kevin really struggles to see the relevance of the Christian faith beyond God occasionally getting him "out of a jam" or letting him into heaven when he dies. Kevin has questions that are both philosophical and practical, and he just can't seem to make much sense of Christianity, life, or God.

Millennials and Faith

These stories suggest that American adolescents come into close contact with Christianity, both its message and adherents, but with little lasting change or value as a

result. Much has been written about the issue of the Millennial generation leaving behind their faith and/or the American Christian church, across all faith traditions, as they enter young adulthood.[1] Millennials, also called Generation Y, are currently in their early teens to early thirties. They are characterized as racially diverse, distrustful of institutions, and authority, and are heavily engaged in social media. American Millennials also tend to delay significant life commitments of marriage, family, and vocation. This generation is already loaded by debt, yet they are still perceived to be much more optimistic about life and their future than their predecessors in Generation X.[2]

Many in this generation of young adults are in a time of transition, evaluating identity, and re-testing loyalties shouldered from parental influence. One of the loyalties being tested is the inherited faith of their parents, as young adults reassess how they understand their experiences of faith and spirituality.[3] Many of those surveyed find church to be unessential to life, believing that it lacks influence and relevancy. Some not only failed to see the connection between church and life, but also between church and their faith.[4]

Several major research and polling organizations conduct surveys that consider the religious beliefs and practices of young people in the United States. The Barna Group, Pew Research Center, National Study of Youth and Religion, and Gallup, among others,

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[1] David Kinnaman with the Barna Group as well as Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton with the National Study of Youth and Religion are prominent names that have performed extensive research on this trend. Of course, other researchers and authors shed light on this trend as well.

[2] "Millennials in Adulthood," Pew Research Center, March 7, 2014, accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/#fnref-18663-1.

[3] Fred Fay, "Emerging Young Adult Spiritual Formation: A Developmental Approach for an Intergenerational Church" (DMin diss., George Fox Evangelical Seminary, 2015), 5.

[4] Thom Rainer and Sam Rainer, *Essential Church: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2008), 5, 26.

have engaged in studies to better understand the increasing number of those in the U.S. who claim no faith. The initial report by Pew Research dubbed this trend "the rise of the nones," and revealed that one-in-three Millennials have no religious affiliation.[5] Further research by Barna has shown that 57 percent of 18-29 year-olds with a Christian background dropped out of church between their teen and early adult years.[6] Numbers vary only slightly in other survey results, as the findings reveal the same trend.

Extensive research, particularly by the Barna Group, has also revealed the nuances that exist in the landscape of young adults leaving the church for the land of faithlessness. There are significant numbers of young adults leaving the church. However, the deeper reality is that there are many reasons for this exodus, and not all young adults stay away from the church, or lose their faith when they leave the institution of the church. For example, one simple reason for the drop-off in attendance is that life changes. Geographical moves such as going to college and changes in schedule related to work, also affect church engagement.[7]

In addition, extensive surveys of the Millennial generation revealed various issues with the church itself. The perception of the church's relationship with culture, more specifically its attitude towards an accelerating and complex culture, has caused dissatisfaction and disillusionment among adolescents and young adults. The following words have been used to describe Millennials' assessment of the church: hypocritical,

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[5] "Nones on the Rise", Pew Research Center, October 9, 2012, accessed July 18, 2016, http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/

[6] "Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials," Barna: Millennials, May 9, 2013, accessed April 26, 2015, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/612-three-spiritual-journeys-of-millennials.

[7] Ed Stetzer, "The Real Reasons Young Adults Drop Out of Church," Christianity Today, December 1, 2014, accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/december/real-reasons-young-adults-drop-out-of-church.html.

political, judgmental, overprotective, superficial, exclusive, anti-science, and doubtless.[8] These and other perceptions influence people to walk away from the church.

Further examination reveals the different journeys of those within the migration. David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, describe three different pathways taken by Millennials who were raised as active churchgoers. "Nomads" are those who have left the church but not their faith. This group doesn't feel like they fit in church anymore, or they see church as optional, yet they still desire to follow Christ. "Prodigals" have left the church and their faith because of damaging experiences in the church, negative perceptions of the church, or because Christian beliefs make little sense to them anymore. Finally, "exiles" feel stuck between the church and culture. They want to see the church be less withdrawn and establish a more faithful presence in the world, or they struggle because they see God's work and presence more evident in the world than in the church.[9]

Some researchers put the blame for this exodus on the increasingly secular nature of society,[10] while others assert that Christian parents have neglected to pass along a biblical faith to their children.[11] Still others blame the American church and point to its

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[8] See David Kinnaman with Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church-- and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011); David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters*, Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012). Both of these books unpack the numerous negative perceptions of the church held by Millennials.

[9] "Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials," Barna: Millennials, May 9, 2013, accessed April 26, 2015, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/612-three-spiritual-journeys-of-millennials.

[10] Laurie Goodstein Stolberg and Sheryl Gay, "Pope Praises U.S., but Warns of Secular Challenges," *New York Times*, April 17, 2008, accessed June 9, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/17/us/nationalspecial2/17pope.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[11] Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Souls in Transition: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 155.

failure to communicate the Bible's relevance and uphold biblical authority.[12] The truth

includes a combination of all of these factors.

Moral Therapeutic Deism

What many alarmed church leaders and parents consider to be the problem—

young adults leaving the church and/or their faith—is likely the symptom of a deeper

dilemma. Christian Smith, sociologist and Notre Dame professor, and Melinda Lundquist

Denton, project manager of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR),

conducted extensive surveys and interviews, which led to some informative conclusions.

They used this research to describe a particular brand of faith adhered to by many

Millennial Christians. They detailed these findings in their book, *Soul Searching: the*

Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers.

Smith and Denton discovered that many self-proclaimed Christian teens held in

common these general affirmations: God is creator and giver of moral law, but doesn't

command or require too much of anyone; the basic purpose of life is to be happy and feel

good, yet also be moral, responsible, and respectful to one another; God watches over us

from a distance but can help out when needed; and heaven awaits those who are good

people and believe in God.[13] Though this is no official creed or statement of beliefs, the

pair dubbed this brand of Christianity "Moral Therapeutic Deism" (MTD). MTD mixes

in with elements of a more traditional faith and is not to be considered a "stand alone"

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[12] Ken Ham and Britt Beemer with Todd Hillard, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2009), 41, 74.

[13] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

faith. It is a functional mutation within Christianity (and Judaism and Mormonism as well) than a formal doctrine.[14]

Clearly this lacks some of the gospel essentials such as repentance, becoming new creations through salvation, transformation through death to self, kingdom service, or the paradox of God's holiness/grace or justice/mercy. The essence of Moral Therapeutic Deism is simply getting along with others, solving problems, and securing self-esteem, all with a measure of God's help. In its essence there really is not much to reject, nor is there much to embrace; MTD is essentially a diluted brand of Christianity. NYSR findings also revealed that, while there are US American teens who are non-religious and have no spirituality or faith to which they adhere, there are also many who follow clear and/or orthodox religious beliefs not tainted by MTD.

Smith notes that "the religion and spirituality of most teenagers actually strikes us as very powerfully reflecting the contours, priorities, expectations, and structures of the larger adult world into which adolescents are being socialized. In many ways, religion is simply happily absorbed by youth."[15] Moral Therapeutic Deism seems to be a syncretistic blend of narcissistic consumerism, pop psychology, and deism found in society. This neutered version of the Judeo-Christian faith fits well within the tolerant, non-offending US American culture.[16] Smith and Lundquist also discovered that as Millennial teens enter their twenties, many transition from moral therapeutic deism to pluralism. They

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[14] Christian Smith, "On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, de Facto Religious Faith" (lecture, Princeton Seminary, NJ), accessed April 23, 2015, https://www.ptsem.edu/uploadedFiles/School_of_Christian_Vocation_and_Mission/Institute_for_Youth_Ministry/Princeton_Lectures/Smith-Moralistic.pdf.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, Reprint ed. (New York: Free Press, 2013), 234.

further reflect society's relativistic views that one's religion is an individualistic belief;

all views are equal and no claim can be made as to absolute truth.[17]

Another conclusion that Smith and Denton came to through their research on

emerging adults was that there seems to be a disconnect between many Christian

adolescents' faith and their lived experience. Smith summarizes this conclusion regarding

the relationship between faith and everyday life for American teens in the following way:

> they had difficulty explaining how faith is particularly consequential or influential in their own lives. Instead, religious faith seems to operate largely invisibly, taken for granted and in the background of their lived experiences. Faith seems to help teens to feel good and maybe to behave better. But then again, many said that their nonreligious peers can be just as good and happy as believers. Many of the religious teenagers we interviewed actually had a difficult time imagining how their own lives would be much different if they were not religious, did not attend church, were not in a youth group.[18]

This reveals the frailty of Moral Therapeutic Deism in that it does not correlate with

substantive parts of life. It lacks the capacity to transform a life and therefore is easy to

dismiss as useless, particularly when reassessing beliefs and transitioning into adulthood.

It is neither necessary to living life nor robust enough to impart meaning and purpose to

one's life. The deeper problem then is that Millennial adolescents do not have a faith that

informs their purpose, identity, vocation, or relationships because the faith offered to

them is insubstantial. Simply stated, it is irrelevant.

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[17] John Stonestreet, "Millennials and Faith: Reaching Today's Emerging Adults," NC Family Policy Council, October 27, 2015, accessed July 6, 2016, http://www.ncfamily.org/millennials-and-faith-reaching-todays-emerging-adults/.

[18] Smith and Denton, 218.

The American Church

Questions abound as to where Moral Therapeutic Deism came from and who is responsible for its existence. The basic understanding is that this version of Christianity has been acquired by teenagers in their churches, which is more of an indictment on US American congregations than on culture or on the teens themselves. The parasitic philosophy has entered Catholic, mainline, and conservative churches and denominations. Generally speaking, adolescent faith is difficult to articulate and operates discreetly in the background of teenage lives.[19] Therefore, it is seemingly more caught than taught as teens are exposed to MTD by the adults in their congregations.

Another extensive survey was completed by America's Research Group, specifically relating to Sunday School and Christian education in conservative evangelical churches. Over 1,000 twenty-somethings who were raised in the church were surveyed on a number of beliefs, values, and practices. The conclusion of the survey was that church and Sunday School had no impact, and in some cases a negative impact, on the spiritual and moral health of those attending. Beliefs about God, morality, scripture, heaven, sin, and many other tenets were no different between those raised in the church and non-attenders. The interpretation of those involved in the research was that the church was not losing high school and college students, but was losing elementary and middle school students.[20]

In his book, *Essential Church: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts*, author Thom Rainer criticizes the church for the epidemic of post-high school dropouts. He

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[19] Dean, 14-15, 220.

[20] Ham and Beemer, 37-45.

faults the church for not truly valuing the adolescents who are present in their congregations, as well as failing to disciple them before they transition to the next season of life. He goes on to list the seven sins of a dying church. He discusses the problem of the church diluting doctrine in an attempt to reach the younger generation, yet he also accuses the church of not being relevant enough for this generation. The seeming inconsistency is clarified when he says churches should ask the question, "How can we best relate the unchanging gospel to the shifting culture around us?"[21] Unfortunately, the message changed along with the method.

It is possible that the seeds of compromise can be traced back to the 1940s and 50s as the American church decided to focus on youth as the way to rescue a decaying culture. Thomas Bergler details this journey in his book, *The Juvenilization of the American Church*. There were concerns about the social practices and political power of youth after the great depression, along with the power of communist ideologies prominent in other countries. The collective angst of adults in general, and in the church in particular, resulted in numerous para-church organizations, such as Youth for Christ, making teens their main target for evangelism and preemptive social reform. Bergler sums it up this way: "In the name of saving civilization by saving young people, Christian youth leaders juvenilized Christian political action and social concern."[22] Youth became the means to an end to save American society and civilization.

The vehicle for this enterprise was revival meetings which included a combination of entertainment, fun, and spirituality. Youth for Christ and Young Life

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[21] Rainer, 17-18, 29.

[22] Thomas Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 21-35.

organizations dared to offend numerous denominations and churches by offering a combination of modern-style musical acts, fun experiences, and gospel messages. Modern marketing techniques met old-time religion as Christian leaders played on the fears of nuclear disaster to win young people to Christ.[23] However, methods were not carefully considered. In the pursuit of enticing young people, emotionalism and entertainment were now part of the American church experience. In the 1960s, the institutional church came to be viewed by pop culture as a hindrance to personal fulfillment. In response, techniques and styles used to reach young people were then adopted as the way to reach adults as well. The juvenilization of the church would see Christian faith mixed with pop culture and the pursuit of self-actualization.[24]

In the 1970s and 80s, the fastest growing white evangelical churches had adopted the seeker-friendly model of the 1950s. These churches, now led by adults who were the adolescents of previous decades, resembled the youth ministries of the 1950s with contemporary music and an entertaining, informal experience. The church, therefore, became youth-oriented or juvenilized. Bergler defines juvenilization as "the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted as appropriate for all ages."[25]

While Bergler traces the trends of the past, Smith and the National Study of Youth and Religion unearthed current trends of pop culture values mixing in with religion for adolescents. Spiritual maturity and biblical literacy are lacking, while

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[23] Ibid., 50, 149.

[24] Ibid., 206.

[25] Ibid., 4, 208.

theological indifference and the desire to use God to achieve personal fulfillment are prevalent. The juvenilization of the church has resulted in a dilution of Christian teaching to a consumeristic, life-enhancing, feel-good faith. Bergler goes on to comment that the prioritizing of attracting youth to church affects adults as well. He says, "large numbers of Americans of all ages not only accept a Christianized version of adolescent narcissism, they often celebrate it as authentic spirituality."[26] There may still be a sense of orthodoxy in American Christianity, but both its biblicality and maturity have been undermined.

Culpable Parents

The church alone cannot be blamed for this flavor of Christian spirituality, since the real offenders here may actually be the parents. It turns out that teens mirror their parents' religious beliefs and practices, despite the popular opinion that they reject it. After high school is when adolescents establish their independence in numerous ways, entering the process of separation-individuation, which establishes the "breaking away" or separation from the parent's beliefs and values. However, during high school, when peers certainly have significant influence on their teenage friends, parents actually matter the most when it comes to teen spiritual formation.[27]

Many studies indicate that the family unit functions as a "personal religious community" and that parents modeling and conversing with their children about faith are significant predictors of adolescent behavior and practices. More specifically, *transmission* is considered passive in that faith beliefs and practices are modeled by the

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[26] Ibid., 218-221, 224.

[27] Dean, 18.

parents, whereas *transactional* communication is an active form of parents engaging in dialogue with the children in their home about faith. Additionally, parents also channel their children into institutions that teach or maintain the same spiritual standards.[28] This pattern of significant parental influence bears out whether it is deemed positive and constructive to a teen's faith or negative and undermining.

It is possible that the Christian faith exhibited in someone's upbringing wasn't vibrantly or authentically practiced[29] and that adolescents simply have an inadequate theological grounding in their faith. As they progress developmentally, they simply discard beliefs from their childhood. Rainer agrees that "doing church" (i.e. going to church and trusting that this will be enough for you children's maturing in faith) is not enough. He says Christian parents are being hypocritical and/or spiritually absent in the home and are not doing enough to help their adolescent(s) find a better grounding in their faith.[30]This nevertheless reinforces the tenet that parents do play a substantial role in the current condition of US American teens' spirituality.

Merton Strommen, founder of Search Institute and the Youth and Family Institute of Augsburg College, proposes that the *primary* responsibility for faith development belongs not to the local church but to parents. He stands by the belief that the reason the American church is losing the next generation is that Christian parents are failing to pass

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[28] Kelly Dean Schwartz, "Transformations in Parent and Friend Faith Support Predicting Adolescents' Religious Faith," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 16, no. 4 (2006): 312.

[29] John Evans, "Young Adults Who Abandon Faith May Have 'Lukewarm' Upbringing," Baptist Press, October 28, 2013, accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.bpnews.net/41364.

[30] Rainer, 95-97. He suggests practically that parents could be more honest and genuine in their questions and struggles, offer spiritual guidance, discuss faith, pray together, etc.

on their faith in the home.[31] He sees the family relationships weakening in terms of

parental harmony and especially parent-child communication. There is a void of everyday

conversations, story-telling, participating in service opportunities, and developing various

family practices and traditions (weekly, annual, and milestone-related).[32]

MTD and Meaning-Making

Regardless of who is to blame for the current state of adolescent spirituality, many

adolescent Christians are lacking in the ability to construct meaning, make sense of faith,

or make connections from faith (the Bible, theology, spirituality) to everyday life

(relationships, choices, vocation, experiences, or identity). Researcher and professor,

Sharon Daloz Parks, says it is human nature to make sense of life and construct

meaning(s) from it, and that people naturally seek understanding and try to find

significance in lived experiences.[33] This seemingly indicates that there is no bridge

between the content of faith and lived experience for many Christian teens. Even if there

were a bridge, the impotence of MTD would not cross over in meaningful ways. Parks

says that "a worthy faith must bear the test of lived experience in the real world—our

discoveries and disappointments, expectations and betrayals, assumptions and

surprises."[34]

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[31] Merton P. Strommen and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing On the Faith: a Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2000), 9, 14.

[32] Strommen. Chapter 3 details Strommen's advocated approach to fostering faith in the home.

[33] Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 19.

[34] Ibid., 23.

Despite the fact that his contributions to this conversation were offered forty to fifty years ago, psychologist Erik Erikson agrees that religious ideologies, beliefs, and worldviews are able to generate a sense of meaning, order, and direction in the world for adolescents.[35] In other words, meaning derived from faith or spirituality is vital for adolescent identity formation and also informs other important areas of life. Given the inability of pop spirituality to merge substantive faith with the central facets of life, adolescents will find those answers and meet those needs somewhere else.

Meaning-Making Defined

The previous section established that a large number of Christian adolescents are unable to construct meaning in their faith and spirituality. This raises questions as to what meaning is and why meaning matters. Meaning-making is a bit of a new term with varied usage,[36] though its concept has been around for millennia. Therefore, there is much to delineate.

Psychologists note that people need a functional system of meaning in order to navigate the world and organize their observations and experiences.[37] Meaning is present when an individual feels that an event "makes sense" and that it aligns with preexisting

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[35] Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis (Austen Riggs Monograph)* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 247.

[36] Crystal Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and Its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Event.," *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 2 (March 2010): 258, EBSCOhost. Park uncovered multiple uses and nuances of meaning-making in her comprehensive review of research performed to date. Some uses were cognitive-processing, some emotion-coping, others loss-resolving. Still others were about causal attributes and some were about meaning reconstruction.

[37] Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, eds., *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, Second Edition*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2014), 357.

beliefs and assumptions. Meaningfulness might also arise from a sense that events are particularly significant or that there is transcendence over the ordinary aspects of life.[38] Psychologist Gordon Medlock ties these concepts together with this definition: meaning in life can be conceptualized as "the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life."[39]

Nazi concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl proposes that the search for meaning is the primary motivational force of humanity and not simply a secondary instinct or drive. He goes on to say it is each individual's responsibility to construct and/or detect meaning in their life; no one else can perform that task for another.[40] Tomas Morris, champion of Blaise Pascal's writings, says that meaning is never intrinsic, but is derivative. In other words, it must be constructed or given by the individual and is not inherently in any event, relationship, or object. Furthermore, he goes on to say that "something has meaning if and only if it is endowed with meaning or significance by a purposeful personal agent."[41] Thus, people can instill meaning in a few islands in the sea of life over which they have dominion but they cannot do so for the totality of life; that ability belongs to the Creator of life. This leads to a distinction between constructing

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[38] Laura King and Joshua Hicks, "Detecting and Constructing Meaning in Life Events," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 4, no. 5 (August 2009): 317, accessed July 6, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1080/17439760902992316.

[39] Gordon Medlock, "Seeking Consensual Understanding of Personal Meaning: Reflections On the Meaning Summit at First Congress On the Construction of Personal Meaning," *Journal of Constructivist Psychology* (Jan 2016): 5, accessed July 12, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1080/10720537.2015.1119079.

[40] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Salt Lake City, UT: Beacon Press, 2006), 121, 125. 132.

[41] Thomas V. Morris, *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the Meaning of Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 56-57.

meaning and detecting meaning, as well as between global meaning and situational meaning.

Global meaning is an overarching system that provides the general framework through which people structure their overall lives and assign meanings to specific experiences within their environment. Global meaning includes general beliefs, goals, and feelings about life. It is also described as high-level ideals or basic assumptions about the world, a central purpose for living, and a sense of meaningfulness in life.[42] Global meaning powerfully influences an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behavior, even if he or she is largely unaware of it.[43]

Situational meaning has to do with how an individual interprets and interacts with everyday experiences. In other words, this reflects how meaning is assigned to a particular event.[44] One's global meaning is the framework through which events are processed. Global meaning can develop without much awareness of the individual, yet a discrepancy between one's global meaning and one's experiences can result is a struggle to assimilate the two. Attempts to integrate information can cause distress, which is actually a key part of the meaning-making process. New experiences will either be assimilated within the global meaning framework (i.e. the individual's global meaning framework ultimately makes sense of it) or will be accommodated through adjustment of the global meaning system.[45] The greatest examples of this are stress-inducing events or

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[42] Paloutzian, 358.

[43] Park, 258.

[44] Dariusz Krok, "Religiousness, Spirituality, and Coping with Stress Among Late Adolescents: A Meaning-Making Perspective," *Journal of Adolescence* 45 (Dec 2015): 197, accessed July 9, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2015.10.004.

[45] Park, 259.

suffering in which people try to make sense of, and cope with, difficult experiences. The following diagram shows the symbiotic relationship between global and situational meaning in the meaning-making process.
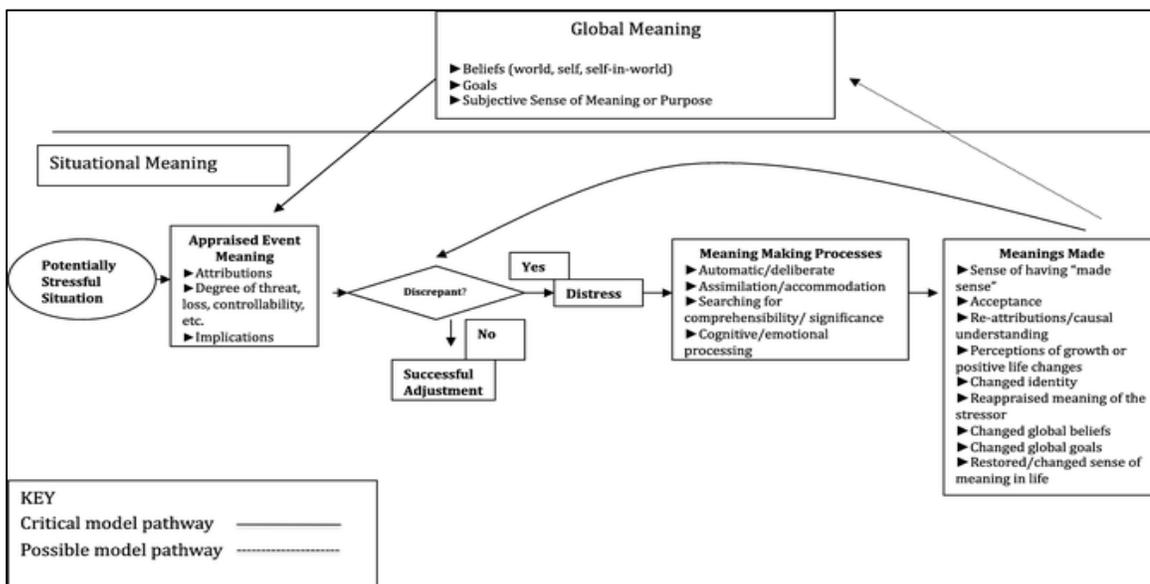
Figure 1. Diagram of the meaning-making model with global and situational meaning.
Source: Crystal Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and Its Effects On Adjustment to Stressful Life Event.," *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 2 (March 2010): 258, EBSCOhost.

With this understanding, *detecting* meaning then is a deductive process moving from general (personal meaning system or global meaning) to the specific situation in which meaning is being abstracted. It is the assimilation of an experience into a pre-existing assumption. This may be very subtle or seem automatic, analogous to a background program running on a computer. Meaning-*construction* is the accommodation process where interpretations of an event challenge the global meaning system requiring an adjustment in this meaning structure. This is definitely a thoughtful process and could be described as learning something new, gaining an insight, or bridging the gap between expectation and experience. Detecting can be summarized as 'I

understand what is happening to me' or 'this makes sense,' whereas constructing can be summarized as 'I don't understand this' or 'I am searching for meaning here.'[46]

Religion & Spirituality

Polish psychologist and author Dariusz Krok submits that religion and spirituality are "central to the global meaning systems of many people because they provide individuals with an integrated set of beliefs, goals, and meanings which can be used in explaining the intricacies of the world and promoting positive reinterpretations of negative events through the sacred lens."[47] Research is showing that religion is able to help individuals and communities shape a strong global meaning system as well as to cope with, and make meaning from, stressful experiences (situational meaning).

Psychologists have identified four ways in which religion reflects global meaning. Religion offers *comprehensiveness* in that it speaks to the entirety of life (origin, purpose, meaning, suffering, death, goals, actions, feelings, beliefs). It is *accessible* in that so many forms are available to those in the United States. Religion also provides *transcendence* in the ability to relate with the divine, someone larger than and outside of self and the universe. Finally, religion makes *truth claims* about the nature of life and provides a sense of significance.[48] To use everyday terms, religion informs worldviews about the nature of God and humanity, sculpts identity, instills values, shapes goals,

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[46] King and Hicks, 318.

[47] Dariusz Krok. "The Religious Meaning System and Subjective Well-Being: The Mediational Perspective of Meaning in Life." *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 36, no.2 (2014): 253, accesses July, 11, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/15736121-12341288.

[48] Paloutzian, 361.

anchors hope, provides motivation, and orients relationships. In short, religion helps make sense of life.

Religion is also a shared way of making meaning as it offers answers to life's big questions about purpose, identity, meaning, suffering, and death.[49] Religion offers community in which to belong and wrestle with questions. It also provides language for faith and the meaning-making process, as well as sacred stories, symbols, and practices to anchor oneself in humanity and life.[50] Parks offers some advice, saying that spiritual formation happens best when it includes the entire spectrum of life as opposed to one particular aspect. She also encourages young adults to find a place within one faith community as opposed to 'cherry-picking' from various faith traditions as our syncretistic society encourages. The smorgasbord approach allows one to avoid asking, and therefore searching for, answers to the big questions.[51]

Parks goes on to explain that whatever people use as a cornerstone on which to build significant life meaning functions as "God" for them, be they religious or not. The reality that virtually everyone has a centering loyalty or driving value for life allows them to be understood as "theists" in this context.[52] Parks provides an interesting spin on theism. She offers this,

> In the times in which we live, many people might best be understood as 'polytheists,' juggling as it were many gods. They find themselves living fragmented lives, piecing together various scraps of discrete meaning, each with its own center of value…each with its own god. Polytheistic faith is composed by

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[49] Parks, 197-98.

[50] Ibid., 202-203.

[51] Leslie Schwartz, *The Undergraduate Quest for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith: An Interview with Sharon Daloz Parks* (Seattle, WA: Spirituality in Higher Education Newsletter, 2007), 6.

[52] Parks, 21-22.

those …who have only been able to compose an assortment of 'isolated wholes.'[53]

Parks describes a global meaning system which lacks a unifying whole. She goes on to describe those who center too much meaning in a single part of life, such as career, or a relationship, or other ambition, and are unable to connect to any larger frame of meaningfulness. She refers to this as "henotheism" and uses the term in a similar way to H. Richard Niebuhr. The thin foundation for ultimate meaning is unstable and inept considering the complexity and adversity of human experience. This focus may be a worthy entity and commitment in one's life, but will the person's "world" collapse if that one center of meaning is lost in some way or another?[54]

Niebuhr then takes this concept the rest of the way. Beyond polytheism with its many centers of meaning and fragmented loyalties, and beyond henotheism which centers in one small god among many other gods in life, there is what he calls "radical monotheism." This is a robust global meaning, a faith centered in "One beyond all the many." Niebuhr clarifies this, saying "when we speak of faith as the composing of meaning in these most comprehensive dimensions, we mean a sensibility of life that not only transcends (beyond us) but also permeates and undergirds our very existence (within and beneath us).[55] God then is that centering and orienting consciousness, both transcendent and immanent, who endows us, and life, with meaning.

Commenting on the particular value of the Christian faith, researcher R.W. Hood states that "no other system of meaning is so bold in its proclaimed ability to provide a

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[53] Ibid., 22.

[54] Ibid.

[55] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture with Supplementary Essays* (New York: Harpercollins College Div, 1972), 24-25, 31-32.

sense of significance. Meaning is embedded within religion's sacred character, so that it points to humanity's ultimate purpose—in the Judeo-Christian tradition, for example, to love and worship God."[56]

Suffering

Of particular challenge to all humans in the meaning-making endeavor, especially to those who possess a faith or spirituality, is the matter of suffering. Frankl captures the essence of existentialism in saying "to live is to suffer; to survive is to find meaning in the suffering."[57] It is not quite as pessimistic as it sounds, as Frankl goes on to say that if life has a purpose (which he firmly believes it does), so too must suffering and death. Frankl clarifies that he is not saying life has no meaning without suffering or that suffering is necessary to construct meaning; he is simply asserting that meaning can be found in suffering just as in other areas of life. It is then the responsibility of the individual to discover meaning in unavoidable suffering. Frankl holds in highest esteem those who know how to suffer.[58]

Niebuhr uses the metaphor of being shipwrecked as a frame for suffering. Shipwrecks include betrayal, failure, illness, various kinds of losses, etc. One can survive these though and wash up on the shore of relief and gladness. Relief not only for simply getting through it, but gladness for a new sense of significance in life, transformation of character, or an enlarged knowing after the loss. This is not in denial of tragedy or loss,

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[56] Bernard Spilka, R. W Hood, and Richard Gorsuch, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach,* 4th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1985), 16.

[57] Frankl, 11.

[58] Ibid., 135-137, 173.

but fully admits the painfulness of it and even the potential to remain diminished in some ways after it. A mature faith encompasses joy as well as pain.[59]

Park notes that how an individual tries to make sense of evil and suffering while still holding to a belief in a good, omnipotent God is the field of theodicy.[60] It is not the purpose here to dive into the numerous beliefs about and reconciliations of God and suffering within the field of theodicy, only to bring to light this particular category of meaning-making in relation to suffering.

Limitations

Before continuing with the proposal of meaning-making and narrative theology, it is important to acknowledge the limitations and cautions involved with the construct and process of meaning-making. One challenge is the research methodology, beginning with a lack of operational definitions. Since meaning-making is a theoretical construct, hypothesis-testing has been difficult in an empirical field. Park suggests standardizing language to make the abstract world of meaning-making easier to access experimentally.[61]

In her review of empirical research to date, Park also discovered that numerous aspects were emphasized in the research thus failing to form a comprehensive study. Nuances such as organizing identity, coping with adversity, grief processing, integrating lessons, benefit finding, meaning reconstruction, cognitive processing, role of religion, precursors and results in meaning-making process, and others were present. One other

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[59] Parks, 28-30.

[60] Paloutzian, 362.

[61] Parks, 262.

dispute in the methodology of the research is with regard to time frames. Most studies performed are cross-sectional in nature and do not take into account the role of time in the meaning-making process. Meaning assessments are dynamic and change over time. Assessing participants only once prohibits the opportunity to observe change before and after experiences, or to note pre- to post-changes in global meaning. Longitudinal studies with clear time markers would contribute to a better understanding of how meaning is processed and can alter over time.[62]

Aside from research methodology, another challenge in meaning-making is the relative nature of meaning. How does one know if the meaning found is correct? Does a correct meaning even exist? What if meaning is not, or cannot, be found? What if the meaning only seems negative or detrimental? A hermeneutical approach needs to be addressed if the process of meaning-making can be more than subjective interpretations and feelings.

Life Stories

Finally, in preparation to address the proposal of narrative theology and meaning-making, research was conducted regarding people's life stories and how they made narrative sense of particular experiences. Northwestern University professor and researcher, Dan McAdams, explains that a life story is "an individual's internalized narrative rendering of his or her life in time entailing the reconstructed past, perceived

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[62] Ibid., 262, 267.

present, and anticipated future."[63] Life stories are psychological and social structures that help shape a person's identity, as well as provide a narrative for making sense of and assimilating life experiences.

Research revealed two narrative strategies used to make sense of significant personal experiences. In a redemption sequence, the storyteller describes a negative life situation transforming into a positive one. The bad is salvaged or redeemed by the good that comes from it. Contamination sequences are the opposite transition, moving from a good experience to an affectively bad one. Good is contaminated or wrecked by something after it. Correlations were drawn between the type of script and imagery used by the story-teller and psychological well-being, self-esteem, and life satisfaction.[64] The implication of this is that there is a clear, though sometimes convoluted, relationship between what happens in a person's life and how they interpret and make sense of it. Secondly, narrative as a construct and strategy is employed by many people, oftentimes without even realizing it.

Meaning-Making with Narrative Theology

In review, young adults are evaluating beliefs, values, and practices at this stage of life and, like all humans, are seeking to make coherent meaning in their existence.[65] Narrative has been shown to be an accessible construct through which to view one's life

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[63] Dan McAdams, "When Bad Things Turn Good And Good Things Turn Bad: Sequences Of Redemption And Contamination In Life Narrative And Their Relation To Psychosocial Adaptation In Midlife Adults And In Students," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27 (April 2001): 475, accessed July 8, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1177/0146167201274008.

[64] Ibid., 474, 483.

[65] Parks, 3-8.

in general as well as make sense of personal experiences.[66] Many young adults are

walking away from the Christian faith and/or the church for numerous reasons, one of

which is the diluted faith handed down to them which is feeble, hollow, and irrelevant.[67]

The proposal being made then is that Christian young adults could use narrative theology

as a framework for understanding their life as a whole and for assimilating lived

experiences in a meaning-making process.

Author and philosopher David Loy reminds us that "any understanding of 'who I

am' and 'who I am becoming' is narrative. Stories allow us to be, and even make us,

meaning-created beings."[68] Theologian Stephen Crites observed that "a man's sense of

his own identity seems largely determined by the kind of story which he understands

himself to have been enacting through the events of his career, the story of his life."[69]

Crites is stating that the narrative in which one is living largely determines one's identity,

as well as goals, values, and rhythms. Though certainly countless stories exist which are

fiction or fable, the scriptures as narrative are normative for a Christian in understanding

God, humanity, and life. Narrative theology then embraces the Bible as the story of

God's activity in the world which speaks not only about God's interaction with specific

humans and humanity in general, but has something to say for and about the reader as

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[66] Royette Tavernier and Teena Willoughby, "Adolescent Turning Points: The Association Between Meaning-Making and Psychological Well-Being," *Developmental Psychology* 47 (July 2012): 1059, accessed July 8, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0026326.

[67] Smith and Denton, 218.

[68] David Loy, *The World is Made of Stories* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 16, 24.

[69] Michael Goldberg, *Theology & Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001), 12.

well. This story shapes an understanding of reality and informs how one relates to

reality.[70]

Seminary professor and author Roger Olson explains that narrative theology does

not neglect doctrine or systematized ideas, but narrative theology

> acknowledges that the biblical propositions are not independent of or superior to
> the metanarrative of God's saving activity. [T]he propositions serve the stories,
> not vice versa. ... Doctrines are secondary to the story; they cannot replace it.
> They are judged by their adequacy to the story—their ability to draw out and
> express faithfully the character of God as revealed by the story.[71]

Therefore, this type of theology provides a narrative construct to inform the meaning-

making process while still allowing for the organization of propositional truth, both

inside and alongside the narrative.

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[70] Ibid., 15, 64, 176.

[71] "Narrative Theology Explained," Patheos: Hosting the Conversation on Faith, January 15, 2016, accessed July 15, 2016, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2016/01/narrative-theology-explained.

CHAPTER TWO: BIBLICAL NARRATIVES

Introduction

The word "theology" is a simple term and at the same time a complex term loaded with ambiguity. At the surface level theology is an undertaking of the study of God (or gods, as Christians don't have exclusive claims to the work of theology) and/or religion. It is the serious endeavor of thinking deeply and critically about God, humanity, and reality. For the Christian, it is an attempt to understand God and the Bible, the nature of faith, and how believers are to live in light of what God has revealed.[1] Theologian D.A. Carson jokes that "on one level, there cannot be a right or wrong definition of biblical theology. ... Everyone does that which is right in his own eyes and calls it biblical theology."[2]

The complexity begins when one explores the many ways to approach this study of God— approaches that are both distinct, and inter-related. There are a dizzying number of methodologies which each claim distinction yet overlap and even plunder each other for their pursuits. Theological categories such as literary, exegetical, biblical, historical, natural, practical, canonical, ecclesial, systematic, moral, and narrative[3] can understandably leave many confused. Seminary professor Dr. Stephen Flick explains their interdependence this way,

> The starting point for an authentic systematic theology must be the Word of God as presented to us in the canon (biblical), expressed in the life of the church in the forms of faith, customs, and methods (historical), organized into a system

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[1] Chuck Conniry, "Leadership in Biblical and Theological Perspectives" (lecture, DMIN Face-to-Face Retreat, Cannon Beach, OR, March 3, 2015).

[2] Edward W Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 78.

[3] Ibid., 132.

(doctrinal), and internalized in definite forms in particular denominations (ecclesial). At this point, doctrinal consciousness discovers the variations between systems of other denominations and the apparitions within the church to which it belongs and engages in conflict to defend the truth (polemical) or identify avenues or reconciliation (irenical). The end of which is a greater realization of the kingdom of God on earth (ethical).[4]

It is within this theological commotion that the category of narrative theology needs to be unpacked.

What is Narrative Theology?

Professor and theologian Gerald Loughlin notes that "any theology that remembers the story, is in part narrative in character."[5] This is a nice start, but narrative theology has some larger parameters of definition (with plenty of room for ambiguity within it). Although there has been significant interest in and development of narrative theology the last forty years, it is not entirely new, as Augustine and Irenaeus both approached the Bible as a whole with a narrative framework.[6] The ground floor of narrative theology (where there is general agreement) is that God has progressively revealed himself through real events in history, and these real events are packed with meaning. Each movement of revelation (act, stage, covenant, dispensation, or however it is framed) plays a necessary and irreducible role in understanding God's character and purposes, as well as informing the recipient on the broken condition of humanity.[7]

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[4] Stephen Flick, "Forms of Theology," Christian Heritage Fellowship, accessed July 20, 2016, https://christianheritagefellowship.com/forms-of-theology/.

[5] Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), x.

[6] Loughlin, 45, 51.

[7] Klink III and Lockett, 66.

Despite the fact that much of the Scriptural text is not narrative, and even those texts which are narrative vary in structure and function, there nevertheless is a key narrative running throughout scripture that provides context for understanding each of the various parts (e.g. the Prophets or Gospels).[8] Various types of non-narrative material, such as law, poetry, practical teaching, and letters, can still fit within a larger narrative structure. And highlighting the narrative shape of scripture does not prevent other theological methodologies from being practiced.[9] As pastor and author, Eugene Peterson, states, "the Bible is basically…an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative."[10] Narrative, therefore, describes the *pattern* of God's activity in the world, not the *genre* that records it.[11]

Olson further describes narrative theology as "our best human attempt to understand the biblical drama-story and that includes developing canonical-linguistic models that express its meaning for the church's belief and life. But a theologian cannot do that properly unless he or she is "living the story" together with a community of faith shaped by the story."[12] The latter part of his statement is usually agreed upon in that narrative theology is done by and for the faith community that is living in and continuing the story. Although the Bible is a historical text being read by contemporary readers who may care about its historicity, the Bible is also a living text and should be meaningfully

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[8] Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *Story and Biblical Theology*, in the Christian Worldview library, accessed July 22, 2016, http://www.biblicaltheology.ca/about/articles.

[9] Ibid., 18-19.

[10] Eugene Peterson, *Living into God's Story*, in the Christian Worldview library, accessed July 22, 2016, http://www.biblicaltheology.ca/about/articles.

[11] Gabriel Fackre, *The Doctrine of Revelation: A Narrative Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 7.

[12] "Narrative Theology Explained," Patheos: Hosting the Conversation on Faith, January 15, 2016, accessed July 21, 2016, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2016/01/narrative-theology-explained.

lived out by a worshiping community.[13] The former part of Olson's statement is a core piece of the on-going conversation within this branch of theology as to what models of hermeneutics are involved, and there is significant disagreement on it.[14] Moving forward, this dissertation will be neither exhaustive nor balanced in its approach.

Narrative as Worldview

The way in which life is understood depends upon which story is believed to be true (or the one that best describes reality). All worldviews or metanarratives claim universal history and are comprehensive in nature; they claim to correlate with all relevant aspects of life and speak to all of reality. Because of this, a faith commitment is made by the community that adheres to it, even secular or non-religions ones. Since there is a claim to tell the true story of the world, an invitation is offered to adopt the story and embody its aim.[15] Christians happen to believe the Bible is the record of humanity's story. This universal story then makes claims upon the lives of people; it is a "controlling story."[16] Therein lays the invitation to enter into the biblical story: allow it to become

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[13] Klink III and Lockett, 160.

[14] See Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: a Critical Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2001) and Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990). These are two principal texts that construct dialogue between leading narrative theologians. The most significant disagreement seems to be on how meaning is derived from the text and the hermeneutical methodologies involved which are theological, philosophical, and literary in nature. Numerous disparities about historicity, truthfulness, and epistemology matter for narrative; narrative theology's relationship with other theological disciplines (biblical, systematic, historical, existential, etc.) as well as other genres of literature; whether or not there is one master narrative with contingent themes spanning the entire Bible (and universally true for humanity as well); along with several other categorical conflicts. There are numerous other texts and articles valuable for an introduction to and an understanding of the many nuances of narrative theology; only two of them are listed here.

[15] Michael W. Goheen, *Reading the Bible as One Story*, in the Christian Worldview library, accessed July 22, 2016, http://www.biblicaltheology.ca/about/articles.

[16] N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 39-43. Wright uses this term as a foundational story that gives meaning and shape to life.

one's reality, and find global meaning in life by participating with God in His redemptive

activity. Narrative theologian Stanley Hauerwas sees story as a worldview category. He

argues,

> My contention is that the narrative character of Christian convictions is neither
> incidental nor accidental to Christian belief. There is no more fundamental way to
> talk of God than in a story. The fact that we come to know God through the
> recounting of the story of Israel and the life of Jesus is decisive for our *truthful
> understanding of* the kind of God we worship as well as *the world in which we
> exist*.[17]

British theologian and missiologist, Lesslie Newbigin also advocates for the universal

history (story) of the Bible because of its worldview implications. Newbigin says, "a

missionary encounter occurs when the church believes the Bible to be the true story of

the world, and embodies the comprehensive claims of that story as a countercultural

community over against the dominant cultural story. Since both stories make

comprehensive and absolute claims, only one story can be *the* basic and foundational

story for life."[18] The biblical story and its implications are competing with other

worldviews and religious stories to become the story of humanity. Despite the preference

for post-modern tolerance, they cannot all be right.

Is the story of scripture THE story of humanity? Hauerwas reminds readers "the

story Christians tell of God exposes the unwelcome fact that I am a sinner. For without

such a narrative the fact and nature of my sin remains hidden in self-deception. Only a

narrative that helps me place myself as a creature of a gracious God can provide the skills

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[17] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 25. Emphasis added.

[18] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990), 23.

to help me locate my sin as fundamentally infidelity and rebellion."[19] Stephen Crites

refers to this type of foundational narrative as a "sacred story;" not simply because of the

presence of the divine but because a person's sense of self and orientation to the world is

shaped through them. He also remarks that a sacred story is something that one awakens

to; it is not something that is created.[20] Awakening to the Christian story with Jesus at the

center, and even more, entering into this sacred story, gives the believer a new "telos"

(aim, orientation, ending).[21] The biblical narrative then provides a new understanding of

reality as well as how one should live in that reality. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre is

often quoted as saying, "I can only answer the question, 'What am I to do?' if I can

answer the prior question, 'Of what story do I find myself a part?'"[22]

Theologians Hans Frei and Karl Barth both maintain that the world must fit into

the story of God instead of fitting God into the story of the world. They are in agreement

with the sentiment that people ought to try to make sense of themselves through the

narrative of scripture instead of trying to make sense of scripture through what seems to

be trendy at the moment in modernity.[23] Frei furthers this idea by proposing that the story

of the Bible is the only true story of the world, and that all other stories must absorb into

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[19] Hauerwas, 31.

[20] Stephen Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," in *Why Narrative: Readings in Narrative Theology*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 70-71. This book also expresses H. Richard Niebuhr's thoughts on the false dichotomy between sacred and secular (p.37). It is an error to assume God only shows up in sacred parts of life or in sacred stories. Sacred events happen in the same realm as secular history, and Niebuhr elaborates on the resulting schism in the perception between faith and history.

[21] Loughlin, 214.

[22] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 216.

[23] Loughlin, 34. Loughlin, referring to criticisms by Frei and Barth, offers several examples. If the world is concerned with Marxist oppression, then liberation theology is the lens through which to see

it. The narrative of scripture is the primary, consuming text, and each person ought to find himself in this story so it becomes his reality.[24]

Peterson paints a clear picture of this understanding of living the biblical story. He proposes that,

> theology, using scripture as text, does not so much present us with a moral code and tell us, "Live up to this," nor does it set out a system of doctrine and say, "Think like this." The biblical way is to tell a story and invite us, "Live into this - this is what it looks like to be human in this God-made and God-ruled world; this is what is involved in becoming and maturing as a human being." We are taken seriously just as we are and given place in his story - for it is God's story. None of us is the leading character in the story of our lives. God is the larger context and plot in which all our stories find themselves.[25]

Post-modernism has little to no room for metanarratives, instead preferring small, local or personal stories. Post-modern's rejection of modernity's epistemological framework changes the scope of truth claims leading to conceptual relativism.[26] Professor and author Craig Bartholomew questions though if grand narratives can in fact be avoided. Even post-modern's rejection of master narratives is itself a grand narrative. He asserts that grand narratives and worldviews cannot be avoided. Everyone lives in some larger story, even if they live unaware of it.[27]

In addition to the view within narrative theology that there is one master narrative, there also is the emphasis on the importance of a particular community's story. The grand

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scripture. If the world is enamored by natural science, then natural theology can be used to show evidence for and ability to know God. If consumer-driven economics is center stage, then God will be seen as a Source for commodities.

[24] Ibid., 37.

[25] Peterson.

[26] David K. Clark, "Narrative Theology and Apologetics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36, no. 4 (December 1993): 512.

[27] Bartholomew and Goheen, *Story and Biblical Theology*, 25.

narrative is not the focus, but a specific community's tradition or story is what is embodied for purpose and meaning. There also is the individual level of narrative, the autobiography, where just the person's narrative is the focus.[28] Therefore, there are 3 different levels of narrative viewpoints: master or overarching, communal, and individual.

The Place of Narrative

The narrative shape of scripture is fundamental and has been missing in many Christians' understanding of life and scripture, even if it isn't the only tool in the theological shed.[29] Narrative is not be used in isolation, but alongside other tools such as biblical and systematic theology.[30] Scottish theologian James Barr notes how some theologians use the narrative approach to theology to sidestep any questions of the historical rootedness of scripture. They simply look for story and meaning and are not concerned if God

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[28] Ibid., 2-3.

[29] D.A. Carson, "How to Read the Bible and Do Theology Well," The Gospel Coalition, September 24, 2015, accessed July 20, 2016, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-bible-and-theology-don-carson-nivzsb. While managing to avoid the deep end of the swimming pool, it is still necessary to mention a few principles in a hermeneutical framework for narrative theology. Although D.A. Caron is not widely considered a narrative theologian, he does use a narrative framework in his evangelical theological praxis. He sees the Bible as the historical progression of God's revelation which develops theological themes inside the narrative. He also presupposes a unity of scripture with one divine author who would not contradict himself in categorical ways while still allowing for diversity within the biblical texts (as well as sub-plots in the larger story). Meaning is understood as within the context of the bigger story. This is consistent with some hermeneutic principles from theologians within narrative theology, including the matter of understanding what a narrative meant to those who first heard and then re-told the story (see Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative,* 204-208). Carson sees an important symbiotic relationship between exegesis, biblical theology (with narrative framework), historical theology, and systematic theology. Exegesis is the starting point for him, but each discipline depends on and looks back to the others for a well-rounded hermeneutic.

[30] There of course is disagreement on whether narrative is the engine driving the theological train as Craig Bartholomew or N.T. Wright might suggest, if it takes its place in line behind exegetical or biblical methodologies as D.A. Carson believes, or if there is nothing more to the train other than narrative as Hans Frei might say.

actually and truly revealed himself in historical events.[31] Bethel Seminary professor and author, David K. Clark, highlights that some authors suggest that Christians need only live in light of the story and that they need not await modern historical proof or appeal to divine authority for validity. They don't even need to interpret the story because biblical faith is not dependent on historical criticism.[32]

German theologian Harald Weinrich echoes the opinion of a low concern for a proper or particular interpretation of biblical narratives, articulating that "the [biblical] stories did not try to produce a clear yes or no as to truth, but more or less relevance. The most relevant stories are directed at faith: they want the hearer himself to imitate the actions of the story. In this process of reception and imitation, an explicit interpretation is not needed."[33] There are those in narrative theology who unabashedly push this to its logical end, having little concern for what is real, true, or precise; only pragmatically asking what to do in light of a religious narrative passed along.[34] Meaning is simply created by the community of hearers. Since some theologians are more concerned with story and meaning (relevance) than with story and historicity (truthfulness), it raises epistemological questions as to how truth is understood and rooted within the narrative context.

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[31] James Barr, *Concept of Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 352, 356.

[32] Clark, 505-506.

[33] Harald Weinrich, "Narrative Theology," NAMENSgedächtnis blog, accessed July 18, 2016 https://jochenteuffel.files.wordpress.com/2010.

[34] R. Ruard Ganzevoort, Maaike de Haardt, and Michael Scherer-Rath, *Religious Stories We Live By: Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies* (Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 3, 34, accessed July 18, 2016, http://site.ebrary.com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/lib/georgefox/reader.action?docID=10815253.

Old Testament scholar and professor Brevard Childs also criticizes those in the narrative theology world who avoid important theological and historical references when they seek to "render reality only by means of retelling the story."[35] This hermeneutic then allows for relative or even non-theological renderings to occur. Narrative therefore should be more than a literary genre and should assertively integrate the theological and historical dimensions of scripture. A biblical story is a theological witness; it is revelation in history. Consequently, historical criticism can very much co-exist with narrative theology.

Newbigin advocates powerfully for the importance of historical reference when he writes, "the whole of Christian teaching would fall to the ground if it were the case that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were not events in real history."[36] He also states that "it is of the very essence of the matter that the events and places which you read in your Bible are part of the real world and the real history –the same world in which you live."[37] He further delineates that people can only understand their lives as interwoven into the larger framework of humanity, that the meaning of life is revealed through certain events in history, that those events are revealed in the Bible and form a narrative continuity between Israel, Jesus, and the church, and that the meaning and purpose of the human story as a whole is seen in that narrative (especially Christ).[38] These historical events, sometimes referred to as these stories, do not illustrate a truth but

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[35] Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1993), 18.

[36] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 66.

[37] Ibid., 68.

[38] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 81-90.

hold the truth about reality and the world within them. The Bible is not a separate story about the world; it *is* the story of the world. The narrative is the truth. Bartholomew agrees and says that "if the biblical story is true, then it requires a [historical] reality that corresponds to it."[39]

New Testament scholar N. T. Wright frames this relationship between history and meaning by employing "outside/inside" language. He elaborates by saying history involves the study of actual events that happened (the outside), but it also cares about the purpose of the event and why it happened (the inside). An event makes sense when it has a reason for it; people tend to ask "why?" when something peculiar happens. This examines the correlation of how the intentions of those involved affect the observable events,[40] thus endowing the actuality of those events with significance. There is again a relationship between narrative and other methodologies of theology.

Theologian and Cambridge professor, David F. Ford, describes the reciprocal relationship between systematic theology, narrative theology, and Christian practice (what he calls system, story, and performance, respectively). Referring to the resurrection of Jesus, he says, "it informs and transforms systematic conceptions of ontology, of God, and of other doctrines; it establishes and illuminates the primacy of the story witnessing to Jesus; and it liberates an explosion of new worship, community-building, and prophetic speech and action."[41] Ford's comments embody how the narrative approach plays a collective role in theology.

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[39] Bartholomew and Goheen, *Story and Biblical Theology*, 23.

[40] Wright, 109-110.

[41] David F. Ford, "System, Story, and Performance: A Proposal about the Role of Narrative in Systematic Theology," in *Why Narrative: Readings in Narrative Theology*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 215.

Narrative for Evangelicals

Narrative theology can be a precarious endeavor for evangelicals. Clark notes how the questions surrounding historicity (does narrative theology care if the events in the biblical narrative actually happened?), epistemology (what is considered 'truth' in narrative theology? Is there absolute truth contained in the narrative? Are pragmatics enough to determine truth?), and their similar shape to postmodernism (conceptual relativity and difficulty in defining) are particularly difficult for evangelicals to address.[42]

In addition to identifying conceptual and theological concerns evangelicals may have with narrative theology,[43] Clark also suggests some potential benefits and opportunities within it. He tries to back evangelicals off the full-court press of modern rationality, saying that Christianity doesn't have to run the gauntlet of every modern rational and scientific paradigm. He also encourages the use of narrative theology to relate with a relativistic, pluralistic, post-modern culture (as well as cross-cultural encounters where the Enlightenment and reason mean little to other people groups).[44] And in fairness, narrative does lend itself to being more comfortable with ambiguity, which is quite difficult for those who demand certainty from scripture.[45] The implications here are that narrative theology could be done alongside biblical and systematic theology, not in place of it, because it does not rely on biblical inerrancy or even truthfulness, two matters that are very important for evangelical Christians.

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[42] Clark, 507-512.

[43] I will again note that narrative theology has a wide spectrum of views and hermeneutics. Not all views would be disagreeable to basic evangelical beliefs and convictions.

[44] Clark, 512-514. He clarifies that using a multiple-systems perspective to adapt to the relativistic culture is done so in a limited way, not a comprehensive, top-level worldview way.

[45] Joel B. Green and Max Turner, eds., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 133.

The Narrative Approach to Scripture

Introduction

The narrative of scripture serves as universal history of the human race; it is a defining worldview informing humanity of its origin and purpose. A Hindu scholar of world religions once said to missionary Lesslie Newbigin,

> I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion—and anyway we have plenty of books of religion in India. We don't need any more! I find in your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole of creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it.[46]

A scholar outside of Christendom frames scripture as narrative as well as any Christian theologian has.

When examining the structure of biblical narrative, a basic framework is proposed. There is a unified, coherent story line that provides the context in which every part is understood. One act cannot be understood apart from the others and its place in the story. The story builds as it moves forward; it is a progressively unfolding drama. The Triune God has a mission and is working towards a full and final restoration of the entire created world, not a destruction of it. Though Israel, Jesus, and the church have nuanced roles, they all share in this same divine mission.[47] The church and modern believers now also have a partnership with God.

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[46] Lesslie Newbigin, *A Walk Through the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 4.

[47] Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 13-15.

There are numerous ways to frame the theo-drama of the Bible, even the Old

Testament itself.[48] Scripture may be seen as a story consisting of three, four, five, or even

six acts. There are hardy theological arguments for each proposal, along with their

respective proponents. Creation, fall, and redemption are the core themes most often

repeated, sometimes with distinctions between redemption and restoration.[49] New

Testament scholar and author Scot McKnight diverges from this template with a narrative

paradigm of "Plan ABA," whereby the focus is on the various ways God seeks to institute

His kingdom.[50] Wright sees the narrative of scripture unfolding as a five-act play with the

church somewhat improvising the fifth act which is still being written: creation, fall,

Israel, Jesus, and church.[51] Finally, Bartholomew and Goheen modify Wright's scheme

and add a sixth act: creation, fall, redemption initiated (Israel), redemption accomplished

(Jesus), the mission of the church, and redemption completed.[52]

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[48] See *Journeying with God: A Survey of the Old Testament* (Colorado Springs: Purposeful Design Publications, 2008). This workbook is a valuable resource to teach high school students the big picture story of the Old Testament. It uses peaks and valleys to show the unfolding narrative of God's creative and redemptive activity in the O.T. It not only aids students in placing each book of the Old Testament in the context of narrative, the approach indirectly helps students frame their personal life experiences in meaningful ways.

[49] See Andrew Kulikovsky, *Creation, Fall, Restoration: A Biblical Theology of Creation* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2009); Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); and Mark Ward, *Biblical Worldview: Creation, Fall, Redemption* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2016) for the distinctions within this paradigm.

[50] Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy: Returning to the Radical Mission of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014). McKnight diverges significantly from other narrative perspectives with his take on how God initially tried to institute his kingdom through Adam, Abraham, and Samuel where God alone was king (Plan A). Then God seeks to use human kings in Plan B. This fails and he reverts back to a revised Plan A and sends Jesus. God alone is king again and both Israel and the church submit to the divine king as he seeks to restore the world. McKnight emphasizes the kingdom of God more so than previous paradigms and also locates the gospel within its rich Jewish history.

[51] Wright, 141-143.

[52] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture.* The entire book is devoted to reading Scripture with this narrative framework.

There are many other ways to view the biblical narrative in addition to those cited. While all of these narrative structures have their validity, a four-act approach will be used for the purposes of this dissertation: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Redemption is comprised of three scenes: redemption initiated (with Israel), redemption accomplished (by Christ), and redemption experienced (by the Church). What follows will be an abridged summary of each act with implications for Christians seeking to understand the world around them and live in the on-going biblical story.

Act 1: Creation

The opening act in scripture is that of the creation account,[53] which reveals the two main characters: God and humanity. The account is both persuasive and informative. Its original audience, the Jews (also called Israelites), were being informed of who God is and where the world came from. The polemical nature of it is that it is an argument *for* the creation of the world by the one true God, and therefore an argument *against* the creation of the world by the many gods worshiped by Israel's surrounding cultures.[54] Many Christians today read Genesis 1-2 with scientific eyes in light of the modern controversy of creation vs. evolution, yet the ancient Near East world primarily consisted of polytheistic cultures. Biblical scholar and Old Testament professor John Stek offers this about the creation account, "Moses' intent was to proclaim knowledge of the true God… to proclaim a right understanding of humankind, the world, and history that

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[53] The narrative of creation is not limited to Gen. 1 and 2; it also finds space in the Psalms, Job, and Isaiah.

[54] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 27.

knowledge of the true God entails—and to proclaim the truth concerning these matters in the face of the false religious notions dominant throughout the world of his day."[55] Israel would need this authoritative narrative to root them in God's story, not the competing origin stories of neighboring cultures.

The creation narrative is not only an argument for monotheism and against polytheism; it is informative for the reader as to the nature of God and why humanity exists. Scripture reveals that the world and humanity were created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. This is unlike anything with which the material or human world is familiar.[56] Having said that, the creation account is less a detailed explanation of *how* the world was made than *who* brought it into existence.[57] Although the initial story may only hint at God's nature,[58] God's character may be glimpsed at through the narrative. God is the source of all that is, and all that was created was good. He is the infinite, uncreated, powerful One who brought the material world into existence. God's personhood is also seen in the narrative in that humans are able to relate with and know their Creator.[59] Human beings are finite, created with God-given limits of knowledge, capacity, and

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[55] John Stek, "What Says the Scripture?," in *Portraits of Creation: Biblical and Scientific Perspectives on the World's Formation*, by Howard Van Till et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 230.

[56] Donald C. McKim, "God's Work: Creation," in *Portable Seminary*, ed. David Horton (Bloomington, N: Bethany House Pub., 2006), 118.

[57] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 27-29.

[58] Fackre, 41.

[59] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 29-32.

place. These limits are not results of the Fall, but reflect the call for humility and dependence on God.[60]

American theologian Gabriel Fackre refers to the Triune God as "Life Together," and says God has created the world with a distinct pattern of *koinonia* (fellowship) partnerships, such as the heavens and the earth, waters above and below, night and day, man and woman, even humanity with nature. Fackre goes on to say that human existence shares this *koinonia* pattern with God in a special way, inviting humanity into divine *koinonia*. Men and women are given volitional freedom, a capacity to accept or reject this invitation to divine partnership (or "life together with their Creator").[61] Genesis 2 discloses this unique relationship between people and God while Genesis 1 contextualizes humanity's relationship to the rest of the created world.

In addition to the purpose of knowing God, humans are given authority and responsibility to protect and care for creation.[62] Their stewardship is participating with God in the care of His world and continuing "to spread the fragrance of His presence throughout the world," as opposed to domination of it.[63] As Christians look back to the beginning of their story, they can find this "worldliness" in Genesis 2. The creation narrative shows that while having a special capacity to know and experience God,

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[60] H. Paul Santmire, "The Genesis Creation Narratives Revisited: Themes for a Global Age," *Interpretation* 45, no. 4 (October 1991): 378.

[61] Fackre, 39-40.

[62] Santmire, 372. The author comments how many in the western industrialized world read the creation narrative with an anthropological lens, with man being valued high above all else in creation, sometimes with implications to the detriment of the earth and even women. He illuminates how there is a rich ecological and eschatological lens to the narrative as well.

[63] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 35.

humans are not superior to the earth. The world as it was created reflected God's beauty

and plan for it and humanity.[64]

Finally, there is the endowment of man and woman, made in the image of God.

There are numerous interpretations of this *imago Dei* concept emphasizing a person's

capacity to exercise dominion over the rest of the created world and/or the ability to

socially and spiritually relate with God. Ecological theologian H. Paul Santmire falls in

line with the interpretations of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth, saying that the *imago*

Dei is also referring to the relationship between male and female. Santmire declares that

> ...this is a community-text, not an individualizing text. In other words, what we
> see here is the coming into being of creatures meant for life with God in a
> corporate world, such as the people of God later on. ... According to this way of
> thinking, had there been no fall and entrance into the world of sin and death, the
> descendants of Adam and Eve would have lived justly and harmoniously in a
> communal world of shalom, not a world of individualizing aggrandizement and
> domination.[65]

The image of God then is not understood only as an individual being made in

God's image, but is understood as man and woman's unique one-flesh relationship

together being made in God's image. Fackre also supports this view of the *imago Dei*,

noting that the image of God related to the one-flesh union between man and woman, the

paradigm of life together intended for the world as reflected in the Trinity.[66]

Act 2: The Fall

The good, purposeful, shalom-filled world of God's making did not last long. The

story of God and humanity now has its conflict. Peterson aptly describes this as "a

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[64] Ibid., 32-37.

[65] Santmire, 374.

[66] Fackre, 26-30, 45.

catastrophe has occurred. We are no longer in continuity with our good beginning. We have been separated from it by a disaster. ... We are, in other words, in the middle of a mess."[67] The first human couple, made in the image of God, is now marred by sin and death. While some questions regarding the origin of evil[68] and difficulty of life[69] are answered in this account, some mystery still remains regarding evil's entrance into the world. Many details about this fall into sin are not given, but the fundamental nature of sin is nonetheless illuminated in the fall narrative.[70]

The first man and woman were tempted with autonomy, with seeking life independently from God, even seeking to be like God instead of living within the God-ordained limitations of dependence and humility. Fackre frames this not as man and woman seeking the knowledge *of* God, but seeking knowledge *as* God. Theirs was the pursuit to know as God knows; it was "idolatry in its epistemological dress (or undress)."[71] Ultimately, it was the first couple's "no" to the invitation of divine *koinonia*.

In their choice to turn from God they experienced a loss of life. Though physical death was not immediately tasted, other experiences of death were known instantly. Their

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[67] Eugene H Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 82-83.

[68] Daniel W. Hardy and David F. Ford, *Praising and Knowing God* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1985), 96-97. Evil is defined as the disorder of good, counterfeit of good, or lack of good. This contextualizes the presence of evil in the world as a distortion of the good that God created, not as an entity in itself created by God.

[69] J. Harold Ellens, "A Psychodynamic Hermeneutic of the Fall Story: Genesis 2:25–3:24: Through a Psychological Lens," *Pastoral Psychology* 45, no. 3 (January 1997): 228, accessed July 28, 2016, http://search. proquest.com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/docview/756918710? accountid=11085. Ellens shows how the narrative of the Fall speaks to the universal experience of why humans can "conceive of aesthetic ideals but hardly create them, long for a perfect world but not fashion one, hope for genuine love but seldom express or experience it, remember and anticipate paradise yet sense it always eluding them."

[70] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 40-41.

[71] Fackre, 41.

secure sense of self was lost, as shame[72] became their identity and they became painfully

isolated from each other in their fallenness. Most of all, their untainted relationship with

God was shattered. Shalom was no longer present as brokenness and distortion marked

their ontological landscape. Adam and Eve, made to mirror and experience the loving

community of the Trinity, now knew an incurved life, closed off from the *shalom* of God.

Idolatry, where self was at the center instead of God, resulted in alienation (death).[73]

The extent to which the image of God in humanity was affected has long been a

conversation in theological and ecumenical circles. Views range from the image being

damaged (minimalist) to it being fully destroyed (maximalist). Interpretations as to what

exactly was affected would be too numerous and deep to cover here, but theologians have

categorized the effects as disordered desire, self-love, ignorance, blindness, bondage of

the will, and damaging of the original capacity to know God and original righteousness

before God.[74] Dutch Calvinist, G.C. Berkoweur, believes that the "activity of God in

created reality is not observed and acknowledged, ... (due) to the radical darkening of the

human heart which did, and does still, withdraw itself from full communion with him,

who is very close to the world in all his actions."[75]

This fits well with imagery painted by Scottish theologian, Donald Baillie. He

describes how God has invited all His children to circle around him to play a great game.

Hands are held as everyone looks to the Great Light at the center of the circle and follows

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[72] Hardy and Ford, 90-91. They marvelously cast shame as the implosion of self-respect, a state of living death where energies of living are turned against ourselves. They also acknowledge shame can be healthy when there is a realization something is fundamentally wrong with self.

[73] Fackre, 43-44.

[74] Ibid., 46-55.

[75] G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 291.

along in the rhythm of love. Nevertheless, everybody has turned their backs on God because of the desire to be at the center instead of him. There is no relational knowledge of God or others because of this. Blind confusion and dissatisfaction result because of the selfish little games being played. God's light still shines on the backs of everyone, casting shadows which reveal all is not as it was supposed to be.[76]

The earth, too, felt the consequences of the Fall and began groaning for redemption. The earth had no vote in the matter and is therefore not seen as fallen; only it was subjected to malfunctioning and disorder because of the first man.[77] Adam and Eve must leave the beautiful garden where God placed them and venture into uncertainty.[78]

The glimmer of hope in this is that the Creator did not call it quits at this point. God pursued humanity while they were still hiding in shame. While curses and consequences were addressed (largely addressing how Adam and Eve were now alienated from God, each other, nature, and eternity),[79] grace was shown in the provision of clothing and the veiled promise to make things right again.[80] Still the dreadful stain of evil continues in the following chapters of Genesis as Cain murders his brother and the whole of humanity becomes so corrupt that God starts over again with Noah and his family.[81]

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[76] D.M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (New York: Scribner, 1948), 205-206.

[77] Rom. 8:19-22; Isa. 24:5.

[78] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 41-43.

[79] Fackre, 44.

[80] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 41-43.

[81] Gen. 4, 6-9.

Act 3: Redemption

REDEMPTION INITIATED (WITH ISRAEL)

Despite the fact that humanity continued to struggle against God,[82] God moves forward with the intent to redeem humanity. The refusal for divine partnership is met with God calling one man to leave his home and go where God tells him. God makes a covenant with Abram and promises that he will be the father of a great nation, have his own land, and that all people on earth will be blessed through him.[83] This marks the beginning of a long journey God takes with generation after generation of Jews (later called Israelites); a nation formed out of nothing. The majority of the Old Testament unfolds this narrative as God has started in full force his movement toward redemption of humanity, which finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Even though the biblical narrative focuses almost exclusively on the descendants of Abraham,[84] through the rest of the Old Testament, it still is in the larger context of God's desire to redeem all the nations (all of humanity).[85]

The remainder of Genesis sees this promise from God offered to Abraham's son, Isaac, and then to his son, Jacob. These men are clearly flawed as were all others after the Fall, but as they journey with God they are "gradually shaped into people fit to bear the promise."[86] This family finds themselves growing into a nation in the land of Egypt, only

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[82] Read about the Tower of Babel in Gen. 11.

[83] See Gen. 12, specifically verses 1-3, for the specific aspects of this promise.

[84] N.T. Wright has received notoriety for bringing Israel back into the narrative of the church.

[85] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 53.

[86] Ibid., 54.

then to be enslaved by the Egyptians when they become so numerous.[87] God empowers

Moses as a type of messiah to liberate them from slavery. God uses the ten plagues to

demonstrate his power over all the many (false) gods of the Egyptians. God is showing

the people of Israel that He is the One to be their God. Now that they are freed from

slavery, God makes another covenant with Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai.[88] He is

their God and they are His people. The original intention was for the nation of Israel to be

a light to all the other nations. They were to be an example, "a showcase to the world of

how being in covenant with God changes a people."[89]

Once this covenant is made and this important role on the world's stage is

assigned, Israel's history will be "measured by the degree of fidelity with which [they]

adhered to this Sinai-given vocation."[90] After a rough patch in the desert,[91] Israel finally

enters the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership.[92] They now have the dignity of

dwelling in their own land, though they failed to drive out every people group that was

previously living there. This led to a test of their faithfulness to God, with them

oscillating between worship of the one true God and idolatrous worship of other gods.[93]

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[87] Exod. 1.

[88] Exod. 2-11, 19-20

[89] John I. Durham, *Exodus,* Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 263.

[90] William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*: *A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1984), 90.

[91] Book of Numbers.

[92] Book of Joshua.

[93] Book of Judges.

Their task of being a light to other nations was not going well as they spiraled into

rebellion against God (their King) at every level in the nation.[94]

Yahweh grants Israel's wish after this and they become a "real nation" with their

own real life king. Saul, David, and Solomon[95] are the first three kings and each has

mixed reviews. Meanwhile, God continues to move closer to sending the Messiah to the

Jewish nation in the form of Jesus of Nazareth (who happened to be in the lineage of

King David). The nation of Israel splits into two kingdoms after Solomon as the book of

2 Kings shows the "split-screen presentation of both kingdoms."[96] Both the northern

kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah are sliding towards disaster, though

Israel is on the fast track with their complete disregard for the covenant. God uses many

prophets throughout this time to remind kings and kingdoms to return to Yahweh and

faithfulness to their covenant with him. Each prophet was unique in personality, vocation,

and style; however, each prophet had a similar calling to speak words on God's behalf

and to confront and warn Israel.[97]

Disaster came as Israel was wiped off of the map by Assyria and Judah was later

taken into captivity by Babylon,[98] though they would graciously be allowed to return to

their homeland.[99] Their resettling started well but again slid towards apathy and disregard

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[94] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 87.

[95] Books of 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, and 1 Kings.

[96] Richard Nelson, *The Historical Books* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 141.

[97] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 108-110.

[98] Books of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Lamentations, Daniel, Ezekiel.

[99] Books of Ezra, Nehemiah.

for the covenant.[100] Israel's future is still uncertain, especially concerning their track

record, yet God is closer still to reconciling the world to himself. Isaiah had previously

prophesied about a suffering servant who would be sent to truly be a light to the nations.

God has not forgotten His promise. He will send the Messiah, renew Israel[101], and then

draw all nations to himself as was told to Abraham.[102]

REDEMPTION ACCOMPLISHED (BY CHRIST)

Jesus' entrance into the human race is the climactic episode of the biblical

narrative. God promised Abraham that he would do for all peoples of the world what he

began with the Jews: reconciling people to himself. The restoration and reconciliation

needed because of sin and death finds its shape in the person of Jesus Christ.[103] The last

Old Testament-type prophet, John the Baptist, announced the kingdom of heaven was at

hand[104] as he prepared the way for the Messiah to come. As Jesus began his public

ministry, he followed the trail of John the Baptist and also preached that the kingdom of

God was at hand.[105]

Carl F.H. Henry, one of the founding architects of the modern evangelical

movement, contextualizes Jesus's life and ministry in the kingdom of God as well. He

suggests that,

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[100] Books of Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

[101] Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 225. Israel is often overlooked in the modern evangelical gospel narrative. Berkhof notes that "in the study of faith…usually…one proceeds directly from the doctrine of sin to Christology. There is hardly any room and interest for God's history with Israel."

[102] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 116-117.

[103] Ibid., 135.

[104] Mark 1:15.

[105] Matt. 4:17.

> Jesus in his own person is the embodied sovereignty of God. He lives out that sovereignty in the flesh. He manifests the kingdom of God by enthroning the creation will of God and demonstrating lordship over Satan. Jesus conducts himself as Lord and true King, ruling over demons, ruling over nature at its fiercest, ruling over sickness, conquering death itself. With the coming of Jesus the kingdom is not merely imminent; it gains the larger scope of incursion and invasion.[106]

Though this kingdom would not be exactly as the Jews were expecting, Jesus was indeed advancing God's kingdom reign further into the world and inviting others to join him.

Four gospel writers contribute to the Christo-centric gospel narrative. They seek not to write a chronological account of Jesus' life, but an episodic and thematic account of His life, death, and resurrection. Each gospel has a distinct perspective and focus in its account of the Messiah who came to restore God's reign over humanity. Mark connects Jesus with John the Baptist and Old Testament prophecies of a forerunner, reminding readers then and now that the Messiah was the full revelation of God in the biblical narrative. Matthew connects Jesus with Abraham and the beginning of Israel's story. Luke traces Jesus back to Adam, rooting the Messiah in the narrative of the restoration of all of humanity. John reaches even further back, noting that Jesus was eternal and present with God before the beginning of the world.[107]

The incarnation is "the decisive event of disclosure in the history of God."[108] Jesus showed salvation and provided salvation. He showed salvation by embodying what living under God's loving authority looked like. He showed it by living in relationship with God the Father the way all of humanity was intended to live, in divine partnership.

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[106] Carl F. H. Henry, "Reflections on the Kingdom of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35, no.1 (March 1992): 42.

[107] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 138.

[108] Fackre, 186.

"Jesus opens the door to the new creation—and then holds that door open and invites us to join him."[109]

The apostle Paul contrasts Adam and Jesus, referring to them as the "first Adam" and "last Adam," respectively.[110] Paul explains how sin entered the world through the first Adam, and therefore death and condemnation came as well. However, the free gift of righteousness came through the last Adam, resulting in justification for those who are in Christ.[111] Jesus did what Adam could not do: live in a loving and dependent relationship with the Father, and thus make it possible for all humans to be restored to that relationship.

Jesus provided salvation through His death and resurrection, defeating the powers of sin and death.[112] The apostle Paul extensively preaches and teaches about the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. It is a multi-dimensional, intermingled pattern of the narrative of the cross expressed through letters.[113] Jesus' choice to lay down His life was a loving, righteous act of obedience to His Father and an expression of the grace of God. It was a humbling, self-sacrificial, sin-defeating, reconciliatory act that

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[109] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 135.

[110] 1 Cor. 15:45-49.

[111] Michael Gorman, *Cruciformity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 340. It is important to note that all are in Adam by virtue of being human, but not all are in Christ. See also Rom. 5:12-21.

[112] 1 Cor. 15.

[113] Gorman, 82.

would have meant nothing without the resurrection.[114] Resurrection proves Jesus'

lordship over death and all humanity.[115]

REDEMPTION EXPERIENCED (BY THE CHURCH)

God alluded to his redemptive intent immediately after the Fall[116] and initiated his

historical pursuit of it through Israel. The Jews were intended to be a light to the world

and integral in his activity to make things right. Jesus then came in the flesh to

accomplish this purpose and through his death and resurrection opened the door to new

life with God. Bartholomew captures the essence of things at this moment, saying,

> In his death Jesus has conquered sin, and in his resurrection he has inaugurated a
> new era of salvation and recovery. The kingdom banquet is ready to be enjoyed,
> but it does not begin just yet. More peoples must first be gathered to the banquet
> table so they too may taste of the renewing power of the coming age. This in-
> between time, after Jesus's first coming and before he comes again, is a time of
> mission for the exalted Christ, the Spirit, and the church.[117]

Jesus made many appearances to eyewitnesses for 40 days after his resurrection,

and then ascended to heaven.[118] Ten days after his ascension God poured out the Spirit on

old and new followers in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit forms a new community to

participate in the life of Christ and to be a vehicle for that salvation to the rest of the

world.[119] The church matures and increases in Jerusalem, then scatters by the hand of

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[114] Ibid., 82-88. Gorman analyzes all of the Pauline texts about Jesus' death and detects thirteen narrative patterns. Gorman notes that "without diminishing the significance of the cross, we can say that for Paul it was a prologue or prelude to resurrection and exaltation, as long as we understand this prelude to be essential and definitive rather than merely introductory." (87)

[115] Rom. 14:9.

[116] Gen. 3:15.

[117] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 185.

[118] See Matt. 28, Luke 24, John 20-21, Acts 1, Acts 9, and 1 Cor. 15.

[119] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 190.

persecution to surrounding parts of the world.[120] The church is participating with God, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, in his worldwide redemption.

God was not only reconciling the world to himself in Christ,[121] but he was making himself known to the world through Christ. Both reconciliation and revelation are in the person of Christ. Fackre encapsulates this as "revelation…is traceable to the Word that God spoke to us in the historical event of Jesus Christ. This central chapter of the Story determines what we read in all the others. Here, the defining action of God is at one and the same time the defining revelation of God, the ultimate deed of God *as* the ultimate disclosure of God."[122] As has been stated extensively, he church's mission is to know Christ and make him known.

Wright sees the church in this act as working out the script for themselves. He is not suggesting they do it by themselves, but is alluding to the fact that the script is not yet written, as it has been in the biblical narrative thus far. The framework already provided is needed in order to reflect on, draw out, improvise, and complete the story.[123] Theology professor, Kevin Vanhoozer, adds this: "On my dramatic reckoning, the church does not have to work out the ending so much as to live in its light. The essential thing is to play the right act. The church is no longer…under the law, nor [does it] have to do the work of Christ. Nor is it already in [the last Act], as some in the first-century church at Thessalonica with an over-realized eschatology mistakenly thought. No, the church is…in-between the first and second comings of Christ time, marked by the first fruits of

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[120] See the book of Acts for selected accounts of the early church.

[121] 2 Cor. 5:15-21.

[122] Fackre, 147.

[123] Wright, 140-143.

the end time but not yet at the end."[124] Improvisation is not needed as much as leaning into the power of the Spirit to have a Christ-honoring presence in the world and to partner with him in his mission.

The church is not only on mission with God,[125] but it exists to experience the sanctifying work of the Spirit as long as it is on the earth. On both an individual and communal level, Jesus' resurrection provides the foundation for God to restore those who are in Christ in a progressive manner, and the in-dwelling Holy Spirit empowers this process.[126] Professor and author, Tom Yoder Neufeld, summarizes this in affirming that "to be brought to life together with Christ is a divine act of rescue and also one of re-creation, a reconstituting of humanity . . . The purpose of this new creation is a new manner of life—walking in good works."[127] Neufeld ties together redemption, identity, and daily living. A Christian's life is marked by the transforming work of the Spirit and the desire to please God. This offers substantial meaning for the believer as "there are no secular moments in a Christian life."[128] All of this is experienced in relational community as God intended his children to live.

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[124] Kevin Vanhoozer, "A Drama of Redemption Model," in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 174. Vanhoozer provides a number of theodramatic hermeneutics in chapter 3 on how the church and believers are to be discerning in this somewhat open-ended act.

[125] There is much about the mission of the Church that cannot be unpacked here (e.g. specific tasks of a church involved in God's redemptive work).

[126] Rom. 6:11-14; 8:11-13; 2 Cor. 4:10-14; and Eph. 2:5-10 are some of the passages that speak to believers identifying with the death and resurrection of Christ, receiving the Holy Spirit, and living by the power of the Holy Spirit.

[127] Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 100.

[128] Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 337.

Act 4: Consummation

The consummation of the biblical narrative will also be the consummation of the entire created world. All that God declared created and declared good, will be utterly restored to its original goodness.[129] Reformed theologian and professor, Michal Horton, remarks that eschatology is not simply a concluding, end-times topic in theology but is "an indispensable lens through which we come to understand the whole system of Christian faith and practice. … [E]schatology comes even before soteriology, since the consummation…was the goal of Adam's trial."[130] In other words, the final act was the initial motivation of the primary character, God. Eschatology then is interdependent with creation, Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, and other narrative themes.

To reach the end of the biblical narrative is to move from faith to sight, when "we will fully know as we have been fully known."[131] The full and final reconciliation will see life together as God intended. Those who said "yes" to the divine invitation to share life with Christ will find their final home with God in the new heaven and earth.[132] All the alienation, ignorance, brokenness, and damage done by sin and death will be ended.[133]

This concept of salvation as restoration (rather than the destruction and remaking) of creation implies significant continuity between the world that we know and the world

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[129] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 227.

[130] Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 906.

[131] 1 Cor. 13:12.

[132] Rev. 21.

[133] Fackre, 214-215, 223.

to come.[134] Some Christians have a misunderstanding that being a Christian is simply about going to heaven when you die and escaping the earth by moving to a spiritualized heaven. Instead, the book of Revelation shows that salvation is a restoration of God's creation on a new earth,[135] with resurrected bodies, from which sin and its effects have been purged. This is the "kingdom that Christ followers have already begun to enjoy in foretaste."[136] Redemption is personal, communal, and cosmic in scope.

Professor Stephen C. Barton talks about this future hope that believers have which is rooted in Christ's resurrection. Of this future hope, Barton has noted, "the resurrection of Christ is the great eschatological reality which offers new life to all alike. It brings the hope of transformed bodies to human beings weighed down with a sense of the body's relentless vulnerability to decay, dishonor and weakness (1 Cor. 15:42-3)."[137]

It is important to note that there is a "dark side" to the story. In regard to post-death existence, scripture speaks of the future judgment of all people.[138] Judgment is a necessary part of the biblical narrative and there will be those who will not live in the eternal city, and whose name will not be in the Lamb's book of life.[139] Many will refuse to repent and will reject the offer of life in Christ. They will spend eternity separated from Christ instead of with him. Jesus actually spoke more about the reality of hell than

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[134] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 232.

[135] See Isa. 65:17; Acts 3:21; Col. 1:19-20; 1 Pet. 3:13; and Rev. 21:1-3.

[136] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 232.

[137] Stephen Barton, "The Epistles and Christian Ethics," in The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 65.

[138] Rev. 20.

[139] Rev. 21:27; 22:15.

any prophet or apostle in scripture.[140] However, this part of the narrative portrays the

magnitude of the grace and mercy of God in salvation as well as the choice for all to

choose the story in which they live.

Doctoral student, David Scafide, underscores that there are significant meaning-

making implications for the end of the biblical narrative:

> Christians' efforts have significance and meaning because this current state of life
> is not all there is. Understanding the eternal consequences of sin and the grace of
> redemption—knowing from whence they came and to where they will now be
> going—has helped Christians endure many trials, without which, it would have
> been easier to fall away or give up hope. Knowing that what happens here on
> earth has eternal significance is a good reminder for believers to stay focused and
> press on with the mission that God gives them.[141]

Both the past and the future infuse meaning to the present. And the end is actually

a return to the beginning. Creation and re-creation stand together as one grand movement

of divine action.[142]

Conclusion

An invitation has been extended to understand scripture as the narrative revelation

of God's activity in the world, then and now. Standing within that invitation is another

one to then personally enter the story and join the community of those who have lived,[143]

and are now living, in this controlling story. The story of humanity is bigger than

modernity, post-modernity, or whatever lens is used to make sense of reality. It becomes

a new lens through which to see reality. This becomes central in the meaning-making

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[140] Horton, 975. See also Matt. 5:30; 8:10-12; 13:40-50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; and Luke 16:19-31.

[141] David Scafide, "Toward a Corporeal, Biblical Narrative: A Study in Church Transformation" (D.Min. diss., George Fox University, 2015), 59.

[142] John Tyson, *Invitation to Christian Spirituality* (New York: Oxford Press, 1999), 8.

[143] Heb. 11.

process. Living in light of and even inside the metanarrative of scripture provides the global meaning needed by adolescent Christians. To be certain, narrative has an important place alongside other theological methodologies, but it must find its place in this generation of Christ-followers.

CHAPTER THREE: NARRATIVES IN CHURCH HISTORY

Introduction

The story of humanity is revealed through the narrative(s) of scripture and offers an invitation to view reality through its worldview lens. Theologian and historian, Alister McGrath maintains, "To become a Christian is not merely to learn the Christian story; it is to enter into it, and accept it as a part of our own existence."[1] Acceptance of this story and participation in it are one and the same.

This chapter will explore various narratives of the church seeking to be faithful to the biblical story, specifically living well in light of it, as well as continuing that story. There are various ways to divide the eras of church history. For this consideration, church history narratives will be organized in the following way: the ***Early church*** (1st through 4th century), ***Monasticism***, the ***Eastern Orthodox church***, and the ***Reformation period*** which will include the Protestant as well as the Catholic church's ***Counter Reformation***.

No attempt will be made to give a systematic history of narratives throughout the existence of the church. What follows will be only a sampling of the diversity and complexity of the narratives in church history and will therefore be necessary to leave out a number of significant people and events in this sampling. Contemporary theologian Hans Kung asserts that God maintains the church in truth, but he does so by providentially working through fallible human beings to steer the church and reform its understanding of truth.[2] This was sometimes messy, and during certain periods of history it was difficult to believe it was actually happening. The human participants in the on-

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[1] Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Spirituality* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 119.

[2] Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 22.

going story of the church are people; therefore, attending to them is to discern the narratives in that place and time. However, just as Catholic priest, Raymond E. Brown, reminds us that no one biblical author is intended to be an overall picture of what the church should be,[3] neither should any church father or theologian hold that place in church history.

Early Church Narratives

Orthodoxy

The early church held the view that God was creating a new people for himself. The church was God's assembly, a salvific community, one Church of God with numerous unique localities.[4] Brown writes about the early church in his book, *The Church the Apostles Left Behind*. He examines New Testament writings as well as the apostolic traditions following them and posits that from the very beginning there was tremendous diversity within the church.[5] Historical theologian Justo Gonzalez echoes a similar idea about the lack of uniformity in the earliest church by noting that the absolute earliest time in the church had both tension and questions.[6]

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[3] Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 146.

[4] G. R. Evans, ed., *The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 41.

[5] In this book, Brown unpacks the diverse traditions that followed in the wake of the apostles which created space for different values, needs, and emphases within orthodoxy. Brown closes his book by saying "a recognition of the range of NT ecclesiological diversity makes the claim of any church to be absolutely faithful to the scripture much more complex. We are faithful but in our own specific way…." (149).

[6] Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity.*, rev. ed., vol. 1, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 25. He is referring to Acts 6:1 where some widows were

Brown gives the example of the city of Ephesus, which he identifies as one of the two great Christian centers in the latter part of the 1st century. He illustrates how this large cosmopolitan city had a number of house churches meeting and how they followed one of several different apostolic traditions (Pauline, Johannine, Petrine).[7] He suggests that Christians today have an idealized view about the uniformity of the New Testament church which does not allow for nuances. Brown reminds readers that *koinonia* (fellowship, sharing life together) is more than possible within the presence of diversity.[8]

Orthodoxy is defined as "right opinion, right belief, or adherence to an accepted set of creeds.[9] While orthodoxy certainly has clear and defining parameters, thus leaving a lot *outside* of its realm, there is also a lot of room *within* it to live. To be fair, the pursuit of orthodoxy was not the primary concern of the earliest church, though it would begin in earnest a short while later as heresies and competing Christological narratives began to spread. Early Christian communities did not set out to install theologians to do battle but were more concerned with knowing and following the risen Christ.[10]

Theology at that time was the church's *reflection* on the salvation of Christ as proclaimed by apostolic preaching and teaching.[11] Also of importance to them was the faith they were passing down to the next generation of Christ-followers. First and

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being neglected due to their status and Galatians 2:11-13 where Peter was unsure how to accept Gentiles wanting to join the church.

[7] Brown, 22-23. He gathers this from the human situations revealed in New Testament letters.

[8] Ibid., 147. Also see the Apostle Paul's comments in Ephesians 4 about what exactly unites believers despite the presence of numerous differences.

[9] "Orthodoxy," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed August 25, 2016, http://www.etymonline.com/ index.php?term=orthodoxy.

[10] Evans, vii.

[11] Olson, 25.

foremost, faith was a commitment to a Person. Yet faith would later come to mean adherence to a set of beliefs found in the narrative of the apostolic teachings being passed down (and even later to the tenets established at official church councils). Faithfulness to the tradition would become a major concern of the church councils in the first few centuries of Christianity, as theologians emerged to maintain orthodoxy in the church.[12] The pursuit of orthodoxy and defense of the Christian faith becomes one of the main narratives of the church throughout history.

As has been stated, the early church had many converts from a wide variety of cultural and religious backgrounds. This may reflect a number of realities about Christianity, but in part it shows the universality of its narrative in that the Christian story is really the story of humanity. The diversity of new believers in the early church also gave rise to an assortment of interpretations of the Christian message and apostolic teaching. Christianity as a religion or theological system was still being defined, so much so that one historian refers to it as "Christianities" due to the various perspectives and emphases.[13] There was no clear framework yet to help in deciphering whether interpretations of apostolic teaching should land inside or outside the boundaries of Christianity.[14]

This new era began for the ancient church when John, the last apostle of Jesus, died. He was the last living link to the Messiah and questions of what to do in the absence of a Christian Bible were present. John's disciple, Polycarp, became an important person

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[12] Evans, vii.

[13] Gonzalez, 69.

[14] The earliest historic official Christian creed, the Apostles Creed, is dated no earlier than the 2nd or 3rd century.

in the early 2nd century church as he was considered an authoritative voice on what the apostles taught and how they lived. This special authority rested on *his* disciples, too, such as Irenaeus.[15] Men like Irenaeus lived in a line of oral tradition that passed on apostolic teaching. This perceived line of apostolic authority proved invaluable against heresies and schisms until the New Testament canon was officially formed in the 4th century.[16] Christian theology was justifiably born in the 2nd century, with apostolic fathers preserving apostles' teachings through letters and responses to critics and cultists. These men, who were bishops and church leaders throughout the Roman Empire, became Christianity's first theologians as they defended doctrines such as the incarnation of God in Christ. They defended orthodoxy amidst a variety of competing ideas and theories that began to creep up, both inside and outside the church.[17]

While there were numerous heresies and challenges to the gospel of Christ, arguably the toughest challenge was presented by Gnosticism. The Gnostics had no official organization and even engaged in various disputes amongst themselves. Regardless, their spiritually elitist views were attractive and also poisonous to 1st and 2nd century believers.[18] In refuting these early deviations and seeking to draw a straight line back to the apostles, Christianity began to formalize and institutionalize its faith and life.

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[15] Olson, 17, 40.

[16] Ibid., 40.

[17] Ibid., 26-27, 41.

[18] Ibid., 29, 36-37. While Gnosticism had debatable origins and more than 20 different schools and teachers within it, some of their agreed upon beliefs were: God is far removed from this world and did not create it; this world was created by an evil, lesser god and therefore creation is inherently evil; the human body is an evil prison whereas the soul living within it is good; there is a special knowledge even beyond Jesus needed for salvation, which is escaping the evil body and world and traveling back to our spiritual home; the messenger from God, Christ, was immaterial and not actually human; and perhaps most importantly, Gnostics considered themselves Christians.

Gnosticism profoundly influenced the early church and there are critics who say vitality was lost as Christianity became more formalized in this battle. While there may be some truth to legalism or Christian moralism becoming more prominent, there was a very worthy cause in standardizing Christian belief (and to some extent life and worship).[19] Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Irenaeus are some of the prominent apologists of this time associated with the defending Christianity, not only against heresies but also against the reigning god in the Roman Empire – Greek philosophy.[20]

Justin Martyr wrote the first major anti-Gnostic polemic around the middle of the 2nd century. He, along with other named and unnamed apologists, defended Christian theology using philosophical language. Roger Olson notes these apologists' place in the ancient church narrative, declaring, "All of them individually and together shaped the story of Christianity largely by making sure that it did not retreat under withering criticism into an underground existence as just another mystery religion. They helped develop Christian thought into theology proper—intellectual and reasonable examination and defense of the Christian message."[21] Tertullian's mid-life conversion to Christ enabled him to use his legal background in staunch support of Christian thinking and beliefs. He was monumental in articulating Trinitarian and Christological doctrine and coined the "one substance, three persons" terminology still used today in describing the Trinity.[22]

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[19] Ibid., 39.

[20] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2003), 33-34.

[21] Olson, 58.

Irenaeus is credited with developing the first major system of Christian doctrine in the latter part of the 2nd century. He particularly developed a system of thought regarding the incarnation of Christ in the context of his polemic against Gnosticism.[23] While some of his thinking on the role of the incarnation was later critiqued by Reformation thinkers,[24] Irenaeus connected to the overarching narrative of scripture and the continuity of God's activity in creation and restoration. More specifically, he honors the role of Israel in God's redemptive pursuit. Irenaeus also insisted on the redemption of humanity being located in bodily history, another clear refute to Gnostic doctrine.[25] He did not consider himself a philosopher, but was above all a pastor, concerned with shepherding God's children in life and faith,[26] and maintaining a unity of doctrine within the church.[27]

These and other apologists helped the orthodox, catholic church find its way in the face of internal and external battles. Interestingly enough, the term *catholic* is defined as "universal" or "according to the whole."[28] The church at this time had a strong history of witness regarding its beliefs and practice, something the heretical groups did not have,

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[22] Gonzalez, 92. Tertullian shows the frailty of humanity and reinforces Hans Kung's remark about God using fallible humans to steer his church. Tertullian himself fell into the heretical Montanist movement despite being such a strong anti-heretical voice.

[23] Olson, 80.

[24] Ibid., 74-75, 80. Some say Irenaeus went too far with the implications of the incarnation. His view was that it wasn't just an important step towards God redeeming humanity through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, but that the human race was born again in the incarnation. It was redemptive in and of itself. For Irenaeus, a threat to the incarnation was a threat to salvation as the incarnation began the process of reversing the corruption of sin in humanity.

[25] Williams, 37.

[26] Gonzalez, 84.

[27] Evans, 48.

[28] Gonzalez, 81.

since they claimed a narrow, secret line of succession from the apostles.[29] Therefore, the Gnostic groups in particular could not claim to be catholic since they did not have the broad foundation of the apostolic witness. The catholic church then became a term of differentiation from the heretical groups and sects, identifying their standing in the line of orthodoxy.[30]

The 3rd century saw the locus of Christian thought and defense move to North Africa, more specifically to the cities of Alexandria and Carthage. Though these two cities were not far from each other in the Roman Empire, they were quite different in theological mindset and leadership. Clement and Origen lived in the city of Alexandria, which was the second largest city in the empire and was truly cosmopolitan. They sought to demonstrate the compatibility of Christianity with Greek thought (using the Greek language) yet also to show its superiority as the pinnacle of truth.[31]

Carthage, on the other hand, was across the Mediterranean Sea from Rome and was in the western, Latin-speaking region of the empire. Tertullian and Cyprian were the leading Christian thinkers in the West and were much more pragmatic than theoretical. Olson describes their conviction was "interested in developing a sound system of church life that could weather the coming storms of the empire that provided a basis for Christian community and moral living." Clement of Alexandria is considered by some to be the prototypical liberal theologian with his use of Greek philosophy. Tertullian of

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[29] Evans, 49.

[30] Gonzalez, 81. The use of the terms *catholic* and *orthodoxy* refer to the universality and theological correctness, respectively, of the church at this point in its history and not to the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, which form later.

[31] Olson, 78, 81-82.

Carthage's response to that approach was "what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"[32] Though there were no major divisions or schisms yet in the Church, one can see some fundamental differences between the western and eastern parts of the Church in Roman Empire.

Despite these differences, there still was a fundamental unity of Christian spirituality throughout the Church. There may have been traditions developing with theological nuances,[33] but the battle to stay true to the biblical narrative was strong and it still allowed for diversity within the Church. Theology professor John R. Tyson frames the spiritual diversity of the community as a means of sanctification for the church,[34] so long as it remained in the lines of orthodoxy.

One of the most significant theological struggles in church history occurred during the 4th century. The Arian controversy centered on the nature of the Trinity, more specifically, whether the Son of God was co-eternal with God the Father. Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, believed and promoted that there was a time the Word did not exist but that he was the first of all created beings.[35] This essentially removed the divine nature from Jesus Christ. Where one landed on this matter would have monumental consequences on theology,[36] worship, and practice.

The man on the other side of this debate was Athanasius, the one-time assistant of bishop Alexander who would himself later go on to become bishop of Alexandria.

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[32] Ibid., 82, 84.

[33] John R. Tyson, ed., *Invitation to Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Gonzalez, 184.

[36] The doctrines of the Trinity, Christ, and salvation are deeply embedded in this controversy.

Athanasius believed that the incarnation was the heart of Christianity, the presence of

God in history.[37] His strength resided in his unshakable conviction and tenacity to never

stop fighting this battle for orthodoxy. He also had a strong relational presence among the

people in his city and congregation,[38] in some ways paralleling the incarnation of God in

Christ which he championed so valiantly.

This was not simply a disagreement between bishops or theologians, but many

believers in the Church were up in arms about this matter. Emperor Constantine, who was

more concerned with church unity than actual orthodoxy, caught wind of this and called a

council of bishops to meet in Nicaea in 325 C.E. Several hundred bishops eventually

fleshed out the Nicene Creed and presiding bishop Alexander condemned Arius as a

heretic.[39] While Arius was labeled a heretic and on the wrong side of Christian history, he

and other church leaders were trying to more fully understand how Christ saves. How did

Christ save humanity? How did God enter human history to redeem?[40] These questions

reflect faith seeking understanding, even if landing on a rejected view of understanding.

The Council of Nicaea didn't fully settle the issue as Arius refused to let it go.

Another council convened in Constantinople in 381 C.E. to put the finishing touches on

the formal doctrine of the Trinity. Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers[41] helped draw

the line of correct doctrine for the Church. In reflecting how this mattered to all believers

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[37] Gonzalez, 200. Athanasius had his own allegorical narrative for the incarnation, writing that it was like the emperor visiting a city and staying in a house that is both special yet like all the other houses in the city.

[38] Ibid., 199-200.

[39] Mark Galli, *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2000), 18.

[40] Gonzalez, 184-185.

[41] The Cappadocian fathers were Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa.

and not just the ivory tower theologians, Gregory of Nyssa joked, "if you ask for change, someone philosophizes to you on the Begotten and the Unbegotten. If you ask the price of bread, you are told, 'The Father is greater, the Son inferior.'"[42] These men sought to articulate the mystery of the Trinity, not explain it away, as some accused them. They sought to clarify and defend what the church could unite around as orthodox faith.[43] Through all of this, the church leaders continued to shape a story that flowed from Jesus and the apostles and continued in its contemporary context.

Persecution

While authors such as Brown and Gonzalez note the diversity of the church from its very inception, Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, notes the unity of direction and vision of the post-apostolic church. Their key narrative was that of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Early church writers, including Ignatius of Antioch, reflect this emphasis in documents written before the New Testament itself existed as a single collection. The focus was not only on Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, but on following him in that way of suffering. Persecution was intense in the Roman Empire during the first several centuries of the church.[44] The early martyrs reflected on the purposes of God in apparent darkness and how God brings glory out of suffering.[45] Those who experienced martyrdom we believed to better understand the

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[42] Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Deity of the Son and the Holly Spirit*, quoted in Harold O.J. Brown in *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 104.

[43] Olson, 174.

[44] Gonzalez, 43-58.

[45] Williams, 24.

meaning of the death of the Suffering Servant,[46] and identified with Christ's experience of true passion.[47]

Williams describes the symbiotic nature of the death-resurrection narrative, saying "the martyr finds God in his suffering because he is assured that his Christian identity as a child of the Father, as a redeemed person, is the fruit of Christ's cross; and the 'content' of Christ's crucifixion, the nature of what was there endured and enacted, is filled out by the present experience of the martyr."[48] Christian martyrs located themselves in Jesus's death-resurrection narrative.

Persecution of Christians occurred on a large scale in the Roman Empire, yet Christianity only expanded the more the empire tried to extinguish it. Tertullian is credited with writing the Roman leaders about persecution and telling them "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."[49] Possibly without even intending it, Tertullian locates the religious persecution of Christians in the narrative of the church's organic growth.

Worship

Justin Martyr is one of the earlier written witnesses on 2nd century Christian worship. He describes their Sunday gatherings as consisting of scripture reading and teaching (from the writing of the apostles or the prophets), singing, prayer, communion, and sharing with those in need. He noted that when a congregation in a particular city

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[46] See Isaiah 53 for prophecies concerning the "Man of Sorrows."

[47] Phil. 3:10.

[48] Williams, 26.

[49] Olson, 83.

grew too large for one service, the unity of the body was something they sought to maintain. In order to symbolize this bond of unity, a piece of bread used in communion in the bishop's church was sent to each congregation and added to their communion elements. Each local gathering of believers also prayed for the other ones in that city.[50] In all of this, communion was the central and highest act of worship for the early church,[51] which again identifies with the life, death, and resurrection narrative of Christ.

The legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire by Constantine occurred in approximately 312 C.E., and this led to the cessation of persecution of Christians (as opposed to the common myth that it made Christianity the state religion). While there may have been some good things about the newfound relationship between Christianity and the Roman Empire, few look back on it as an overall good shift for the Church. The Church had ecclesial leaders as well as an imperial authority over it now. The emperor had an important religious role for centuries and was now regarded as "the divinely appointed protector of the Church."[52] The influence and values of the very secular empire were creeping into the Church, and Christianity was losing some of its distinct identity.[53] The corporate Christian identity of the first 300 years of the Church became tainted. Leonard Sweet suggests that "the life story of all Christians should be 'they left all and

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[50] Gonzalez, 109-111.

[51] Ibid., 108. This was true until the time of the Reformation when preaching became the central aspect of worship in Protestant churches.

[52] Evans, 65.

[53] Ibid., 58.

followed Jesus.'"[54] Instead of living in this narrative, the 4th century saw a union forming between the Body of Christ and world.

Imperial edicts granted privileges[55] to churches and leaders in the years that followed Constantine's edict. This had many effects on the narrative of the church in the 4th century, one being the significance of a conversion to Christianity. Following Christ did not carry the same weight and danger in an empire that was no longer persecuting believers, and Christians more easily gathered in public places instead of privately in homes. Imperial protocol affected Christian worship as features from pagan or emperor worship made their way into church services.[56] By the end of the 4th century there was a significant change in the narrative of the Church. The battle for orthodoxy, fueled by heresies, and the growth of the Church due to persecution were being replaced by settling into a relationship with the Roman Empire.

Monastic Narratives

Christian monasticism has origins inside and outside of the Church. Even before Constantine's time and the changes to the Church in his wake, some believers were drawn to a solitary life of asceticism or a detached kind of community. Paul's words on a life of celibacy and a greater freedom to serve the Lord[57] nurtured a monastic lifestyle

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[54] Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 20.

[55] Gonzalez 142. One that is still known today in the U.S. is tax exemption for clergy.

[56] Ibid., 143-144. Some of the new "imperial" features of Christian worship were the use of incense, special garments for priests, gestures of respect, kneeling in prayer, processionals with use of a choir, and a more passive congregation.

[57] See 1 Cor. 7:32-35 for Paul's personal advice on marriage and ministry.

and mindset. However, so too did Stoic philosophy, Gnosticism, and other regional

religious traditions.[58] There also were pragmatic roots to the earliest monastic

communities forming in the deserts of Egypt, as they were protesting the secular

authority of the Church. It was not so much a way of escape but a direct response to the

condition of the Church in the empire.[59]

Nevertheless, Benedictine nun, Laurentia Johns, traces the spirit of Christian

monasticism back to the first church in Jerusalem. She writes,

> This proto-Christian community, characterized by a life in common, the pooling
> of resources, shared prayer at intervals throughout the day (after the pattern of the
> Jewish Temple services) and bound together by commitment to the mandate of
> Christ to live out the Gospel precepts of love of God and of neighbor, forms both
> the primary impulse for, and the model of, all subsequent monastic endeavors.[60]

While Johns connects monasticism with the early church narrative in the book of Acts,[61]

the valor of the early monastic narrative is captured by Williams in his book, *The Wound*

of Knowledge. Williams focuses on the life of Antony, considered to be the founding

father of the monastic movement in the late 3rd century and also biographized by

Athanasius.[62] Williams notes that the monastic objection was to the illusion of a Christian

identity created by the world. Catholic priest and author, Henri Nouwen, notes that

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[58] Gonzalez, 158-161. Though beliefs differed between these systems, they shared a similar view of the body being limited, unholy, evil, or needing to be punished.

[59] Williams, 102-103.

[60] Laurentia Johns, "Monastic Spirituality," in *The Bloomsbury Guide to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Peter Tyler and Richard Woods (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 70.

[61] Acts 2:42-47.

[62] Williams, 104. Antony was not the first one to live a solitary life in the desert, but he came out of seclusion to act as a spiritual father to other recluses near him. Interestingly enough, Athanasius was the biographer who made Antony known. And Antony threw his weighty support on the side of Athanasius during the Arian controversy.

according to the monastic conviction, "the Christian had to become the enemy of the dark world."[63]

However, the world was not the only enemy.[64] The monk would live in the desert in order to confront the true nature of his humanity, found in the fallen self, which was hidden or distracted by the trappings of the world. The geographical location of isolation in the Egyptian desert simply fostered the psychological location to engage the battle with interior darkness. In other words, exterior solitude was symbolic as well as necessary to enter the desert within oneself. Antony has been credited with saying a Christian should expect temptation until his last breath. This narrative of growth-through-conflict was prominent in the early monastic world of the desert fathers and mothers.[65] Antony's support of Athanasius throughout the Arian controversy also aligned him and the monastic movement with orthodoxy.

Theology professor Benedicta Ward considers the desert fathers and mothers just as influential as the other church fathers who wrote about theology. The main difference for her is that while the theologians debated and wrote about Christian doctrine, the desert fathers and mothers lived it.[66] Ward expresses it this way: "This simplicity of personal encounter makes the hermits deeply significant…because they were *not trying*

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[63] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 14.

[64] James 1:14 describes the fallen self within each person as the source of temptation.

[65] Williams, 105.

[66] Benedicta Ward, "The Spirituality of the Dessert Fathers and Mothers," in *The Bloomsbury Guide to Christian Spirituality*, eds. Peter Tyler and Richard Woods (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), 41.

to instruct or analyze but to live in Christ, and therefore receive the life of the Trinity."[67]

They lived in silence so as to listen to the voice of Christ, they fasted so as to feast on

food of the Spirit, they disregarded sleep so as to eagerly anticipate Christ's return. The

narrative of their lives was built on the greatest commandment to love God with heart,

soul, mind, and strength.[68]

Douglas Burton-Christie, commenting on the monastic spirituality of the desert

fathers, says, "It would not be an exaggeration to say that the biblical commandment to

love, more than any other, defined and gave shape to the world in which the desert fathers

lived."[69] Their simple yet difficult lifestyle was built on the belief that God was "here and

now or else he was nowhere."[70] While there were exceptions,[71] most monastic

communities greatly enhanced the ability for Christians to live according to the biblical

narrative instead of the one belonging to the world.[72]

Pachomius is considered by many to be a founding father of communal

monasticism. He was not drawn away to the desert in early 4th century but to the fertile

Nile valley to develop monastic villages. An abandoned and deserted village was his

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[67] Ibid., 47. Italics added.

[68] Matt. 22:37

[69] Douglas Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 261.

[70] Ward, 47.

[71] See Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 208-250.

[72] Conrad Leyser, "The Uses of the Desert in the Sixth-Century West," *Church History and Religious Culture* 86, no. 4 (January 2006): 117.

starting point for fashioning an ascetic community.[73] While Pachomium monasteries were communal in the sense of monks living together, there still was a significant amount of freedom for each monk to establish his own daily rhythm.[74]

Basil the Great, one of the Cappadocian fathers as well as one of the founding fathers of communal monasticism, was insistent in his writings about experiencing formation in community. He modified the concept of cenobitical life for a monastic community by establishing an authoritative rule for monks to follow which shaped the communal engagement of participants. In a question-and-answer format, he made the case for the value of living life with others (in contrast to a life of solitude) and allowing those relationships to reflect what still needed to be healed, matured, and formed.[75] He proposed that there is a knowledge of self found only in community with others.[76] This nuanced monastic narrative fit very well with the many "one another" commands written in the New Testament epistles.

Throughout the centuries there would be numerous monastic orders formed in the Church,[77] yet the Benedictine monks stand out because of the Rule of St. Benedict. In the

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[73] James Goehring, "Withdrawing from the Desert: Pachomius and the Development of Village Monasticism in Upper Egypt," *The Harvard Theological Review* 89, no. 3 (1996): 5-7.

[74] "Monasticism," Catholic Online, accessed August 21, 2016, http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=8092.

[75] Basil the Great, *Longer Rules*, Rule 7; trans. Augustine Holmes in *A Life Pleasing to God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 73. Basil asked "Whose feet will you wash? Who will you care for? In comparison with whom will you be last if you live by yourself?"

[76] John R. Tyson, ed., *Invitation to Christian Spirituality: an Ecumenical Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 93.

[77] Davide A. Bianchini, "What Are the Differences between Religious Orders?," Religious Vocation, December 27, 2014, accessed August 23, 2016, http://www.religious-vocation.com/differences_religious_orders. html. See the following site for a description of the major contemplative and active monastic orders. Included are Benedictines- 6th century; Cistercians and Carthusians- 11th century; Franciscans and Dominicans- 13th century; Jesuits- 16th century; and Trappists- 17th century.

first half of the 6th century, Benedict of Nursia synthesized three centuries of monastic

wisdom from the influential teachings of the desert fathers, John Cassian, Augustine, and

Basil. Benedict also integrated the works of other church fathers while maintaining the

Gospel of Christ as the main narrative of monastic life. The Rule of St. Benedict was

flexible in its potentials for daily rhythm but focused in its essential precepts of preferring

nothing over the love of Christ and seeking first the kingdom of God.[78]

> Benedictine monastic spirituality absolutizes nothing but God. The balance,
> moderation, sense of proportion which characterize the Rule of St. Benedict
> derive fundamentally from placing everything else in relation to the one absolute:
> God alone. This harks back to the 'monos' imperative which, as we have seen,
> finds its roots in the human heart and the Early Church.[79]

Benedictine spirituality then joins in the narrative of the early church as a communal,

holistic, passionate following of Christ.

Eastern Orthodox Narratives

It is worth repeating that this sampling will do no justice to the body of beliefs

and practices of the Eastern Orthodox narrative. Matters of importance will be neglected

due to the scope of this paper and historical developments of the Great Schism will not be

addressed[80] as much as the undercurrents of Eastern Orthodox values, doctrines, and

worship. The Eastern Orthodox family of churches views itself as the one continued

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[78] Johns, 72-73.

[79] Ibid., 77.

[80] Olson, 279. Though it will be acknowledged that long before the official split between
Constantinople (east) and Rome (west) in 1054 C.E., there were distinguishing theological and cultural
features between eastern and western regions of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

existence of the Church of Jesus Christ and his apostles, just as the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant Church believe to be true of themselves.[81]

The Eastern tradition possesses a different approach to theology and faith than the Western traditions (both Catholic and Protestant). The Eastern approach centers on liturgy and allows theology to be an outgrowth of its worship tradition. Conversely, the Western approach is that theology is rooted in scripture and worship is the outgrowth of reflection on those two matters. Modern Orthodox theologian, John Meyendorff, clarifies this by saying, "while a Western Christian generally checked his faith against external authority (the teaching authority of the church or the Bible), the Byzantine [Eastern Orthodox] Christian considered the liturgy both a source and an expression of his theology. … The liturgy maintained the Church's identity."[82] Therefore, the tradition of worship in the church is the major source and norm for Orthodox theology.

Eastern Orthodoxy's tradition became established in the late 8th century, at the seventh ecumenical council in Nicaea. Although worship did evolve throughout the centuries of Christianity, the Eastern Church views its liturgy from Constantine through the Second Council of Nicaea (4th through 8th century) as divinely inspired, specifically that which was rooted in Constantinople (the eastern capital of the Roman Empire). At the heart of this rule of Eastern conviction is the credo, "The law of worship is the law of belief."[83]

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[81] Ibid., 278.

[82] John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 115.

[83] Olson, 293.

It would be difficult to find an Eastern Orthodox systematic theology with organized doctrinal propositions similar to what was so valued in the West. Eastern theology avoided philosophical speculation and was more accepting of mystery and paradox. Certainly there were theological debates and undoubtedly doctrine mattered, but the Eastern Church "preferred to maintain its faithfulness to the 'mind of Christ' through the liturgy of the Church."[84]

This type of narrative, rooted in liturgical tradition, is not easy for westerners to understand, but tradition governs both the individual believer and the larger Church as well. Olson frames it this way: "It is the overall story into which God inserts converts' lives (even infants covered by baptism), so that their individual stories become part of the great story of divine revelation from the Old Testament through the early church and its martyrs…creeds…and true worship."[85]

Regarding their notion of atonement, the Orthodox Church placed great value on the incarnation. Harkening back to Irenaeus, salvation began when God appeared in the flesh.[86] Brokenness was the cause of humanity's sin and Jesus came to earth to be the human that Adam failed to be. People are in community (in the Church) with other believers to be aligned with God in restoration to full humanity, so to be in the Church is to have salvation.[87]

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[84] Meyendorrf, 128.

[85] Olson, 292.

[86] Ibid., 74-75, 80.

[87] Dan Brunner, "Trinity and Relationality" (lecture, George Fox Face-to-Face D.Min. Retreat, Cannon Beach, October 22, 2014). On the other hand, the West flipped the script and framed it as sin being the cause of humanity's brokenness and that Jesus died for the sins of the world to make things right again. Salvation is rooted more in Jesus' death and resurrection in the western mindset.

Reformation Narratives

Protestant Reformation

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century[88] was one of the greatest periods

of upheaval in church history. There were significant social, political, and economic

currents that fed the wave of the Reformation. Western Europe had experienced many

changing tides in the 14th and 15th centuries, including agricultural failures, the Bubonic

plague, the blossoming Renaissance movement, frustrations of the feudal system, and the

rise of nation states, among other incidents.[89] However, the Reformation was, at its heart,

a theological narrative. There were numerous doctrines and church practices that were

opposed by Protestant reformers, such as sacraments, purgatory, indulgences, saints,

relics, and the authority of church tradition. The main disputes were captured by the

"sola" phrases (*sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola Christo*, etc.). These clarifications, or

reactions to Catholic Church teaching, have to do with the nature of salvation (by grace

through faith in Christ and not by works) and the locus of authority for faith and practice

(scripture, not papal authority).[90] The reformers believed their work was a return to

orthodox Christianity and living according to the narrative of scripture instead of church

leadership and tradition.

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[88] Gonzalez, 413-15. One of the roots of the Reformation can go back to 14th century theologian, John Wycliffe. He translated the Bible from Vulgate to English and was a dissenter of the Catholic Church. He opposed monastic orders and challenged the church hierarchy as well as transubstantiation.

[89] James R. Payton, *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 23-39.

[90] "Catholic Reformation," Theopedia, accessed December 8, 2014, http://www.theopedia.com/ Catholic_Reformation.

There were many persons and groups who exerted their influence to shape the Reformation.[91] Three men who received the most credit were German monk Martin Luther, Swiss preacher Ulrich Zwingli, and French theologian John Calvin. Luther provided a giant push to the theological shift by publicly posting his disagreement on the power and effectiveness of indulgences, and by engaging in public debates. While Luther had his 95 theses, Zwingli had his own 67 theses. He defied tradition and church authority by eating sausage during Lent, preaching only from the Bible, and by abolishing Mass. Calvin's greatest desire was in the glory of God and he developed a powerful systematic theology. He also wanted separation of church and state in decision-making (e.g. he didn't agree that magistrates should be able to excommunicate people from the church).[92] Though the Reformation spread through reformers (prompted by aforementioned theological issues) and rulers (fueled by political issues such as the feudal system, land ownership, and locus of authority), many also credit the rise of the printing press as a significant influence in the spread of the Protestant Reformation.[93]

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[91] Randall C. Zachman, "Called to Rebuild a Church in Ruins: The Life and Work of John Calvin," *The Expository Times* 126, no. 3 (November 2014): 5. Zachman highlights the first wave of restoration beginning with the work of Lorenzo Valla, Desiderius Erasmus and Jacques Lefevre D'Estaples, who sought to restore the Latin Bible that had been corrupted through ignorance of the original Hebrew and Greek languages. Martin Luther, Johannes Oecolampadius, Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, Martin Bucer, and Pierre Viret had sought to restore the preaching of the Word of God and the proper use of the sacraments. Philip Melanchthon and Jean Sturm had sought to restore the proper method of teaching doctrine. John Calvin worked to restore the true worship of God by building up piety and religion on its true foundations.

[92] Denis Janz, *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 81, 151, 155, 203-204.

[93] Jared Rubin, "Printing And Protestants: An Empirical Test of the Role of Printing in the Reformation." *Review Of Economics & Statistics 96*, no. 2 (2014): 276. *Business Source Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed December 9, 2014).

Martin Luther understood that humans experience life in narrative form.[94] He also saw scripture as a metanarrative of God's interactions with humanity in historically real ways. While he preached exegetically, he also loved story-telling[95] and would use both biblical and personal narrative to lead his hearers to participate in God's unfolding drama.[96] As a narrator, he was recasting the stories he himself heard and within which he was attempting to live. Martin Luther's understanding of God's revelation of himself to humanity was evident in his "theology of the cross," where the climax of God's revelation came through Christ's death on the cross.[97]

Luther wrote a subversive script in his attempts to find and understand the "true church" that is faithful to the biblical narrative instead of "the word of another."[98] He preached from the Genesis narrative to root his students in scripture instead of church tradition, and to "convey to his students a view of history that provided continuity between the Reformation and the true church from its very beginnings, thus giving historical background…to the new identity he was seeking to shape in his students."[99] However, Luther and other reformers also based their agenda for reform, though to

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[94] Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 31

[95] John A. Maxfield, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2008), 155. Luther used the narrative of Abraham in Genesis to support the concept of justification by faith instead of works. He did this instead of appealing only to the propositions of the New Testament epistles.

[96] Kolb, ix-xi.

[97] Ibid., 1-2.

[98] Maxfield 154-5, 220. Luther framed both the sin of Eve and the Catholic Church as listening to the word of another.

[99] Ibid., 142.

differing degrees and in a variety of ways, on an appeal to early Christianity, looking to the witness of the early church fathers and creeds.[100]

While Luther obviously wrote a great deal, he did not attempt to systematize and publish his theology. Conversely, Zwingli and Calvin were more intent on organizing this new Protestant theology.[101] Even though these three reformers are linked together in many ways, they were not the closest of theological friends as there were competing narratives and views even between them. Zwingli and Calvin differed from Luther[102] primarily in the areas of soteriology, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology.[103]

Ulrich Zwingli's reading of the Bible in the original languages as well as other classical writings, including those of the church fathers, fueled his criticism of the superficial, commercialized spirituality of the Church.[104] Zwingli held the Bible as the only standard for Christian faith and practice and saw himself more and more as a "prophetic interpreter of the divine Word, to which he attributed the power to change people and society."[105] The first Protestant church, of sorts, was founded in Zurich in 1523 where Zwingli defended his "sola" beliefs regarding scripture and Christ. He also

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[100] Ibid., 144.

[101] Olson, 397.

[102] Zwingli and Calvin were the beginnings of the Reformed tradition while Luther was the primary agent of the Lutheran tradition.

[103] Olson, 398. See also Peter Opitz, "Ulrich Zwingli," *Religion Compass* 2, no.6 (September 2008): 954. For Zwingli's views on the Lord's Supper. He understood Christ to be spiritually present to the believer in the communion elements but not physically present.

[104] Opitz, 949, 956. The writings of Erasmus and Augustine strongly influenced Zwingli's theological thinking.

[105] Ibid., 950. 'Prophetic' for Zwingli meant the interpretation of the Bible into one's own time.

started a theological school to train Protestant pastors, with the goal of reshaping the

individual and the society according to God's Word.[106]

Zwingli turned to a Christocentric understanding of the biblical narrative as the

guide for life and away from church authority. This is apparent when reading his 67

theses: "all of Zwingli's critique at the church and the religious practice of his time is

based on the fact that Christ alone has brought about the definitive reconciliation between

God and the world."[107] Zwingli's journey to become a reformer took years and was not

something he welcomed nonchalantly. Church history professor, Eaun Cameron explains

about Zwingli and the other reformers, that "one did not become a first-generation

reformer by habit, compulsion, or default. Where any evidence exists, it suggests that the

reformers reached their positions only after serious and earnest heart-searching. They

were some of the most conscientious revolutionaries ever to rebel against authority."[108]

John Calvin followed in the wake of Martin Luther and played a major role in the

Reformation. He saw himself as part of a team of theologians and pastors called by God

to help restore a church damaged (as they saw it) by the papacy.[109] He identified with the

captivity and restoration narrative of the Old Testament Jews who were taken into exile

by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. Notre Dame professor, Randall C. Zachman,

illuminates this narrative:

> Calvin saw Luther and others as called by God to proclaim freedom and release
> from the tyranny of the Pope in Rome. However, Calvin understood his own
> position to be like Ezra and Nehemiah, who returned from Babylon to find the
> Temple and all of Jerusalem in ruins. Just as those who returned from Babylon

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[106] Ibid., 951-2.

[107] Ibid., 947.

[108] Eaun Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1991), 185.

[109] Zachman, 105.

had to rediscover the foundations of the Temple in order to rebuild it, Calvin and his colleagues sought to clear off the foundations of the true worship of God from the rubble left by the papacy, so that the ruined Church could be rebuilt on these foundations.[110]

This narrative provided Calvin a rich and empowering story in which to participate with God.

Calvin's magnum opus was *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the preeminent work in Protestant Christian theology. Yet the Reformation was not only a theological enterprise; it also was a movement toward a new Christian spirituality.[111] Calvin emphasized a narrative of being joined with Christ, which had profound and even mystical implications. Calvin's emphasis upon union with Christ "can be called the hallmark of both reformed doctrine and reformed spirituality [as] it is an essential part of Christian existence and of the believer's piety."[112] Calvin saw the mystical union of believers in and with Christ as one of the great mysteries of the gospel. This Reformation narrative was a distinction from a legal/transactional spirituality since it stated that believers are not one with Christ because they are declared righteous, but that they are righteous because they are now one with Christ. His writings also worked to emphasize justification and sanctification as simultaneous realities of being in Christ as opposed to separate phenomena.[113]

Calvin worked tirelessly in Geneva to return the church to his understanding of the orthodox narrative. As a result, "Geneva came to be seen as the model of what a

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[110] Ibid.

[111] P.H. Fick, "John Calvin and Postmodern Spirituality," *In die Skriflig* 44, no. 4 (July 2010): 282.

[112] Ibid., 278.

[113] Ibid., 279.

'truly Reformed' city looked like."[114] Believers there learned how to live as a disciplined

community with a clear mission which served them well in the challenges they would

face when they returned to their homelands. For when they went back, "they had in their

pockets, so to speak, a proven formula for turning the key theological ideas of the

Reformation into living institutional embodiment."[115] The central piece in all of Calvin's

work to restore the church was the reading, teaching, and application of scripture.[116]

Catholic Reformation

The Catholic Church was not initially concerned with the activity of the

reformers. Pope Leo X dismissed it as "nothing more than a drunken brawl among

German monks,"[117] but the papacy would come to realize the issues raised could not be

swept under the carpet. The Catholic Church then was not content to only be on the

defensive against Protestant criticism.[118] Numerous Catholic scholars built both a

theological and historical defense against Protestantism as well as the humanism of the

Renaissance. Robert Bellarmine in particular, invested years in organizing a systematized

polemic against Protestantism, pieces of which are still used today by Catholics.[119]

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[114] Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 77.

[115] R. Bruce Douglass, "The Difference Calvin Made," *Theology Today* 67, no. 2 (July 2010): 210.

[116] Zachman, 110.

[117] Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 321.

[118] Leah Payne, "Historical Models for Spiritual Formation" (lecture, George Fox Face-to-Face D.Min. Retreat, Cannon Beach, October 24, 2014). Renewal within the Catholic Church actually began before Luther's reforming work. It was centered more so in Spain and Italy while the theological angst of the Protestants was located in Germany and Switzerland.

[119] Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, *The Reformation to the Present Day* (New Haven: HarperOne, 2010), 138-9.

The "Catholic Reformation" was the endeavor to reform the church by addressing numerous issues, including the divide between clergy and laity, priest's education (particularly in rural parishes), indulgence abuse, and other financial misuses. The Catholic Reformation was also called the "Counter Reformation" from the perspective that it was a response to the Protestant Reformation. It also reaffirmed the structure of the Catholic Church and maintained the doctrines that were opposed by Protestant reformers, such as sacraments, salvation by faith and works,[120] indulgences, authority of church tradition, saints, relics, etc.[121]

During this time, Ignatius of Loyola would prove to be extremely loyal to the pope and a staunch defender of the Catholic Church and doctrine, particularly against the Lutherans.[122] Loyola was a 16th century Spaniard who converted to Christianity and later founded the Catholic order, "the Society of Jesus" (Jesuits); he is well-known for his writing: the *Spiritual Exercises*.[123] One of the Jesuits' primary ministries was education in defense of the Catholic Church and in support of its apostolic mission. In addition to education, Ignatius also emphasized charitable work and cultivation of a particular type of spirituality for the Jesuit order called "Ignatian spirituality."[124]

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[120] Lindberg, 327. There were some leaders in the Catholic Church who were concerned about reform and saw renewal of the individual as the way forward. Their ideas were rooted in pre-Reformation biblical perspectives but also strengthened by Reformation debates. They were quite sympathetic to the Protestant pursuit yet remained in the Catholic Church.

[121] "Catholic Reformation," Theopedia, accessed December 3, 2014, http://www.theopedia.com/ Catholic_Reformation.

[122] Vince Ryan, "Ignatius of Loyola and Ideas of Catholic Reform," Ignatius Insight, accessed December 3, 2014, http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2007/vryan_jesuitsreform_jan07.asp.

[123] James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 1.

[124] Janz, 368-370.

Ignatian spirituality has as its foundation, *finding God in all things*. This can also be referred to as "incarnational spirituality," in that God can be found in everyday activities. He taught that there is no spiritual compartment and then the rest of life; God is present in all things and speaks through daily human experience.[125] 18th century Jesuit Jean-Pierre de Caussade describes the Ignatian value of everything being precious. He says, "The simplest sermon, the most banal conversations, the least erudite books become the source of knowledge and wisdom to these souls by virtue of God's purpose. This is why they carefully pick up the crumbs which clever minds tread underfoot, for to them everything is precious and a source of enrichment."[126] The "daily examen" was a practice Ignatius recommended to all Jesuit brothers to reflect on the day, and to become more aware of God speaking through one's feelings (consolation and desolation).[127] Ignatius provided this refreshing narrative of incarnational spirituality which was one example reflecting a core value of the Catholic renewal— that of self-renewal.

Individual renewal was actually one of the two main concerns during the Council of Trent that stretched almost two decades (1545-1563). Faith and practice took on a new appearance as it became more personal and interior. The Church was going to be transformed because individual members would be transformed. Personal piety, prayer, and confession were emphasized, in some ways to the neglect of corporate liturgy. Church history scholar Carter Lindberg frames the emergence of the confessional box as

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[125] Martin, 5.

[126] Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment t Divine Providence*, quoted by James Marti in *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 284.

[127] Martin, 5-8.

a reflection of the interiorizing of faith.[128]

The other concern during the Council of Trent was opposition to the perceived Protestant heresy. One of the council sessions sought to counter the doctrine *sola scriptura*, promoted by Protestant reformers. The council decided that the apostolic (church) traditions were to be accepted with the same authority as scripture. They taught that the teaching authority of the Catholic Church was the final interpreter of tradition and scripture, whereas the individual believer had little business with such affairs.[129] The council of Trent also reaffirmed the narrative of good works being the "cause of an increase in justification" as opposed to the fruit of justification as Luther propositioned. This negated good works as a result of salvation and affirmed them as a prerequisite for salvation.[130]

The parameters of orthodoxy seemed to changed when comparing this point in church history with what it looked like during the first few centuries. Church history professor, Berndt Hamm, notes "that the Council of Trent narrowed orthodoxy down considerably by comparison with the doctrinal diversity and broad spectrum of Catholic theology in the Middle Ages."[131] American historian, Carter Lindberg, summarizes the council of Trent this way:

> While the council of Trent may have failed to achieve all its goals of reformation of the faith, restoration of morality, and reunion of all Christians, it certainly restored spirit and energy to the Roman church. The decades following the

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[128] Lindberg, 343-4.

[129] Ibid., 340. According to the council, truth was contained in the written books *and* the unwritten traditions.

[130] Ibid., 341.

[131] Berndt Hamm, "What was the Reformation Doctrine of Justification?" in *The German Reformation: The Essential Readings*, ed. C. Scott Dixon (Oxford, Blackwell, 1999), 60.

council witnessed renewed theological scholarship and education, moral reform, and spiritual growth as Catholicism responded to Protestantism.[132]

The Counter Reformation was a time of evaluation for the Catholic Church. Authorities and clergy considered which narratives they were living in and which ones needed to change. A value was placed on living in the stream of church tradition and allowing voices of past church fathers and current papal authority to direct their story. This was a clear distinction with the Protestant way of looking to and living only in the biblical narrative.[133] While the Catholic Church also reinforced the design of structure and hierarchy, leaders still saw the need for reform. Amidst the reforms made there was an emphasis on personal practices and interior faith, and there was a shift from the corporate life of the Church as the vehicle for faith, to individual spirituality.

Conclusion

The preceding narratives show the diversity of the Church while seeking to maintain faithfulness to the unifying revelation(s) of God. Some of these narratives directly tie in with the metanarrative of scripture and God's redemptive activity in the world. Then again some look to continue adding to the story passed on from the apostles of Christ in the 1st century. The early Church's narrative was that they labored to establish and preserve orthodoxy in light of other competing worldviews both inside and outside the Church. They sought to be faithful to the apostolic tradition while the New

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[132] Lindberg, 343.

[133] Though some will argue Protestants also depend on creeds and/or previous church councils as sources of authority.

Testament scripture was taking shape. The early church also continued in the "Suffering Servant" narrative with martyrs sacrificing their lives for the gospel.

Monasticism revealed its own battle narrative which was evident in the opposition to the worldliness of the church by retreating into the desert as well as in contending with the traitor nature within each believer. The Eastern Orthodox Church shows the narrative of the worshiping church, that every matter of belief and practice should flow out of the worship of God. And the Protestant reformers desired to return to their view of a "true church" narrative, charging their church authorities of falling away from the spirit and practice of the New Testament and no longer living in its actual story. Finally, in response to that, Catholic reformers reaffirmed their beliefs that they were living according to the biblical story as it continued through their church leaders and papal authority.

CURRENT NARRATIVES OF CHURCH AND CULTURE

Introduction

As previously stated, narratives are foundational stories that give shape and meaning to life.[1] The narrative shape of scripture has been explored as have been selected narratives throughout church history. This chapter will address some narratives that exist in the American evangelical church. It will also endeavor to unpack the confusing worldview of postmodernism which has as its central narrative the rejection of all big stories. Attempts will be made to reconcile postmodernism and Christianity along with addressing the strain of Moral Therapeutic Deism in the American church.

Evangelicalism

Defined

The English word "evangelical" comes from the Greek word *evangelion* which literally means "good news" and is translated as "gospel." American Evangelical Christians are one of *many* streams within the Christian tradition.[2] The evangelical movement is not as easy to define as one may think, since significant diversity exists

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[1] N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 39-43. Wright uses the term "controlling story" in describing this concept.

[2] Charles H. Lippy, *Faith in America: Changes, Challenges, New Directions* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006). See this book for a well-rounded look at Christian faith in America covering perspectives of worship trends, the arts, personal spirituality, books, film, internet, workplace, environment, sports, and even terrorism.

within it.[3] What makes evangelicals unique within Christendom, in ways that cannot be

claimed by another group or denomination, can be difficult to pinpoint.[4] Historian and

professor, David Bebbington, identified four distinctives of evangelicalism that are still

largely employed today:

1. *Conversionism*: the belief that individuals need to be transformed through a "born-again" experience as well as a life-long process of following Jesus.
2. *Activism*: the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform work.
3. *Biblicism*: the esteem that the Bible is held in high regard as the ultimate authority for the believer.
4. *Crucicentrism*: the importance of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross to atone for the sins of the world.[5]

American evangelical theologian, Donald G. Bloesch, describes the evangelical

movement as a spirituality that cherishes grace over works. Grace is apart from any

works of merit, and faith is what fuels works of service. While creeds and sacraments

may be respected, emphasis is placed on internal experiences of new birth by the power

of the Holy Spirit and personal, daily fellowship with Christ. Bloesch notes that the work

of Christ may be even more crucial than the person of Christ, but that the two must be

held together[6] (perhaps a subtle distinction from Orthodox Christianity).

Alister McGrath spells out six controlling convictions for evangelicals in his book

Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity. They are:

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[3] David Hempton illustrates the difficulty of defining this group in chapter one of his book. See David Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

[4] Douglas A. Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 17-18.

[5] David W Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2-3.

[6] Donald G. Bloesch, "Evangelicalism," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 16.

1. The supreme authority of scripture as a source of knowledge of God and a guide to Christian living.
2. The majesty of Jesus Christ, both as incarnate God and as the Savior of sinful humanity.
3. The lordship of the Holy Spirit.
4. The need for personal conversion.
5. The priority of evangelism for both individual Christians and the church as a whole.
6. The importance of Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship and growth.[7]

One may read these fundamental convictions and wonder how this is any different from what is considered conservative or even mainstream Christianity. This reflects the difficulty in defining a movement that belongs to countless denominations and possesses no constitution.

Douglas A. Sweeney refers to evangelicals as a patchwork quilt or a mosaic because of the diversity within evangelicalism. In some ways there are more theological differences than commonalities.[8] Dr. Brian Harris, principal of Vose Seminary, writes that evangelicalism is in danger of becoming a "hyphenated movement," given the conditions and clarifications being added.[9] He also questions whether Bebbington's quadrilateral of priorities is still reflective of evangelicals today. Harris pontificates that "contemporary evangelicals know they are busy, albeit that they are not entirely clear as to what they are busy about."[10] Donald Dayton prefers to drop the label "evangelical"

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[7] Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 55-56.

[8] Sweeney, 19-21.

[9] Brian Harris, "Beyond Bebbington: The Quest for Evangelical Identity in a Postmodern Era," *The Churchman* 122, no. 3 (2008): 201. He lists just some of the qualifying names: conservative evangelical, post-conservative, post-evangelical, and young evangelical.

[10] Ibid., 203.

altogether because it is "theologically incoherent, sociologically confusing, and ecumenically harmful."[11]

Sweeney, takes his own shot at defining this ambiguous term: "evangelicals comprise a movement that is rooted in classical Christian orthodoxy, shaped by a largely Protestant understanding of the gospel, and distinguished from other such movements by an eighteenth-century twist."[12] This provides a different lens than Bebbington and McGrath, in that it includes cultural[13] and historical roots as well as a theological framework. It ties together New Testament Christianity, early church creeds, the 16th century Protestant Reformation in Europe, and the 18th century Great Awakening in Europe and the United States.

Multiple perspectives exist on the condition of the evangelical church in America. Author Davis Bunn sees a politically-diverse, socially-engaged, theologically-rich collection of churches.[14] David Hempton, sees disenchantment narratives with many leaving the evangelical fold. Since evangelicalism is not a formal denomination or religious organization, it is easy to slide in and out of it with little attention or formality.[15]

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[11] Donald W. Dayton, *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 251. Dayton clarifies each of those critiques by saying that evangelicals are often at war with one another and have never united around doctrine; the term "evangelical" obscures more than it reveals about the group; and he finds evangelical leaders rather elitist.

[12] Sweeney, 23-24.

[13] One significant area not addressed in this introduction to evangelicals is their engagement in the political arena. See David P. Gushee, ed., *Christians and Politics Beyond the Culture Wars: An Agenda for Engagement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000) for a consideration of this topic.

[14] Davis Bunn, "Evangelical and Post-Evangelical Christianity," *European Judaism* 38, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 14-15, EBSCOhost.

[15] Hempton, 3-18. A plethora of factors fuel exits from the idealistic, passionate evangelical tradition: intellectual limitations which stunt independent thinking, unrealistic ideals of how social ills and political conflicts of the world would change because of the gospel, questions about feminism and social reform, and general political posturing. These are not unlike the reasons Millennials are leaving the church.

Aside from the various perspectives on the current condition of evangelicalism, there are some narrative undercurrents that exist within it.

Evangelical Narratives

Former Wheaton College colleagues, Timothy Phillips and Dennis Okholm, locate the birth of American evangelicalism in the middle of the 20th century as a moderate posture between liberal and fundamental Christianity.[16] They also situate the evangelical church now in a post-Christian culture that is very different from the early days of evangelicalism. However, this dislocation of sorts aligns well with the biblical narrative of exile.[17]

Israel was no longer in their comfortable home, just as the American church is no longer comfortable with a surrounding culture that is post-modern and post-Christian. Israel was still to be faithful to the covenant they had with God, just as the church is still to be a faithful witness to the people and culture around her. Phillips and Okholm challenge the evangelical church to be "faithful to the Gospel in a dominant culture whose fundamental assumptions are contrary to the Christian faith."[18] And later add, "The evangelical church should see itself in exile, not unlike those in Babylon. …The exile motif allows the church to redefine itself theologically in distinction from and in

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See chapter 1 of this dissertation for treatment of young adult Millennials leaving the church and/or their faith.

[16] Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, *A Family of Faith: an Introduction to Evangelical Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 257-59. See chapter 16 for their take on the roots of evangelicalism from the 18th century forward.

[17] For a fuller biblical account of the exile, read 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah 40-66, Daniel 1-6, Jeremiah 39-43, Lamentations, and Esther.

[18] Phillips and Okholm, 269.

proper relation to a culture with which it has been comfortable for too long."[19] Obviously,

nuances are needed here as the evangelical church did not cause American culture to

change from relatively Judeo-Christian to post-Christian, whereas Israel was responsible

for their displacement from their land. The heart of this motif is that evangelicals are

living in a different land than they once knew and should look strange to those around

them if they are living according to their covenant with God.

Another current in the evangelical narrative has been noticed by Mark Noll in his

book *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction*. He recognizes the growth of

the charismatic movement as well as the spread of Pentecostalism (both of which are

within the realm of evangelicalism) and their influence on that which evangelicals pay

attention. The shift has been from an emphasis on justification (how God makes sinners

acceptable) to a focus on sanctification (becoming increasingly holy).[20] The atoning death

of Christ is still at the center of evangelical values (Crucicentrism according to

Bebbington),[21] but the formal doctrines today receive less attention than thirty to sixty

years ago. Instead there is more of a focus on the consoling effects of redemption than on

the theological explanations of it. The Psalms have preference over Isaiah and the

Gospels garner attention over Paul's epistles.[22]

Evangelicals, though not known to embrace narrative theology, nonetheless live

within an eschatological narrative. Professor and worship aesthetics consultant, Joanne

M. Swenson, notes that "eschatology among evangelicals has long been one of their

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001), 25.

[21] Bebbington, 2-3.

[22] Noll, 25-26.

defining symbolic discourses, dominated by reality claims (dogma) accompanied by passionate argument, counter-argument, and church schisms."[23] Regardless of where an evangelical stands in view of the rapture, the millennial reign of Christ is a "significant part of eschatology that more broadly includes the direction of time, the eternal state of individuals, the future status of this world's kingdoms, and the full realization of God's kingdom. The triumph of God's kingdom through Christ and his Gospel over the principalities and powers of this world constitutes a large part of the biblical basis of the Christian movement."[24]

This anticipation of the final act in God's redemptive narrative[25] shapes the missionary work of evangelicals throughout the world and fuels the insistence on individual conversion.[26] In fact, all four of Bebbington's quadrilateral of priorities are seen in the massive evangelical missionary movement. The simplicity and power of the Gospel is preached (Crucicentrism) and the trustworthiness of the Bible (Biblicism) is present along with the conversionism that is emphasized in the missionary activity (activism).

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[23] Joanne M. Swenson, "From Dogma to Aesthetica: Evangelical Eschatology Gets a Makeover," *Cross Currents* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 566-67, accessed October 24, 2016, http://go.galegroup.com. georgefox.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=newb64238&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA114975424&asid=e314ff1a28be07a4c5c9ef9693f8274d.

[24] Michael Pocock, "The Influence of Premillennial Eschatology on Evangelical Missionary Theory and Praxis from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 33, no. 3 (July 2009): 129, ATLASerials, Religion Collection.

[25] See chapter 2 of this dissertation for a narrative understanding of scripture with "consummation" as the fourth final act.

[26] Pocock, 132, 134.

Postmodernism in America

The term "postmodernism" is utilized quite frequently, yet is a concept that radiates ambiguity in both its usage and meaning. Ambiguity exists not simply because of the multiple uses of the word "postmodernism," but also because ambiguity is simply valued over clarity and coherence. Postmoderns tend to view contradiction and uncertainty as "an inevitable product of the multiple…systems of knowledge and narratives circulating at one time."[27] More than one system of knowledge, reality, and truth is accepted because postmodernism can be understood as the "erosion of confidence in the rational as sole guarantor and deliverer of truth."[28] It also has been said that the prefix "post" is not directional; it reflects what it is replacing without indicating a new direction or shape.[29] Maybe this is on purpose.

Postmodernism's definition may be unclear; however, postmodernity's agenda is clear in that it is suspicious and critical of modernism.[30] Modernism rejected the trust in authority as the source of knowledge/truth that was present during the lengthy pre-

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[27] Clayton Whisnant, "Some Common Themes and Ideas Within the Field of Postmodern Thought" (lecture, Wofford College, Spartanburg, SC, November 19, 2013), accessed October 22, 2016, http://webs.wofford.edu/ whisnantcj/his389/Postmodernism.pdf. It has been used in the context of a specific time period/era, philosophical ideas, language systems, cultural movements, and artistic work. One reason for its convoluted content is that it was developed by a diverse group of philosophers.

[28] James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 62.

[29] Craig Van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 114.

[30] Jerry L. Summers, "Teaching History, the Gospel, and the Postmodern Self," in *History and the Christian Historian,* ed. Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 205.

modern period.[31] Reason was elevated in the place of trusted authority or revelation. Modernism replaced them with the power of rational argument, belief in an independent objective reality, empiricism, individuality, and absolute truth.[32]

Postmodernism seconded the motion made by modernism, and thoroughly rejected authority as a source of truth (the king, the Bible, the church, town sage, etc.). Postmodernism has also rejected the confidence in reason, which deeply shaped the modern era, since modernism failed to deliver the promised goods with reason reigning as god. Science, technology, and politics have not dramatically improved the world; neither have the predicted failures of religion due to the rise of rationality held true. Reason has not served humanity well in the reconciliation of differences but in many cases has instead resulted in oppression and domination.[33]

Questioning Reality

The modern notion that one can know and test reality in any objective way is melting under the heat of postmodern contempt. Twentieth century philosophers denounced a universally accessible ground for knowledge and purported that grasping any objective reality outside of self is considered pretentious. Self, then, became the

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[31] Paul Connelly, "Modernity in the Sequence of Historical Eras," 2008, accessed October 22, 2016, http://www.darc.org/connelly/religion5.html. Find a chart on this site reflecting a general division of historical eras. Other approaches to and manners of separating the eras exist.

[32] Brian Eck, David Entwistle, and Scott White, "The Postmodern Context: Teaching Integration in a Changing Culture," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 35, no. 2 (2016): 114.

[33] Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 41-46, 125.

source of knowledge and reality. Truth is constructed by the self, not found "out there" anywhere.[34]

Walter Truett Anderson's book title says it all: *Reality Isn't What it Used to Be.*[35] In this book, the social psychologist and political scientist provides a humorous poke at postmodernity's perception of reality by relaying a joke about three baseball umpires sharing some drinks after a game. "One umpire says, 'There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way they are.' Another responds, 'There's balls and there's strikes and I call 'em the way I see 'em.' The third says, 'There's balls and there's strikes, and they aint nothin' until I call 'em.'"[36] The third umpire captures the essence of the postmodern approach to reality—truth and reality are fully defined by self.

Language consequently creates the world, as opposed to describing the world that independently exists. There is no objective reality out there; only what is created by linguistics and words. All narratives, not merely fictional ones, generate reality as opposed to reflecting reality, because no one sees and experiences the world in the same way,[37] as explained by the baseball umpires. Language has been described as a view-finder (the children's toy) in that it "constructs the illusion of being a view into another world, but in fact there is nothing beyond the language."[38] If you were to look up a word

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[34] Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 13.

[35] Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1992).

[36] Anderson, 75.

[37] Wells, 27-28.

[38] Whisnant.

in the dictionary, all you would find would be other words. Words describe words and there is no escape outside this language paradigm. Meaning is constructed by language.[39]

Tell Me a Story

A clear shift has transpired between the three eras regarding narratives and story-telling. Heath White describes that "[p]remoderns didn't question the authority of traditional stories of the past. Moderns questioned them to find the true (objective, absolute) rendition of the past through the…use of reason and evidence. Postmoderns have abandoned the idea of an authoritative version of history altogether."[40] Historical narratives are seen not as the way events happened, but as biased interpretations of the events that happened, sometimes unintentionally and sometimes as a thinly veiled exertion of power.

Narratives are still important to the postmodern though. David K. Clark perceives that there is a "persistent postmodern habit of accepting multiple perspectives or conceptual schemes at every level. Postmoderns generally assume that different points of view can legitimately function in the world."[41] Absolute truth is seen (and feared) as power since the authority to determine what is true is also the right to decide who is important. No one narrative should be granted that power, nor should any one truth make

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[39] Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church, and Narrative Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 13. Herein lays the ambiguity and incongruity of postmodernism. This perspective about words and meaning is called "textualism." It is in itself a narrative; one among many, and a nihilistic worldview at that.

[40] White, 149.

[41] David K. Clark, "Narrative Theology and Apologetics," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36, no. 4 (December 1993): 503.

demands of all people.[42] Unresolved differences actually help safeguard freedom and defend against coercion. Those with a pessimistic leaning hold more to the fear of what could happen if one person or group is granted moral authority on any issue. Universal agreement through the use of reason is no longer sought after since we are so frequently reminded how this ended so poorly for many oppressed and marginalized groups.[43] Spiritually then there is a marketplace of sorts where every idea, belief, and story is valued.

With truth being defined by self and narrative being the "construction vehicle" for postmoderns to build reality, language again is the power to do this work.[44] Evidence cannot stand alone since it requires an interpretation, and that interpretation involves an element of persuasive story-telling. Literature (and literary criticism) becomes more of the dominant lens than science (reason and modernity) or religion (authority and premodernity) because story-telling is a core value in postmodernism. And inherent in this value is making space for competing interpretive narratives and resisting a dominant narrative's influence.[45] The only dominant narrative that is acceptable is that there are multiple, equally true narratives.

Where Have All The Metanarratives Gone?

In reality (whatever that might be), it is quite risky to mention the possibility of a metanarrative to postmoderns. The closest they may come to accepting that term is

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[42] White, 55, 57, 59, 155.

[43] Ibid., 55-56.

[44] Phillips and Okholm, *Christian Apologetics in a Postmodern World*, 13-14.

[45] White, 108-9.

acknowledging what is referred to as a "dominant narrative," which is nothing more than an intellectual consensus on one particular narrative. Postmodernism has actually been defined as "incredulity towards metanarratives," since metanarratives are big stories regarding all of humanity and usually contain absolute truths. According to postmodern thought, metanarratives lend themselves to winners and losers and advance narratives of superiority, power, and being right.[46]

Individual stories are exchanged for big stories and postmoderns are happy to mix and match traditions and beliefs. Syncretism and relativism are the flavors of the day, yet in their embrace, postmoderns trade rootedness for their freedom and experience isolation inside their originality.[47] There is an irony with the postmodern value system where relationships with others are valued and protected by disallowing dominant or imposing narratives to have a space. Acceptance, individuality, and freedom from constraint are championed, yet the result of this emphasis is isolation (less connected to denominations and institutions) instead of community.

When metanarratives are rejected due to ultimate truth and/or reality being questioned, meaning subsequently has no stable place to reside since it is changing all the time depending on the context. What remains is tolerance and political correctness in a relativistic world. American philosopher, Allan Bloom commented that "relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness—and the relativism

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[46] Ibid., 153.

[47] Ibid., 117, 128-29.

that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth…is the great insight of our times."[48]

Regarding narratives and postmodernism, Dr. Clayton Whisnant offers that,

Narratives do not have equal value. Most of us unconsciously choose some really enormous stories that we accept both as "true," insofar as we then make a multitude of decisions in relation to them, and as foundational, insofar as they provide a kind of background story to all the other stories that we tell about our lives. The metanarratives, as they are generally called, are the "big stories" that allow us to make ultimate sense of the world. …The problem with metanarratives is that they are so important to us that we tend to try to make others fit into them—*whether they like it or not* …Postmodernists point out that both of these aspects of metanarratives are illusory, and furthermore tend to be used for purpose of oppression.[49]

Consequently, the fear regarding metanarratives is that they will be forced upon others in philosophical, religious, political, and sometimes even physical ways.

James K.A. Smith finds nuances within the postmodern rejection of metanarratives which result in a different perspective on postmodernity. In his book, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* he explores the writings of Jean-Francois Lyotard, the French philosopher often viewed as a founding father of postmodern social theory.[50] Smith posits that Lyotard did not actually reject metanarratives or grand stories that make universal claims about all of humanity. He suggests instead that Lyotard rejected metanarratives that specifically use rationality to legitimize themselves. Lyotard's dismissal was targeting modernity's love affair with science and the use of universal reason to prove a claim; he was not rebuffing the proclamation of a story. There was no

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[48] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 26.

[49] Whisnant. Emphasis added. Some of the "big stories" he references are Christianity's story of sin and redemption; the Enlightenment's story of the progress of history; Marx's story about the dialectic of history that will eventual yield equality, social harmony, and truth; and America's belief in the eventual triumph of freedom and democracy throughout the world.

[50] Lyotard delivered the famous definition of postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives."

tension for Lyotard between global and local narratives (big and small stories), only between modern science and narratives.[51]

Lyotard indicates that science itself has been infiltrated by narrative since science and modernity tell their own stories.[52] The modern world reinvented itself with another master story. Instead of the story being about God it was about the Enlightenment, science, evolution, a master race, history, the psyche, etc.[53] Modernity's narrative looks to universal reason, outside itself, for validation of its story. This is a language game, Lyotard clarifies, where science is not being honest with itself, because it lives within its own narrative while at the same time condemning narrative knowledge.[54] Every grand story or truth claim has its own ground rules; its own criteria of justification. The universal-reason paradigm is but one language game among many, and therefore what constitutes proof or evidence is relative to that language game. Smith simplifies this by elucidating,

> what constitutes the postmodern condition is precisely a plurality of language games—a condition in which no story can claim either auto-legitimation…nor appeal to a phantom universal reason (because reason is just one myth among others, which is itself rooted in narrative). And this plurality is based on the fact that each game is grounded in different narratives or myths."[55]

Circling back around, metanarratives, then, are how Lyotard describes the "false appeals to universal, rational, scientific criteria—as though they were divorced from any

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[51] Smith, 63-65.

[52] Ibid., 68. He asks the piercing question, "Is there a bigger story than Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*?"

[53] Loughlin, 9.

[54] Smith, 66-67. Lyotard distinguishes narrative knowledge from scientific knowledge. The former needs no outside legitimization because it is rooted within people (cultural customs and the authority of the narrator). The latter seeks validation outside the people, language, and communication process and therefore looks to universal reason.

[55] Ibid., 70.

particular myth or narrative."[56] With this significant distinction in mind, postmodernism

and Christianity are not dialectically opposed to each other. This understanding of

postmodernism actually makes space in society for a strong Christian witness to its own

biblical narrative, and this will be revisited in the next section.

Postmodernism and Christianity

Postmodernism has garnered a fairly nasty reputation among many Christians.

Indian-born, Canadian-American apologist, Ravi Zacharias, describes postmodernism as

a dark cultural mood that is inherently anti-Christian.

> We are living in a time when sensitivities are at the surface, often vented with
> cutting words. Philosophically, you can believe anything so as you do not claim it
> as a better way. Religiously, you can hold to anything, so long as you do not bring
> Jesus Christ into it. If a spiritual idea is eastern, it is granted critical immunity; if
> western, it is thoroughly criticized. … Such is the mood at the end of the
> twentieth century. A mood can be a dangerous state of mind, because it can crush
> reason under the weight of feeling. But that is precisely what I believe
> postmodernism best represents— a mood.[57]

This is a commonly held view among many Christian leaders and thinkers. Nevertheless,

it could be a mistake to suggest Christianity is completely incompatible with

postmodernism, just as it would be an error to assume all modernist values are

compatible with the Christian faith. Modernism and postmodernism find places of

alignment with Christianity and both find places of departure from it. Christianity has

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[56] Ibid., 68. The term *myth* should not be taken as a fable or untrue story but as a traditional, religious, or confessional story with orienting power.

[57] Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2002), 8.

become married to modernism and the Enlightenment in its commitment to

intellectualism, individualism, and abstract truth.[58]

Returning to Lyotard's view that postmodernism is really critiquing modernism's

refusal to acknowledge its own orienting narrative and faith commitments, the incredulity

towards metanarratives was based on reason and rationality being the substantiation for

that metanarrative. This nuance allows for the biblical metanarrative to still be a player in

the game, albeit a game of different sorts. Christianity cannot continue to assert itself to a

postmodern world on the basis of modern paradigms. More specifically, the Christian

faith and worldview should not use reason to proclaim itself as the one true narrative *and*

force it upon others in this pluralistic society because of that specific criterion. However,

Smith says it can be done by "getting everyone's presuppositions on the table and then

narrating the story of Christian faith, allowing others to see the way in which it makes

sense of our experience and our world. While the new apologetics will be *un*apologetics,

it will at the same time be characterized by faithful storytelling…proclaiming the story of

the gospel in the power of the Spirit."[59]

Smith goes on to say that the Christian faith needs to leave its modern-dressed,

proposition-based statements of faith and return to the narrative form through which God

actually revealed himself and humanity's story in the biblical canon. The ultimately

narrative character of the Christian faith is intimately linked to the creative and

redemptive activity of God; it does not belong in the form of spiritual laws or theological

data. Scripture not only facilitates the understanding of the world but also provides the

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[58] Eck, Entwistle, and White, 114-15.

[59] Smith, 74.

narrative for the church's role in the world. Thus, scripture is central to the Christian faith in a postmodern context since it *is* the narrative for the church and about the world.[60]

The return to narrative theology[61] fits within the postmodern climate. The church's worship is rooted in liturgically revisiting the scenes/acts of God in the theo-drama of salvation where it can be seen that God is faithful to his covenant. The church's practices are also shaped by the narrative that is Eucharistic, artistic, and hospitable. The narrative is Eucharistic in that the church lives within the pattern of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection and continues to proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. It is artistic in that the biblical narrative invokes the imagination, is rich in images and symbolism, and can be easily conveyed in aesthetic ways to a postmodern culture. And the narrative is hospitable in that it not only is welcoming to all, but also that it is an invitation into a timeless gospel with a unique language and story. Such is a proclamation that is not dumbed down or simply a religious version of what is already available in society just to make it attractive.[62]

An Embodied Life

John G Stackhouse Jr., suggests the church today should be less concerned with the credibility or logic of truth claims. He suggests showing that the Christian faith *could* be true by how the church lives as the embodied presence of Christ on the earth. Christian individuals and communities filled with integrity, justice, and love, who live out their callings with meaning create a type of apologetic the postmodern world will recognize. It

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[60] Ibid., 74-76.

[61] See chapter 2 of this dissertation for an explanation of narrative theology.

[62] Smith, 77-78.

creates an environment where someone may consider whether Christian truth claims may be true. They are not convinced by propositions or logic, but they are invited and persuaded by communities shining their lights on a hill for men to see.[63] Pastor Tim Keller urges Christians to understand the gospel, not as a way of being saved from the penalty of sin, but as the fundamental dynamic for living the whole Christian life. This is what pragmatic postmoderns need.[64] Essentially, Christianity must prove it has something meaningful and important to say before it may be considered true.

The source of moral authority then is not some objective truth out there but is the church's embodied life. A more faithful witness of the risen Christ needs to be demonstrated before anybody will care about the authority behind a Christian's declarations.[65] Jesus personified the embodiment of love through inclusion of the excluded and the marginalized (Gentiles, prostitutes, sinners), as well as by loving his enemies.[66]

Philip D. Kenneson, concretizes the concept of embodiment using the phrase "Jesus is Lord of the universe." This statement may be objectively true, but it doesn't mean anything unless there was a community who witnessed this, lived in such a way that reflected and taught what the lordship of Jesus looked like, and passed along this

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[63] John G. Stackhouse, "From Architect to Argument: Historic Resources for Christian Apologetics," in *Christian Apologetics in a Postmodern World*, eds. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 49-55.

[64] Tim Keller, "Preaching in a Postmodern Climate" (sermon, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, 2008), accessed October 23, 2016, http://storage.cloversites.com/citychurch/documents/ Preaching the Gospel in a Post Modern Culture.pdf.

[65] Philip D. Kenneson, "There's No Such Thing as Objective Truth, and it's a Good Thing," in *Christian Apologetics in a Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 166.

[66] J. Richard Middleton, "Facing the Postmodern Scalpel: Can the Christian Faith Withstand Destruction," in *Christian Apologetics in a Postmodern World*, eds. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 150-51.

narrative to following generations. And how will people understand that statement unless there are communities of faith, animated by the Holy Spirit, seeking to live under the lordship of Christ today? Kenneson adds that "Jesus is Lord" must be more than objectively true; it must be visible in the life of the church as it experiences life together with/in the risen Jesus. The calling is to live in such a way that one's life does not make sense if God did not exist, and to live in a way that causes the world to ask questions.[67]

Phillips and Okholm share this idea of the church's embodiment of the Christian story. If the culture understands everything about the church's worship and practices, then the church may not actually be living according to the biblical narrative. They maintain that "the church lives its life…in a way incomprehensible apart from the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Our morality does *not* make sense outside of the church and Jesus' vision of life. To the watching and listening world, severed from our master narrative, our actions and words look and sound like a foreign culture and language."[68]

Having said that, Clark still believes that there are points of connection between Christianity and postmodernism. He believes postmodernism's value of stories and experiences presents a concrete mode for Christians to communicate (and postmoderns to understand) the gospel. This also allows for religious or spiritual experience to be a valid type of "evidence."[69] It does not fit, nor does it need to, within the rational paradigm of modern reason and authorization.

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[67] Kenneson, 167-69. Kenneson submits that, while evangelicals are spot-on in seeking to defend their faith according to 1 Peter 3:15 (…always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that is in you), they are answering questions no one is asking. Principally, evangelicals are still giving modern answers to a postmodern crowd not asking the same questions being answered.

[68] Phillips and Okholm, *A Family of Faith*, 269.

[69] Clark, 512-13.

Clark reminds us that "systematic conceptual relativism is not a *necessary* part of the postmodern alternative as postmoderns practice it."[70] However, questions still exist as to the story's role within the church. How does a postmodern decide that one story is better to follow than another? Should there be only a pragmatic function assigned to story, such as to shape identity, character, and community?[71] And should a Christian be concerned with the historical rootedness of biblical narratives or simply focus on the meaning of them? These are difficult questions regarding narrative and postmodernism with more than one possible answer for each question.

A Matter of Perspective

Houghton College president, Shirley Mullen, offers some metaphors regarding vision and perspective that may help Christians become a little more comfortable operating in and relating with a postmodern context. The metaphors allow for the belief that truth is somewhere "out there" while still acknowledging that humans do not always see clearly or from the same perspective. Mullen expounds that these metaphors "leave room for the recognition associated with postmodernism that where we stand, our background, our locatedness does affect what we see. And yet these metaphors provide a means for moving beyond uncritical pluralistic relativism. We can always invite others to see what we see."[72]

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[70] Ibid., 511. Italics added.

[71] Ibid., 508.

[72] Shirley A. Mullen, "Between 'Romance' and 'True History': Historical Narrative and Truth Telling in a Postmodern Age," in *History and the Christian Historian,* ed. Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 38-39.

This allows Christians to truly be witnesses to what they see, know, and experience while still allowing people to voice their own opinions and perspectives. It is an invitation to see and participate while still making room for doubt or belief.[73] It also allows Christians to nevertheless uphold the universal truthfulness of God's good news and to find ways to contextualize it in a given setting. Postmodernism emphasizes differences within humanity and there is no reason to have to deny those differences while expressing a truthful interpretation of the gospel.[74]

In summary, Lyotard's particular take on postmodernism allows more congruence with Christianity than most believers currently understand. Obviously there are also points of incongruence between the two. However, there are also major points of incongruence between modernism and Christianity, yet the biblical faith/narrative managed to survive during that period. The invitation offered by postmodern culture to Christianity is to tell their story with a different spirit and mindset. The spirit must be much more hospitable and the mindset must be the biblical interpretation of the world for this time and place.

Narratives of Moral Therapeutic Deism

By way of review, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton conducted comprehensive surveys and interviews which led to some very informative conclusions. Through their research they unearthed a particular brand of faith adhered to by many

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[73] Ibid., 39. Mullen further develops the "witness" metaphor by acknowledging the roles of the credibility and character of the witness as well testimonies by others to the same truth.

[74] Van Gelder, 136.

Millennial Christians. They detailed these findings in their book, *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenager.*[75]

Smith and Denton discovered that many self-proclaimed Christian teens held in common these general affirmations: God is creator and giver of moral law, but doesn't command or require too much of anyone; the basic purpose of life is to be happy and feel good, yet also be moral, responsible, and respectful to one another; God watches over us from a distance but can help out when needed; and heaven awaits those who are good people and believe in God.[76] The pair dubbed this brand of Christianity "Moral Therapeutic Deism" (MTD), though there is no official creed or statement of beliefs. MTD mixes in with elements of a more traditional faith and is not to be considered a "stand alone" faith. It is more a mutation of Christianity than a formal doctrine.[77] The essence of Moral Therapeutic Deism is simply getting along with others, solving one's problems, and securing self-esteem—all with a measure of God's help.

Philip Rieff, American sociologist and cultural critic, labels the general tone of post-modern culture as therapeutic.[78] Questions about the nature of truth, goodness, meaning, and even God are considered unknowable and therefore no longer an ultimate concern. Instead the culture focuses on managing experiences and environments with the

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[75] Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Souls in Transition: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[76] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

[77] Christian Smith, "On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, de Facto Religious Faith" (lecture, Princeton Seminary, NJ), accessed April 23, 2015, https://www.ptsem.edu/ uploadedFiles/School_of_Christian_Vocation_and_Mission/Institute_for_Youth_Ministry/Princeton_Lectu res/Smith-Moralistic.pdf.

[78] Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 13.

endgame of manipulating one's well-being. Truth claims and ethical obligations are

exchanged for psychological effectiveness.[79]

French philosopher, Jacques Ellul, spoke about communism and fascism in *The*

Presence of the Kingdom. Although those political ideologies don't exactly resonate with

postmodernism, his comments are directly applicable to the contemporary church

movement of a therapeutic God.

> They are incapable of making a genuine revolution in our civilization because
> they accept the essential basis of civilization, and confine themselves to moving
> along the line of its internal development. Thus, utilizing what this world offers,
> they become its slave, although they think that they are transforming it. [They are]
> superficial modifications, which change nothing [with] the real problem of our
> day.[80]

Ellul's critique is appropriate for any American church that panders to the felt needs of

society in a way that compromises the gospel story and larger biblical narrative.

The narrative running through MTD is that God is a Divine Butler or Cosmic

Therapist who is on call to help people take care of their problems or professionally help

them feel better about themselves.[81] It is a personally convenient faith with little New

Testament or orthodox Christianity within it. Seminary professor Michael S. Horton sees

traces of Gnostic philosophy present in the American church. Gnosticism, as has been

articulated,[82] was a powerful rival to early Christianity. Applicable to this context, the

innocent self (the soul or spirit) was thrown into chaos (matter, history, time), and

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[79] Roger Lundin, "The Pragmatics of Postmodernity," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, eds. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 31.

[80] Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom,* 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989), 25.

[81] Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Souls in Transition: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 154-56, 165.

[82] See chapter 3 of this dissertation for a brief introduction to Gnostic philosophy.

"salvation comes through learning the techniques, rules, steps and secrets for escaping this material world."[83] It may not be the material world being escaped today, but the therapeutic approach is in line with gaining the knowledge and techniques to feel better about and improve the self—all with God's help, of course. Self-understanding and self-realization are the paths to redemption. This narrative places self as the main character with everything else, including God, revolving around self. It becomes a small story with minimal capacity for transformation.

Just as an element of Gnostic philosophy addressed the felt needs of the Greek culture, so too is there a reconstruction of Christianity into a prescription of psychological well-being and moral uplift.[84] The church becomes an experience center where consumers come to get their felt needs met.[85] Worship services that are considered seeker-driven tend to have a consumerist, individualistic, self-help feel where praise songs are increasingly focusing on feelings, experiences, and longings.[86] Paul warned against the godlessness of the last days when "men will be lovers of themselves...having a form of religion but denying its power." (2 Timothy 3:5)

It is worth mentioning that it is not unbiblical to turn to God for help in navigating difficulties in life or for the healing of a wounded soul.[87] It may be unfair to only place in

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[83] Michael S. Horton, "Gnostic Worship," Modern Reformation, August 1995, accessed October 18, 2016, http://www.modernreformation.org/default.php?page=articledisplay&var1=artread&var2=696%25.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Bill Hull, *Right Thinking* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1985), 66.

[86] See Thomas Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 206, 208, 218-21, 224. This is similar to Bergler's take on the juvenilization of the American church.

[87] Many Bible passages express God's concern for us and our privilege/freedom to find strength and healing in Him. Numerous Psalms, including Ps. 40, speak of turning to God for help in a time of

a negative light the qualities of God that are therapeutic, healing, satisfying, and corrective. One component in a mature relationship with God may be to understand the biblical narrative as one's larger story which reflects how one's faith actually helps in coping with stress and trouble. Viewing God as a "key component of how one deals with problems in life is consistent with a robust faith in which one has a personal relationship with a God in whom one trusts…and a faith that one has come to personally own."[88] In this case it could be less the flavor of MTD (with God being a Cosmic Therapist) and could be more an indication of a healthy, maturing faith. There are always complexities and nuances in the realm of faith and one should be careful to examine thoroughly before making judgments.

Conclusion

Just as there is difficulty in understanding the nuances of postmodernism (in part because there is no great consensus on it), there also is difficulty in charting Christianity's path forward in the face of it. Evangelicalism has had a special place in American Christianity (and one could argue in America in general) the last sixty years. The evangelical movement has had a strong emphasis on evangelism and mission work where the Bible is trusted as God's authoritative revelation and Jesus' death and resurrection is exalted as the only way of salvation for the individual converting to Christ. Without fully embracing all the nuances of the recent movement in narrative theology,

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despair. Ps. 147:3 reveals that God heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. 1 Pet. 5:7 tells us to cast our anxieties on God for He cares for us.

[88] Kaye Cook et al., "Religiousness and Spirituality Among Highly Religious Emerging Adults," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 263, accessed September 18, 2016, https://georgefox.idm.oclc.org/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/docview/1787812922?accountid=11085.

evangelicalism is still inherently narrative in its valuing of the gospel story. Evangelical narratives are seen not only within its belief system but also in its story as the surrounding culture is becoming increasingly different and hostile to the Church. It was suggested that the evangelical church possibly has some new narratives within scripture with which to identify.

Christianity still has a voice in the marketplace of postmodernism so long as the Church adapts its narrative to the culture in the same way it adjusted to the modern narrative for several centuries. The four (or six or however many) core values of evangelicalism can remain and the biblical narrative itself does not have to change. The language of the game has changed though, and Christianity runs the risk of losing out if it continues to insist on the old (modern) rules of engagement. It must be stated again that the narrative does *not* have to change and should not change. Yet in some ways this is gradually happening as Moral Therapeutic Deism indicates the unsuitable aspects of postmodern culture are infiltrating the ranks. The evangelical church can continue its witness in the postmodern culture if so desired, but must return to the biblical narrative in form and content.

CHAPTER FIVE: ADOLESCENT MEANING-MAKING

Introduction

This chapter will offer a snapshot of adolescent development through a psychological lens as well as the lens of spirituality in America. The framework for adolescent meaning-making will be constructed and will fuse together the narrative shape of life with the narrative approach to scripture. This again is in response to a post-modern brand of Christian spirituality that has infiltrated the ranks of Christian adolescents.

Adolescent Development

Adolescence

Adolescence is a relatively new phenomenon that described an identity at the beginning of the 20th century as a brief transition period between childhood and adulthood. At the time it was understood to last only a few years with its onset at puberty and its completion with the assumption of adult responsibilities.[1] Previous markers for the end of adolescence were: accepting responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and financial self-sufficiency.[2] The last century of psychological and sociological research, in addition to more recent shifts in cultural trends and family systems, has changed our understanding of adolescence as well. It is a term that is no longer safe to attach an age range to its definition (like the term "teenager") since

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[1] Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers (Youth, Family, and Culture)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 7.

[2] Chap Clark, ed., *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations Into the Family of Faith (Youth, Family, and Culture)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 29.

adolescence is said to "begin in biology and end in culture"[3] when culture affirms one's entrance into the stream of adulthood.

Well-respected developmental psychologist, John Santrock, notes that adolescence has two main components: separateness (the desire for uniqueness) and self-assertion (the quest for personal autonomy).[4] Seasoned youth ministry practitioner, Chap Clark, offers this robust definition. Adolescence is "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."[5] Clark's definition includes the differentiation process noted by Santrock, yet he also includes the important role of relationships in this phase which will be addressed considerably in the next chapter. Clark also observes that adolescence is now taking longer to navigate in the 21st century. Biologically, puberty is beginning earlier and the cultural markers for adulthood[6] can be achieved incrementally or gradually which pushes the transition into adulthood even later.[7]

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[3] John Santrock, *Adolescence*, 8 ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 28-29.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 9. Let it be noted that the purpose of this chapter is to briefly outline the shape of adolescence while not delving into the many approaches to understanding and systematizing the developmental phase of adolescence.

[6] Brian Simmons, *Wandering in the Wilderness: Changes and Challenges to Emerging Adults' Christian Faith* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2011), 21-23. These markers include establishing oneself in a career, getting married, having children, "putting down roots" (e.g. not moving back in with parents), etc. No longer are rights such as driving, voting, smoking, or drinking seen as rites of passage into adulthood.

[7] Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, 27-30. Adolescence can last as long as 15 years. Clark interestingly attributes the extension of the adolescent stage to a couple different factors, one being the loss of a shared corporate story (or metanarrative) in America which he doesn't really unpack after mentioning it.

The extension of adolescence has now led to divisions within adolescence, as early-, mid-, and late-adolescence have become their own stages.[8] The delayed move into adulthood has also created another somewhat ambiguous stage called "emerging adulthood" which is located between adolescence and young adulthood.[9] Author and university professor, Brian Simmons, attaches a wilderness motif to the emerging adult phase as it is a time of uncertainty, change, and danger.[10] It seems appropriate to attribute that narrative to adolescence as well since beliefs, relationships, direction, and even the understanding of self is uncertain and changing throughout adolescence (though there may be variations as to what is uncertain or changing depending on the stage of adolescence).

Clark distinguishes a particular feature of the wandering narrative for adolescents. He suggests they have been systematically abandoned by external systems (mainly school) and internal relationships (mainly family and other significant adults). He theorizes that children and adolescents have been pressured to be more autonomous and competent than they are prepared to be, and that they have to suppress their own needs for security and protection in order to submit to the cultural and parental expectations.[11] They are more isolated and unsupervised than ever, in particular mid-adolescents (high

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[8] Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 11.

[9] Simmons, 31-35. Simmons seeks to explain four distinctions between adolescence and emerging adults. However, others consider the third decade a time of delayed adolescence and not a stage between adolescence and adulthood. For a treatment on the different perspectives, see J. Brynner, "Rethinking the Youth Phase of the Life Course: The Case of Emerging Adulthood?," *Journal of Youth Studies* 8 (2005): 367-84.

[10] Ibid., 15-17.

[11] Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 28-35.

school age).[12] Christian Smith and Melissa Lunquist Denton also found this adolescent

abandonment in the structural disconnect between adults and teenagers, which is seen in

the fearful and frenetic search for affirmation and loyal relationships.[13] All of this fits

within the wilderness narrative as young people face an uncertain future, have questions

without answers, and feel alone.

Individuation and Identity

One of the core tasks of the adolescent phase is that of individuation (though it is

not a uniquely adolescent task). Psychotherapist and professor of clinical psychology,

Ruthellen Josselson, explains the relational aspect of adolescent identity formation, as

adolescents

> undergo a separation-individuation process on the road to identity. But at the
> same time they are not becoming "lone selves" needing no one, standing to face
> the forces of life alone. Rather they are editing and modifying, enriching and
> extending their connections to others, becoming more fully themselves in relation.
> Individuation is reinvested in revised relatedness, and in these commitments lies
> the integration of identity.[14]

Josselson alludes to the over-emphasis in American culture of the individual identity and

acknowledges the need adolescents have for belongingness, connectedness, and a

communal identity.

People in general, and adolescents in particular, seem to be at their healthiest

when they have a balance of independence and attachment, an interdependent autonomy

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[12] Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 19.

[13] Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 182-86.

[14] Ruthellen Josselson, "Identity and Relatedness in the Life Cycle," in *Identity and Development: An Interdisciplinary Approach* eds. Harke A. Bosma et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1994), 83.

of sorts. The process of individuation is less concerned with a fully independent self than it is in moving toward adult life in community, "realizing that this move is itself a piece of the larger, lifelong process of differentiation."[15] While peers become increasingly important to the developing adolescent it does not mean that parents are no longer important. It is normal for early and mid-adolescents to want to spend more time with their friends than their parents. However, "decreased frequency of contact with family does not mean that family closeness has assumed less importance for the adolescent."[16] Adolescents still need adults, including their parents. This simply reflects the domain in which the major work of individuation is occurring. This also reinforces Clark's idea that systematically abandoning kids and leaving them to their own devices is damaging and slows their individuation processes.[17]

Youth ministry practitioner, Amy Jacober, also pushes back on society's emphasis on an individual identity. She proposes that an overemphasis on individualism and self-reliance can pull attention away from the normative need of belonging. Jacober also steers adolescents away from basing their identity on *what* one does as opposed to *who* one is. Teens live in a very performance-based and image-driven culture where it is difficult to feel one deserves to belong. Cultivating an individual identity rooted in a theological understanding of *who I am* and not just *what I do* would be a meaningful shift

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[15] Amy E. Jacober, *The Adolescent Journey: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Practical Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 60-61. This again is a complex process involving cognitive, moral, and social development which is not being addressed in this chapter.

[16] Jeffrey O'Koon, "Attachment to Parents and Peers in Late Adolescence and Their Relationship with Self-Image," *Adolescence* 32, no. 126 (Summer 1997): 472.

[17] Clark, *Adoptive, Youth Ministry,* 37-38.

for Christian adolescents. Essentially their identity would be based on being *in* Christ and moving toward God's original intention of humanity (God's mission/story).[18]

The importance of identity development during adolescence is revealed by Kenda Creasy Dean, professor of youth, church, and culture at Princeton Theological Seminary.

> [W]ithout a coherent identity, adolescents feel constantly at risk of disintegrating, of becoming nonexistent—literally, of being a "nobody." They intuit that this disparate self is not right," but they lack the resources to justify it. So they resort to myriad anesthetics to numb the pain of falling apart: achievement, substance abuse, consumerism, serial relationships—the list is endless. Every salve eventually wears off, revealing the fragile self anew.[19]

This reflects the weightiness of the developmental work that adolescents are doing. While rooted in the same soil as the work of individuation, identify formation (and meaning-making) is actually a lifelong process. Adolescence is simply a "juncture" where identity construction is an intensified psycho-social task.[20]

Adolescent Spirituality

Several studies have revealed that another of the central domains to be explored in the individuation process is that of faith (religious beliefs, spirituality, worldview, etc.). Adolescents have indicated that it is important to them that they own their religious beliefs and values as they move closer to adulthood.[21] Jacober describes this activity as a

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[18] Jacober, 58, 60.

[19] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 16.

[20] Kate C. McLean, "Late Adolescent Identity Development: Narrative Meaning Making and Memory Telling," *Developmental Psychology* 41, no. 4 (2005): 683.

[21] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. "A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs among Emerging Adults," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 17, no. 5 (September 2002): 452.

"renegotiation of space" where the adolescent grows too large for the confines of childhood parental authority.[22]

During childhood and early adolescence, the source of religious authority is external—in parents, teachers, ministers, and the Bible. A shift occurs in late adolescence and emerging adulthood where the source of authority becomes internal (inside the person) which reflects that renegotiation of space. Movement towards autonomy, responsibility and ownership of beliefs becomes more noticeable. This transition reflected in bumper sticker statements would be from "God said it—I believe it—That settles it" to "God said it—I'll evaluate it—Maybe I'll believe it."[23]

The journey of faith and meaning-making starts before and continues after adolescence. Sharon Parks distinguishes between the forms of knowing of children, adolescents, and adults. The forms of knowing have to do with where a person is functioning within cognitive development and attends to *how* meaning is structured more so than *what* is believed. Parks places a child in the "authority-bound" stage where the authority is external (Bible, minister, parent, culture, media, customs, etc.) and everything is clearly right or wrong (dualistic in this sense).[24]

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[22] Jacober, 69. Nonetheless, other studies reflect that adolescents still generally hold to their parents' religious beliefs and worldviews. See Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers,* 170.

[23] Simmons, 45-46. A spectrum exists as to how much an adolescent will self-author their worldview and identity and how tethered they may be to a faith tradition. The degree of inward focus varies depending on the person, family, faith tradition, culture, etc.

[24] Patrick Love, "Comparing Spiritual Development and Cognitive Development," *Journal of College Student Development* 43, no. 3 (May/June 2002): 362.

Parks notes that when this type of faith exists, "people cannot stand outside of their own

perspective, or reflect upon their own thought."[25]

The next step for an early or mid-adolescent would be into the realm of

"unqualified relativism." This is when awareness settles in that neither the world nor God

is always predictable. Those in authority are understood to be imperfect and teens begin

to realize that numerous responses may need to be considered as potential answers to big

questions about life.[26] The knowing of a late adolescent or young adulthood is considered

a "probing commitment" when significant exploration and some formation happens, but

the beliefs have not been fully tested or qualified. Short-term commitments are made as

adolescents are "road-testing" beliefs, practices, and/or faith communities. The litmus test

for faith at the probing commitment stage becomes more pragmatic (which aligns well

with the relevance-oriented postmodern culture). Many need to experiment with their

faith, assess it, and see where modifications need to be made. In this time there is a

restructuring or a reordering of faith. This exploration may lead to assimilating,

discarding, or modifying tenets of faith and spirituality.[27]

That being said, even teens in the early- and mid-adolescent stages desire a faith

that is personal and capable of shaping their identity. They desire a faith that is relevant

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[25] Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 55.

[26] Love, 363. Love actually criticizes Parks for a perceived gap between unqualified relativism and probing commitment. He suggests another stage should exist which allows for a more gradual movement from predictable, dualistic, one-right-answer thinking to the relativistic openness to multiple ideas.

[27] Simmons, 44-45, 47-49.

to their social world and have been known to struggle with an abstract belief system disconnected from everyday life.[28]

Adults continue to "tested commitment" where faith has been explored, tested by life and critical thought, and is marked by centeredness as opposed to ambivalence. Parks also identifies a "convictional commitment" for a mature adult without disclosing characteristics of that progression. Regardless, the point is that while meaning-making is a central task in adolescence, all the work cannot be completed in that stage of life[29] due to the nature of cognitive and faith development. While adolescence is a crucial time to engage meaning-making, it is good to keep in mind that there is more work to be done as the journey continues into adulthood.[30]

Moral Therapeutic Deism

Chapter 1 introduced the problem of adolescents leaving the church and/or their faith as they transition into young adulthood. There are a considerable number of nuances in this phenomenon which means that there is no single solution to address the problem. Significant research performed by numerous organizations, including the National Study

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[28] Thomas Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 11, 13.

[29] Parks, 69. Parks also incorporates a social component of faith development in the manner of forms of *dependence* and forms of *community* (both of which correlate with the forms of knowing). A person would move from "dependence" on a primary authority figure to "counter-dependence" (moving away from the source of authority) to "fragile inner dependence" where there is a balance with one's and others' views. Similarly, a progression exists from "conventional community", which is defined by their family relationships and is homogeneous in nature, to "diffuse community" which has more diversity and may not be so monolithic in nature . After that is a "mentoring community" which supports the individuation process of a late adolescent or young adult as beliefs and values are further personalized and nuanced. Just as the forms of knowing continue on in later adulthood, so do the forms of dependence and community. For a bullet-point summary of the forms of knowing, dependence and community, see "Faith Development Theories," March 18, 2015, accessed December 9, 2016, http://meier-hamilton.blogspot.com.

[30] Love, 364-368.

of Youth and Religion, discovered and articulated a particular brand of Christian faith among American adolescents and emerging adults dubbed "Moral Therapeutic Deism" (MTD).[31] This amalgamation of beliefs holds that God is creator but remains marginal in daily life. He helps people be moral, wants people to be kind to each other, and aids in finding self-fulfillment.[32] As far as narratives, worldviews, and controlling stories go, MTD demands little from its "adherents," is deficient in its ability to produce substantial meaning in life, and lacks the interpretive power to reconcile disparate life events.

As noted in the previous chapter regarding post-modern narratives, adolescents live in a culture that values tolerance and openness to many competing narratives. The climate of acceptance combined with easy access to ideas also makes faith and spiritual values more negotiable for adolescents in the individuation process.[33] Values and beliefs are still very important; they simply look different from what adults may expect since they are more open-ended. Research professor, Jeffrey Arnett, submits that "because young people view it as both their right and responsibility to form their beliefs and values independently of their parents, they pick and choose from the ideas they discover as they go along and combine them to form their own unique, individualized set of beliefs, an 'a

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[31] Christian Smith, "On 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' as U.S. Teenagers' Actual, Tacit, de Facto Religious Faith" (lecture, Princeton Seminary, NJ), accessed April 23, 2015, https://www.ptsem.edu/uploadedFiles/School_of_Christian_Vocation_and_Mission/Institute_for_Youth_Ministry/Princeton_Lectures/Smith-Moralistic.pdf.

[32] Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena, eds., *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality: Meaning-Making in an Age of Transition (Emerging Adulthood Series)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25. This is a simplified description of MTD. There are no official doctrines or beliefs, and there is significant variation among Christian adolescents when considering gender, economic status, ethnicity, and denominational affiliation.

[33] Jacober, 89.

la carte system.'"[34] This is the fertile soil in which variant strains such as MTD take root and flourish. In addition to culture, research has shown that MTD can be traced through American churches as well as the parents of these adolescents.[35]

The Narrative Shape of Life

The adolescent task of meaning-making can be a daunting one because adolescents must navigate many competing narratives and syncretistic worldviews as they differentiate from their parents and forge their own identity. The final chapter of this dissertation will attempt to address practical aspects of this endeavor, both for adolescents seeking to build a bridge from their faith to everyday life as well as for those walking alongside adolescents in their journey. The second chapter of this dissertation acknowledged the central components of and some challenges within the world of narrative theology, particularly for evangelicals.

The proposal being made is to consider not only the narrative approach to scripture in the work of meaning-making but also the narrative shape of life. The storied nature of human experience and behavior is receiving increased amounts of attention in psychology, sociology, education, and history in addition to theology.[36] This conceptualizing of human lives in narrative terms has resulted in the use of storytelling to

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[34] Arnett, 464. This is probably more readily seen in late adolescents and emerging adults, but traces of it are present in mid-adolescents as well.

[35] See chapter 1 for more on the role parents and churches have played in the diffusion of MTD.

[36] Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, eds., *Turns in the Road: Narrative Studies of Lives in Transition* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), xi-xii. This includes methodologies such as case studies, autobiographical approaches, psychobiography, life histories, analysis of life narrative accounts, ethnographies which emphasizes qualitative over quantitative research.

find meaning in life, make sense of significant turning points, and cope with stressful life events.[37]

Dan McAdams actually proposes that one's identity *is* a life story which begins to take shape in adolescence.[38] Professor of psychology, Kate McLean, submits that "life stories serve to make sense of one's past, present, and anticipated future, and are partly constructed by making meaning of past experience."[39] Psychologist and former president of Search Institute, Peter Benson, asserts that during adolescent development the desire is awakening for the self to be "embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental 'engine' that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose and contribution."[40] Dr. Tristine Rainer, a pioneer in journal writing and narrative autobiography, advocates finding the "story shape" of one's life (with "story" defined as a meaningful pattern of events). She suggests reading and writing the script of one's life instead of looking "out there" for some cosmic meaning for the whole of life.[41] Author and counselor, John Eldredge, adds that the deepest convictions of our hearts are formed through stories and our interpretations of those stories. He posits that "life is not a series of propositions, it is a series of dramatic scenes" and that "our souls

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[37] Ibid.

[38] See Dan McAdams, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology* 5 (2001): 100-22.

[39] McLean, 683.

[40] Benson and Roehlkepartain, 13.

[41] Tristine Rainer, *Your Life as Story* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1998), 1.

speak the images and emotions of story."[42]

While Rainer would say there is no universal meaning for all of humanity and therefore to find individualized meaning,[43] Eldredge makes it clear that experience alone cannot furnish its own interpretation because it is so easy to misunderstand the story in which we live. He further elaborates that "we find ourselves in the middle of a story that is sometimes wonderful, sometimes awful, often a confusing mixture of both, and we haven't the slightest clue of how to make sense of it all. Worse, we try to interpret the meaning of life with only fragments, isolated incidents, feelings, and images without reference to the story of which these scenes are merely a part."[44] Many have concluded that there is no sensible, meaningful story of life, or they respond by crafting their own small story in which to live (sports, career, politics, relationships, media, etc.). These smaller stories offer a taste of the adventure, beauty, and meaning of the larger story yet fall short of offering the real thing.[45]

Parks repurposes the term "polytheism" and uses it to describe the attempt of finding meaning in smaller stories. She describes this experience as "living fragmented lives, piecing together various scraps of discrete meaning, each with its own center of value…each with its own god. Polytheistic faith is composed by those …who have only been able to compose an assortment of 'isolated wholes.'"[46]

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[42] Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance: Drawing Closer to the Heart of God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 38-39. Eldredge shares pivotal scenes from throughout his life story as he develops the larger story in which we all live.

[43] Rainer, 1.

[44] Curtis and Eldredge, 36.

[45] Ibid., 43.

[46] Parks, 22.

The consideration of the narrative shape of life along with the acknowledged difficulty in interpreting life events lends itself to the necessity of a hermeneutic for life events and experiences, in this case a larger story in which to live and make sense of life. We essentially cannot script our own lives without a greater reference point, and the metanarrative of scripture provides the anchoring story and scaffolding for meaning-making. The biblical narrative invites us to set our stories alongside the stories of those within the accounts, but also to locate ourselves in the still-unfolding story. The narrative of scripture is what reveals who we are, what has happened, who God is, and what He has done and is doing.[47]

The heart of this connection is that our life experiences can be understood through the master narrative of creation, fall, and God's reconciling and restoring of humanity, and that God is present and active in daily life.[48] According to theologian James McClendon, experience is not simply an individual matter or feeling, but that which "constitutes our share in the Christ story…the enduring or timely aspect of our lives in relation to God and one another; as plot and character in some setting, it is the stuff of narrative."[49] Our experiences with God and others in life are a part of a larger connecting narrative. Meaning-making occurs as experiences are reflected upon and understood in light of God's story even though there will be experiences that cannot be easily reconciled or understood.[50] This becomes a challenging discipline to make adolescents

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[47] Joel B. Green and Max Turner, ed., *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 137.

[48] Jacober, 36.

[49] James Wm. McClendon, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, *Ethics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 38-39.

think, ask questions, and look for meaning as they seek to connect faith with everyday

life.

Meaning-Making for Adolescents

Meaning-Making Framework

The meaning-making process finds its place within the context of faith. Parks

describes faith as

> a process of meaning-making, which is the process of making sense out of the activities of life, seeking patterns, order, coherence, and relation between and among the disparate elements of human living. It is the process of discovering and creating connections among experiences and events. …That is, faith is trying to make sense of the 'big picture,' trying to find an overall sense of meaning and purpose in one's life.[51]

This definition expands the notion of faith to be more than just cognitive or religious in

nature since faith is more than what one believes, it is what one does. It also encompasses

several important concepts. The first is that of global meaning which refers to the

overarching system that furnishes the general framework through which people structure

their overall lives and assign meanings to specific experiences. Global meaning includes

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[50] Many evangelicals may feel uncomfortable with narrative being the primary lens in reading scripture; however, it does fit well alongside other approaches to understanding scripture. See D.A. Carson, "How to Read the Bible and Do Theology Well," The Gospel Coalition, September 24, 2015, accessed November 25, 2016. https://www. thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-bible-and-theology-don-carson-nivzsb. Although D.A. Caron is not widely considered a narrative theologian, he does use a narrative framework in his evangelical theological praxis. He sees the Bible as the historical progression of God's revelation which develops theological themes inside the narrative. Meaning is understood as within the context of the bigger story. This is consistent with some hermeneutic principles from theologians within narrative theology, including the matter of understanding what a narrative meant to those who first heard and then re-told the story. Carson sees an important symbiotic relationship between exegesis, biblical theology (with narrative framework), historical theology, and systematic theology. Exegesis is the starting point for him, but each discipline depends on and looks back to the others for a well-rounded hermeneutic.

[51] Parks, 18-19. Parks unpacks the definition of faith and offers a multi-faceted perspective which includes personal, visceral, affective, passional, behavioral, and rational aspects.

general values, beliefs, goals, and feelings about life.[52] Parks refers to this in making

sense of the big picture of life and trying to find an overall sense of purpose.

Parks also includes the idea of situational meaning which has to do with how an

individual interprets and interacts with everyday experiences along with how meaning is

assigned to a particular event.[53] This is alluded to in making sense out of the activities of

life and creating connections among experiences. The third significant concept is that of

accommodation, or when life doesn't make sense and attempts are made to reconcile

one's global meaning with a difficult or confusing experience that doesn't seem to fit.[54]

This is reflected by seeking to make sense of the disparate elements of life and humanity.

These three components are central in the meaning-making process.

As noted earlier in the chapter, adolescents are in a time of significant change

within multiple domains of personhood,[55] and it is within this period of development that

meaning-making becomes a crucial activity. Thomas Bergler notes how culture can

impose upon the meaning-making process for adolescents. He remarks that "the

meanings adults read into the lives of young people take on the power to shape the

experience of adolescence itself. …Adolescent behavior often reflects the actual, lived

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[52] Raymond F. Paloutzian and Crystal L. Park, eds., *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, Second Edition*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2014), 358.

[53] Dariusz Krok, "Religiousness, Spirituality, and Coping with Stress Among Late Adolescents: A Meaning-Making Perspective," *Journal of Adolescence* 45 (Dec 2015): 197, accessed November 25, 2016, http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2015.10.004.

[54] Crystal Park, "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and Its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Event.," *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 2 (March 2010): 259, EBSCOhost.

[55] It is not within the scope of this chapter to address the many significant physiological, social, cognitive, and affective changes adolescents are undergoing. However, all of these domains play a role in the overall development and the meaning-making work for an adolescent.

values of society, not just its ideals."[56] Jacober observes the same power that culture has in telling young people who they are and who they can become.[57] These ideals of what young people should be and do (college, marriage, career, etc.) create the ideal future towards which adolescents will be striving.

However, adolescents cannot simply ignore all cultural values or significant adults in their lives since their social world is a necessary part of their development. They must learn to navigate this as they slowly take ownership of their worldview system with a few trusted others aiding their journey. There is a consensus discovered through research (and verified in everyday life) that adolescents are at a less mature stage of faith and cognitive development than adults which is due to their psychological capacity and lack of life experience.[58] This reality, combined with their pursuit of interdependent autonomy, means the work of meaning-making should not be done alone by an adolescent. Adolescence, in particular mid- and late-adolescence, is marked by a "hunger to anchor autonomy and personal choice within a meaning-making context." This has been shown to be best accomplished in the context of interdependent relationships—spiritual communities and role models who become a significant resource for value formation and faith development. Since meaning-making is both an individual and community-centered activity, adolescents benefit from a space that nurtures support and

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[56] Bergler, 17.

[57] Jacober, 81-83.

[58] Barry and Abo-Zena, 28. Research indicates that adolescents are rarely at the same place in all area of development.

mentoring, allows room to explore difficult questions, permits observation of useful

attitudes and practices, and helps develop a sense of the adolescent self that is maturing.[59]

Skepticism as a Companion

It is the norm for young people to doubt their faith and question their

spirituality.[60] While doubting can be given a negative connotation in certain religious

circles and superficially viewed as a rejection of previously held beliefs, many

researchers find great benefit in questioning since it can be an integral piece of moving

towards a mature faith and identity. Researchers Gina Magyar-Russell et. al have noted

that "too often, deconstruction is mistakenly understood as singularly nihilistic exercise

leading to the complete rejection and destruction of home-making propositions. …

However, deconstruction involves a double movement of dismantling in order to rebuild,

of individuation in order to reintegrate."[61] Inherent in this viewpoint is the idea of "home-

making" propositions which are the particular beliefs that provide a sense of place,

meaning, and belonging in the world.

Questioning is not the end in itself but the means to a greater end. Magyar-Russell

et. al. goes on to say that "the goal of leaving [home] is not to become an ideological

vagabond, but rather home-leaving is a prerequisite for the homecoming to a more mature

and cohesive identity and worldview."[62] Skepticism provides the necessary struggle for

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[59] Ibid., 48-50. The role of peers, parents, and other significant adults will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.

[60] Ibid., 29.

[61] Gina Magyar-Russell, Paul J. Deal, and Iain Tucker Brown, "Potential Benefits and Detriments of Religiousness and Spirituality to Emerging Adults," in *Emerging Adults Religiousness and Spirituality*, eds. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 50.

flexing of the ideological muscles to strengthen them in order to function on their own. These researchers again note the importance of a healthy relational environment to provide guidance in the individuation process of rebuilding lest the adolescent become stuck in a perpetually internally-focused state.[63] Doubt then is not the enemy or the impetus of abandoning faith and church involvement; the more likely culprits are how doubt is framed and with whom it is navigated.

The church (and Christ-centered educational institutions) would do well to frame skepticism as a companion on the journey of maturing faith in how it creates space to question and openness to learning. Not every person goes through times of deep doubting, but too much of Christian culture focuses on right belief and right behavior[64] instead of empowering hearts and minds to raise the questions needed to help move forward in their journey (or at least get unstuck).

Suffering and Transformation

Suffering adds another difficult dimension to the meaning-making process as it is often difficult for adolescents to understand, reconcile, or even accept the presence of pain in the world and their lives. Suffering can lead to doubt, skepticism, or a stronger experience of disillusionment. Parks depicts suffering as anything from physical and emotional pain to yearning, doubt, or purposelessness, and she borrows from Richard Niebuhr the vivid metaphor of suffering as "being shipwrecked."[65] The shipwrecking

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid., 51.

[64] Understanding that Christians follow a Person and not just a theological system allows space for those recalibrations during and after seasons of disillusionment.

experience means the prior (and oftentimes naïve) view of the world is being contested.

The previously held schema is found to be insufficient and in need of accommodation.

Yet for those who have the resiliency and surrounding fellowship to survive the

shipwreck, there is a new knowing on the other side. There is a new reality beyond the

loss, a transformation in the discovery that life can have new or more meaning after the

shipwreck. There still is grief in the process, but it is a survival full of meaning.[66]

Suffering is a crucial and necessary part of transformation in and through Christ.

The truer reality is that suffering is filled with the *potential* for transformation and

therefore the *potential* for meaning-making. Hardship and trials don't automatically result

in meaningful formation because pain can be denied, medicated, or internalized without

allowing God's Spirit to shape and re-make his children. Suffering is unavoidable, but

options exist for how to engage it and those options have different results.

Andrew Root unpacks the significance of the incarnation, crucifixion, and

resurrection in the context of transformation through suffering. Suffering plays a

significant role in the faith journey and in making meaning because it is a primary way

that God transforms the Christian. This is where a theological understanding of what the

crucifixion means is crucial so that believers can share in Christ's sufferings through their

own suffering. There is no reconciliation or transformation (or meaning) in suffering

without the experience of Jesus' suffering.[67] Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote "What happened

to and in Christ has happened to all of us…. [but] only the crucified human being is at

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[65] Parks, 27.

[66] Ibid., 27-31.

[67] Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: from a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Nashville, TN: IVP Books, 2007), 94-95.

peace with God. In the figure of the crucified, human beings recognize and find themselves."[68] All this is rooted in understanding that in the incarnation Jesus is the second Adam or new man (human).

In addition to understanding the incarnation and crucifixion, the resurrection has great significance for meaning-making as well. Without the resurrection, there would be no remedy for estrangement or possibility for transformation (or meaning). Root asserts, "By suffering the fullness of death as a human and *overcoming it*, Jesus has bent humanity back to God, overcoming and transforming in his own person the penchant for self-determination and self-preservation."[69] Transformation happens as a result of suffering only as resurrection follows crucifixion: transformation by the living resurrected Christ is the purpose, not behavior modification or assimilation into a Christian morality.[70]

A theological understanding of the cross and resurrection informs interpretations of suffering in the world.[71] Creating a theological framework and worldview, or global meaning system, where suffering at least has some place or meaning (even if all specific examples and questions can't be answered) is empowering in the meaning-making process. Every instance of suffering doesn't even have to even make sense for it to be purposeful.

Furthermore, meaning is not an entity separate from other entities; it is derived from them. Thus being transformed by God and experiencing a life-giving relationship

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[68] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 88.

[69] Root, 97. Emphasis added.

[70] Ibid., 100.

[71] Phil. 3:7-11.

with him and others can be the goal, not simply finding meaning. Experiencing the restorative power of the gospel through Christ is central and that in itself is meaningful while also being its own end.[72]

All of this is holistic, not simply spiritual. If anything, the spiritual and theological nature of transformation is all-encompassing. James E. Loder captures the idea that the spiritual component is really the deepest essence of personhood. He articulates, "We do not understand that theological answers are brought in to meet human needs, but it is rather the reverse: human needs get their definition and take the form that they do because they already exhibit a longing for a lost reality that is tacitly presupposed by the anguished struggles of the human spirit to find its original ground."[73] A person's "spirit" is an intrinsic part of what it means to be human.[74] This requires recognition of the spiritual components of all aspects of everyday life and not just associating spirituality with religious practice.

Conclusion

Adolescence is a developmentally-rich period of life regarding all aspects of personhood. No longer a child though not yet an adult, the adolescent has much to grapple with as they journey towards adulthood. There are parallel paths of shaping a unique sense of self (identity) and separating from parents (individuation) yet still

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[72] This would be Act 3 (Redemption) of the biblical narrative. See chapter 2 of this dissertation for a fuller explanation.

[73] James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 195.

[74] Benson and Roehlkepartain, 20. The word *spirit* comes from the Latin *spiritus,* meaning breath expressed with vigor and courage.

needing to maintain meaningful connections with parents and other significant adults (interdependent autonomy).

Due to their growing cognitive capabilities, meaning-making also becomes a significant endeavor for adolescents as they begin to assume more ownership of their life— in particular, their beliefs, values, and practices. The meaning-making venture can be intimidating due to the smorgasbord of worldviews and interpretive lenses readily available to adolescents, which is a reminder that parents and other significant adults need to walk alongside adolescents as they proceed on this developmental path.

The narrative shape of life (i.e. story is a natural way to view and make sense of life) is a logical fit with a narrative approach to scripture in the meaning-making process. Recognizing the Bible as the story of God and his relationship with humanity delivers all the necessary features of the meaning-making framework. Challenges that adolescents deal with in their maturation, such as skepticism and suffering, find a meaningful place within narrative. In the end, the realization comes that this is not simply about a particular domain of development (cognitive, spiritual, etc.) but is about all of life. These narrative lenses are needed for a robust, substantive faith where transformation is experienced and meaning is made.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Introduction

Everyone lives according to a narrative, some story that informs their identity and makes sense of the world, even if they cannot fully articulate it. Life itself actually has a narrative shape to it given that story is a natural way to view and make sense of life. David Loy affirms that *any* understanding of our identity is narrative, and that stories allow us to be meaning-created beings.[1]

This understanding of life merges well with a narrative approach to scripture that embraces the Bible as the storied revelation of God's activity in the world. Narratives are also evident throughout church history as the diverse Church sought to remain faithful to the unifying revelation(s) of God. This is often described as "orthodoxy," as church leaders desired to maintain alignment with Jesus' and apostolic teaching. Currently, postmodernism also values story through its insistence on accepting all competing narratives as marketplace equals. In a sense, this insistence on tolerance is its own big story (metanarrative).

Amidst the cultural context of postmodernism and engaged in the developmental work of individuation and identity formation, many Christian adolescents are embracing one particular narrative: Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD). MTD was coined to describe a commonly held belief in a benign, mostly sidelined God. It is principally a shallow narrative which does little to help adolescents make sense of life, interpret experiences, endure pain and suffering, shape identity, or facilitate transformation. It lacks any

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[1] David Loy, *The World is Made of Stories* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 16, 24.

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consequential meaning and, along with a variety of other factors, has resulted in adolescents deserting the Church and/or their faith when reaching young adulthood.

Instead of seeing God through the lens of MTD, a new reality of God can be offered by embracing the truer and fuller biblical narrative. Recognizing the Bible as the story of God and his relationship with humanity imparts an understanding of life as a whole (global meaning) and facilitates the assimilation of lived experiences (situational meaning) in a meaning-making process. Living in light of and even inside the metanarrative of scripture provides the meaning-making material needed by adolescent Christians.

Recommendations

Meaning-Making Practices for Adolescents

Meaning-making work is not to be undertaken alone just as the adolescent task of individuation is not a solitary endeavor. Adolescents will benefit from the engaged presence of parents and other significant adults who can provide a mentoring community. With this in mind, even the following practices in which adolescents are recommended to engage are better suited with adult participation.

Life Story

Numerous psychologists propose that identity *is* a life story, and that "life stories serve to make sense of one's past, present, and anticipated future."[2] This capacity

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[2] Kate C. McLean, "Late Adolescent Identity Development: Narrative Meaning Making and Memory Telling," *Developmental Psychology* 41, no. 4 (2005): 683, 686. There are various types and purpose of stories, such as self-explanation, entertainment, validation, intimacy, and meaning-seeking.

begins to develop in adolescence and is a critical component of identity development, self-expression, and meaning-making.[3] Adolescents can learn to articulate their life story so as to become more adept at seeing life through a narrative lens. There are various approaches to formulating a life story, but the heart of the practice is learning to see the narrative shape of life.[4]

An adolescent's perspective on a particular event reflects how she or he makes narrative sense of life. Another recommended practice is to intentionally use the narrative(s) of scripture to interpret life experiences.[5] There are numerous narratives in scripture containing personal experiences of suffering, doubt, disillusionment, loss, or frustration.[6] Dan McAdams notes how highly generative adults find redemptive sequences in their life narratives. Redemptive sequences involve "early suffering followed by deliverance to a positive effect;" with outcomes including recovery, growth, learning, improvement, transformation, strength, or greater hope.[7] The overarching narrative of scripture as well as the many stories within it provides a meaningful

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[3] Kate C. McLean and Cade D. Mansfield, "To Reason or Not to Reason: Is Autobiographical Reasoning Always Beneficial?," *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 131 (Spring 2011), 86. Most often this begins developing in late adolescence.

[4] Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, eds., *Turns in the Road: Narrative Studies of Lives in Transition* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 12. Potential scenes in a life story are (in no certain order): 1.High point, 2.Low point, 3.Turning point, 4.Earliest memory, 5.Important childhood scene, 6.Important adolescent scene, 7.Persons/Characters of positive or negative influence, 8.Desired future, 9.Personal beliefs/ideology, 10.Life theme(s).

[5] Parents or other significant adults may need to help in this process, both with identifying narratives in scripture and connecting life experiences with those biblical narratives. See next sections for comments on this.

[6] See life stories of Joseph, David, Solomon, Job, Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul, or Stephen. Read the Psalms for autobiographical expressions of thoughts and feelings in various types of life experiences.

[7] McAdams et. al., 5-25. Everybody has contamination sequences as well when they feel stuck or depressed. A high number of these does not contribute to well-being, sense-making, or generative adults.

interpretive framework for adolescents to make sense of personal experiences and life events.

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection occurs when adolescents reflect on and ask questions about the spiritual traditions, practices, and even content of the faith being passed down to them. Despite the fact that these are often times adopted without much thought, an important task in adolescents owning their faith is to evaluate what is imparted to them. It can be a disruptive process to young people as answers to questions may not come easily or be the answers they are expecting. It also can be disruptive to those around adolescents as they are given freedom to ask unsettling questions, maybe even ones the significant adults around them have not personally asked. Nevertheless, this is necessary for adolescent growth in meaning-making.

More specifically, teens need to be able to ask questions so as to better understand the narrative of their faith traditions or the very story into which they are being invited to live.[8] Most often the practices and traditions that remain are the ones that are wrestled with and examined. If youth neglect this probing process, it becomes more likely that they will neglect ownership of their faith as well.[9]

Adolescents also need to critically reflect on their individual lives. They will certainly need help with this but youth can learn to listen to their lives and the story being

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[8] Almeda M. Wright, "Reflective Youth Ministry: Youth Ministry as Critical, Ongoing, Communal Reflection," in *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 91. Jesus also questioned the religious traditions, social structures, and worship practices of his day. See Matt. 21:12-13, Mark 3:1-6, Luke 2:41-51, Luke 10:25-37, and John 4 for some of these occurrences.

[9] Ibid., 91-92.

told (e.g. God calling them to a vocation through the inner voice of passion, their unique gifts and talents, or the long road of experience). Moments of individual introspection are also necessary for increased awareness, course correction, or re-alignment with God.[10] Moreover, young people can critically reflect on the world around them since the world can be changed and influenced by the collective work of individuals. Critical reflection on the needs of the world, the injustices of social structures, or oppressive narratives can lead to changes in perception as well as taking action.[11] As adolescents better understand and live into God's story, they can begin to participate with God and his interests in the world.

Parents' Collaboration with Adolescents

There is a direct correlation between the level of caring engagement by a parent and the maturing faith of an adolescent. The quality of this communicative bond is even more important than any values or spiritual practices that are merely modeled by the parent. Additionally, it is only when the parent-child relationship is significantly diminished that the influence of peers become more dominant than that of parents.[12]

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[10] Ibid., 93-94.

[11] Ibid., 94-95.

[12] Merton P. Strommen and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing On the Faith: a Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2000), 66, 85, 88-91. Empirical tests reveal that children and adolescents almost unconsciously adopt beliefs and worldviews from their parents when a congenial, warm relationship exists. Additionally, modeling (values-in-action) and verbally sharing (storying their own lives) cultivate a healthy, open dynamic in the home which furthers the positive adolescent formation.

A parent's role in the faith development of a child obviously begins before adolescence. There is much that is caught and taught during pre-school and childhood.[13] The developmental intersection in adolescence though is what is unique. While faith and moral developments are experienced throughout childhood, it is only in adolescence that the cognitive abilities have developed enough so the meaning-making work can be engaged through evaluation of narratives and practices. Adolescence is when the key transfer of ownership and testing of faith can begin, and below are some ways parents can collaborate with adolescents in this meaning-making work.

Parents' Faith Journey

Parents themselves must first view the world through the metanarrative of scripture and understand the Bible as God's and humanity's story—a story which makes claims upon their lives. Episcopal priest, scholar, and author, John Westerhoff, encourages parents to enlarge their grasp of the biblical story, "to learn it more completely, to understand it more deeply, to possess it more personally, and to live it more fully,"[14] so that *their* lives are transformed. Adolescents are better able to make meaning in their faith when it means something to their parents. Therefore, parents need to be maturing in their faith and spirituality as well; they need to be continuing their own

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[13] Larry J. Nelson, "The Role of Parents in the Religious and Spiritual Development of Emerging Adults," in *Emerging Adults Religiousness and Spirituality*, ed. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 61-62.

[14] John H. Westerhoff III, *Bringing up Children in the Christian Faith* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1980), 37, 39. Westerhoff notes how the biblical narrative has meaning on varying levels, that meanings of stories can change at different times of life, and that insights vary depending on the person's needs and experiences.

pilgrimage so that they can live faithfully with their children and have the necessary credibility with their adolescent child.[15]

Intentional Conversations

Second, parents are encouraged to have intentional conversations about faith. This can be done in numerous ways. Parents can simply share a "God sighting"[16] of how they saw God at work in some way that day. They can also speak of their own faith journey, the larger story of how they came to faith in Christ or smaller stories within that journey. Questions are great conversation-starters; parents can ask about something taught at church, how their adolescent's friends at school live out their faith, or a particular question about their teen's faith.[17]

Developing adolescents also need their parents to be a sounding board as they process life experiences, which includes responsive listening. Listeners who are responsive "pay attention, ask questions, contribute to the narrative, and support the telling of a story, although not necessarily the specific content offered by a narrator."[18] Parents can participate in responsive listening by helping to clarify the adolescent's

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[15] Ibid., 71. Chapter 5 of this book admonishes parents to continue and to model an adult pilgrimage of faith.

[16] Dietrich Kirk, *Raising Teens in an Almost Christian World: A Parent's Guide* (Brentwood, TN: Center for Youth Ministry Training, 2012), 58.

[17] Ibid. Each chapter of Kirk's book contains "Conversation Starters" in which questions are asked of teens that require critical thinking and conversation to process an idea. Each chapter also contains ideas called "Tradition Builders" which are ways for parents to pass along a substantial faith to their children.

[18] Monisha Pasupathi and Trisha L. Weeks, "Integrating Self and Experience in Narrative as a Route to Adolescent Identity Construction," *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 131 (Spring 2011): 37.

identity, remember/understand the past, affirm perceptions,[19] re-frame experiences when necessary, or contextualize pieces of the adolescent's story in the larger narrative of scripture.

Adolescents particularly need help processing difficult or painful experiences, especially those that do not seem to fit within their existing global meaning system. Kenda Dean identifies this scenario as a prime opportunity for transformation as adolescents are faced with a disorienting dilemma. This process typically involves four distinct movements:[20] (1) a disorienting dilemma; (2) critical self-reflection on prior assumptions; (3) discourse that puts into words the insights derived from critical reflection; and (4) action.[21]

Disorienting dilemmas are events that "pull the rug out from under us far enough to make our existing cultural toolkits inoperable."[22] These events challenge the existing worldview system and cause disequilibrium. This leads to reflection, an examination of prior assumptions, and an exploration of new options that can resolve or make sense of the discord. The third step is where parents can help in the accommodation of a new experience as they dialogue with their adolescent in the reflection process.[23] Ideally, the

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[19] Ibid., 37-40.

[20] This essentially is an adolescent work in practical theology which usually has four movements or questions in its work: (1) What is going on? (2) Why is it going on? (3) What ought to be going on? (4) How might we respond?

[21] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 171-176.

[22] Ibid., 175.

[23] Parent-adolescent dialogue is more art than science. A parent's voice or interpretation has the potential to be overpowering and actually hinder an adolescent from finding his own voice or interpretation. For a fuller treatment on this concept, see Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, eds., *Turns in the Road: Narrative Studies of Lives in Transition* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 229-248.

adolescent then moves forward with a paradigm shift and new ways of understanding

God, self, and the world (even if some ambiguity is involved).[24]

Kara Powell, Executive Director of the Fuller Youth Institute, offers four very

helpful words for parents to remember. When asked a difficult question to which they are

unprepared to respond, they can answer with "I don't know, but…." There are numerous

ways to complete that phrase which can validate the question being asked, honor the

adolescent asking it, and also model authenticity when not knowing how to respond.[25]

The Church's Collaboration with Adolescents

Socio-cultural developmental theorist Lev Vygotsky describes the crucial support

adults offer developing adolescents. He describes the support as "scaffolding" which

fosters growth and learning. Scaffolding is erected to provide structure and access to an

expanding building; it also is removed at a time when it is no longer needed. So too do

adolescents need an "interlocking network of caring adults" to be a safe and supportive

presence as they learn, grow, doubt, and make meaning in their lives.[26] However, there

are times when adults need to step back and allow adolescents to function more

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[24] Adolescents can also engage this movement through journaling and writing their thoughts/questions/prayers or responding to a pertinent passage of scripture.

[25] Kara Powell, "Can I Ask That? Imagining a Church Big Enough For Teenagers' Big Questions," in *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 232. Some of the ways to complete "I don't know, but…" are: (1) that's an important question (2) let's find out together (3) I wonder that, too (4) who do you think we could ask about that (5) I wonder what stirred up that question, and (6) that questions isn't too big for God.

[26] For a fuller explanation of this part of Vygotsky's theory, see Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstyne King, and Kevin S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), 90-97.

autonomously. Below are a few ways churches can collaborate with adolescents in their meaning-making work.

Teach the Narrative

Churches play a primary role in the worldview development of an adolescent. Numerous studies indicate that religion (as a global and situational meaning system) aids in providing a cohesive sense of identity and addressing existential questions about life purpose and vocation.[27] The overarching story presented, both directly and as an undercurrent to other teaching, shapes young people's global system of meaning. In some ways, this is even more important to teach clearly in student ministries where messages are tailored to the felt needs of students.

With this in mind, Christianity needs to be framed as more than a series of propositions to believe or norms to practice. Neither of these makes sense when removed from the narrative in which they belong. Dietrich Kirk, executive director of the Center for Youth Ministry Training, articulates the importance of clearly teaching this narrative.

> [The biblical narrative] helps us recognize God's activity in Jesus Christ and in us, as Christ calls us to participate in His redemptive work in the world. Our God story tells us who God is, shapes our ability to participate in the Christian community, and provides the means for discerning our call as disciples and for claiming our hope in God's future. … For centuries, two strategies—telling God's story and enacting it—comprised the heart of Christian formation, or catechesis, the "handing on" of a faith tradition from one generation to the next. Churches and families can (and must) help by plunging teenagers into Christianity's peculiar God story, and by inviting young people to take part in practices that embody it.[28]

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[27] William B. Whitney and Pamela E. King, "Religious Congregations and Communities" in *Emerging Adults Religiousness and Spirituality*, eds. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 141.

[28] Kirk, 44.

Church leaders do not have to dive head-long into the narrative theology movement in order to embrace and express the biblical narrative, but it must be taught in order to provide the bigger story for adolescents to live in and understand the world. Not only can the Church help adolescents understand the big story in which they are living, but the Church can also help adolescents discern how the smaller stories within scripture fit into the big story.[29]

Intergenerational Story-telling

Present-day American culture tells stories far less than people in other generations and other cultures, yet stories remain the universal language of all ages.[30] Due to the common practice of separating generations within church ministries, young people often do not know older generations and their stories (and vice versa). However, churches have found remarkable benefit in the intentional fostering of intergenerational relationships and storytelling.[31] Giving adolescents the space to listen to the stories of their elders is a way of chronicling God's on-going story, similar to what was commanded of the Israelites in the Old Testament.[32] Family studies professor, Dr. Holly Catterton Allen, believes that "sharing the biblical narrative and our personal spiritual narratives across

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[29] Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 219. See the following popular-level works for connecting the narratives *within* scripture to the overarching narrative *of* scripture. Robbie Castleman, *The Story of Scripture: The Unfolding Drama of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2008). Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

[30] Allen and Ross, 221-222.

[31] John T. Williams, "If You Build It They Will Come: Using Storytelling as an Intergenerational Bridge" (DMin diss., Wesley Theological Seminary, 2006).

[32] For examples of this biblical command, see Deut. 4:9; 6:6-9; and Josh. 4:21-24.

the generations will form our identity as God's people as perhaps nothing else can do."[33] Adolescents are given a sense of communal identity through these relationships and stories as opposed to an individualized sense of self more common in America.

Thinking and Doubting

Yale Divinity School's Dr. Almeda Wright advocates helping young people becoming critical theologians. She recommends "helping them to become reflective participants in God's kingdom work, even as they are nurtured and welcomed by adults who model critical reflection."[34] Thus, one quality of a congregation that aids the adolescent meaning-making journey is that of a thinking climate.[35] Teaching adolescents to dialogue and think critically will prove invaluable if/when they go away to college. They don't have to be afraid of new questions or feel threatened by other worldviews that make some sense as well.

The previous chapter of this dissertation explained the significant and oftentimes necessary role that doubt can have in the meaning-making process. Christ-centered communities (churches as well as para-church ministries and schools) need to create space for adolescents to ask questions and experience sincere doubt. In many cases, college students and young adults who leave the faith and/or the Church had questions beginning in early adolescence (12-14 years old) which were ignored or only answered

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[33] Allen and Ross, 225. Appendix A of their book has forty ideas for bringing generations together in the church, including prompts for intergenerational story-telling.

[34] Wright, 85.

[35] Strommen, 158.

superficially.[36] When teenagers are given "stock, inadequate, or even dismissive answers to complex or difficult questions, they learn that faith is best lived by ignoring the uncomfortable."[37] Making space means avoiding superficial answers and sometimes not offering answers at all but providing a safe place to doubt. Teenagers often long for someone to just listen to them without telling them what to think or do. This can take place in the context of small groups, mentoring relationships, and even large group activities where teens are allowed to write down questions at the end of a teaching session.

Another reflective activity creating this sacred space to doubt empowers teens to write a "Statement of Doubt" (instead of a "Statement of Faith"). This encourages students to openly share where they are on their faith journey instead of feeling they need to hide as so often happens in Christian communities.[38] Teens are given permission to question the narratives, beliefs, or practices of the Bible, the Church, or their denomination. Unsurprisingly, adults need to sympathetically walk alongside teens in this activity.

A strong asset in making room for doubt is the book of Psalms. In addition to the psalms of praise and thanksgiving, there are many psalms of lament that ask questions, express darker emotions, and plead for help from God. Sadness, anger, frustration, doubt, and disappointment weave reality into the fabric of faith and normalize these pieces of

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[36] Derek Melleby, *Understanding Teens After High School: Timothy Clydesdale Interview* (Center for Parent/Youth Understanding, 2012), accessed December 27, 2016, http://www.collegetransitioninitiative.com/files/2012/10/cti_clydesdale.pdf.

[37] Powell, 221.

[38] Ibid., 229.

our stories. These types of psalms can also reveal that answers may not be everything and that God can handle any emotion or question.[39]

Limitations and Further Research

While the application of narrative theology to address the lack of meaning in adolescent faith is a specific recommendation, there are many other factors relevant to this issue. Faith development that occurs during childhood is foundational to the adolescent work of meaning-making and was not addressed in this dissertation. A plethora of literature has been written about the importance of and approaches to childhood faith formation. It is also acknowledged that a narrative approach to life and scripture is not the only important component in meaningful faith development. This is primarily a cognitive approach and doesn't directly address the affective or behavioral components of adolescent spirituality.

Furthermore, there are many nuances of parental and church obligations in the transference of faith and spirituality to adolescents. Parenting styles and the quality of parent-child relationships form the greater context in which parents guide the faith development of their child and cannot be divorced from outcomes in adolescence and young adulthood. Factors such as parental warmth, acceptance of a child, and the level of coercion in which beliefs and practices are passed down can matter as much as the beliefs

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[39] Ibid., 229-230. Songs or times of silent lament can be included in corporate worship. Adolescents can also be encouraged to write their own psalm of lament while in a season of disorientation or doubt.

and practices themselves.[40] Potential differences may also exist between adolescent males and females in regard to engagement in meaning-making work along with openness to parental involvement in their faith maturation.

Considerations were not given to other influences such as denomination, geographical location, culture, theology, or practices of churches. In addition to the recommendations for churches given above, assumptions are made that the church in which an adolescent participates is not fostering negative experiences and perceptions like the churches mentioned in chapter one.[41]

<div align="center">Concluding Remarks</div>

The vignette about Marcus in chapter one presents a Christian adolescent who participated in church events yet did not participate in the work of meaning-making. He had a Christian family, engaged in a form of spirituality, and was involved in church activities yet still failed to construct sufficient meaning in his faith during adolescence which eventually resulted in abandoning his faith. The vignette about Kevin showed his struggle to find any meaning in the Christian faith beyond God's problem-solving help or ticket to heaven after death. He was unable to build a bridge from his vague belief system to the purpose and everyday experiences of life.

Adolescents *must* construct meaning in their faith if it is to remain after their transition to young adulthood. Current trends of the young adult exodus from the Church

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[40] Larry J. Nelson, "The Role of Parents in the Religious and Spiritual Development of Emerging Adults" in *Emerging Adults Religiousness and Spirituality*, ed. Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 65.

[41] Some of the negative attitudes and stereotypes about the Church which were introduced in chapter 1 are: hypocritical, political, judgmental, overprotective, superficial, exclusive, anti-science, and doubtless.

can be curtailed if adolescents are given a story in which to live that makes sense of their world. There is no greater story than the one made known through the pages of scripture. It is a narrative that explains humanity as whole and gives meaning to lives in particular. Developmentally-ripe adolescents can begin to recognize the narrative shape of their lives as well as discern the larger narrative of life through the Bible's metanarrative.

It is fair to say that life and faith will never fully be figured out nor will all questions be answered. Almeda Wright reminds us that "knowing fully who God is and what God is calling us to in every situation would be lovely, but that is not the case and has never been the case in the history of Christianity."[42] Nevertheless, churches, parents, and other significant adults can walk alongside adolescents in their journey to help them make narrative sense of their faith and lives to whatever extent possible. The biblical story certainly permits questions, doubt, and ambiguity. Even better than that, the biblical story empowers significant meaning-making for Christian adolescents.

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[42] Wright, 90. Adults may be comfortable living with ambiguity and unanswered questions, but few adolescents are since they are at a different stage of faith development.

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