



# The Way of Jesus: Adolescent Development as Christological Process

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**I**t was Thursday night at workcamp. Nearing the end of a long week of service, the evening program offered a presentation of Jesus' death and resurrection in the form of Stations of the Cross. The stations were designed to help these adolescents and their adult leaders connect their own life experiences with central events of the crucifixion.

There were dice, so that students could throw them as the soldiers did at the foot of the cross. Like the soldiers unable to see the Son of God hanging above them, these students were invited to ponder all that distracts them from seeing Jesus in their daily lives. At another station, 400 workcampers were invited to use red paint and their finger to write their name under the words "Remember Me," as the thief on Jesus' side had once implored Jesus. A sea of adolescents populated the site throughout the evening: sitting, writing and praying. At the end of the evening, the newsprint was filled from side to side and top to bottom with names, and a single sentence gratefully scrawled in the midst of the Robs, Sarahs, Emilys, and Jasons: "You already know my name."

In a culture rife with both concern for, as well as myths about young people, what do we know about the kind of faith given expression here? How is such faith exemplified in the day-to-day life of a teenager? Does committed Christian faith actually change the look of adolescent development? How could this kind of faith—faith that finds identity in the saving act of Jesus—actually shape and define our understanding of the process of faith formation.

In contrast, both the church and the youth serving community spend much of their energy and attention in the study of troubled adolescents. In fact, the way that many adults view adolescence in general is, well, ominous. Listen to the conversations among parents around you, and the fearful ways they negatively anticipate their child's move into this life phase. Listen to what they believe about adolescence—"it will be difficult, and we need to let them *go off* to find themselves." There remains a marked emphasis in American culture on adolescence as a period of crisis, focused on the individual's solo quest for identity. Unfortunately, adolescent faith development has often been viewed through that hands-off lens.

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However, could such notions in fact be a self-fulfilling prophesy? What if Christian churches could help the rest of American society begin to see adolescence through a different set of lenses. For example, a recent article in *Psychology Today* listing the “ten worst ideas in the history of psychology,” described “adolescent angst” as an example of the one of the worst ideas still needing to be exposed. Built on a “faulty biological theory,” the struggles of adolescence are not only far from inevitable, but are actually non-existent in many other cultures. There is also documented concern that the misrepresentation of this period of life is the basis for both therapy and the juvenile justice system, and has actually resulted in greater problems for the growth of young people than ever seen before.<sup>1</sup>

It is striking to note that even Christian youth ministers often talk about adolescents with similar fear and negativity. Even these adults who are willing to take on the challenges of leadership in the church on behalf of young people too often believe that they are to step back and expect problems. In fact, much youth ministry literature describes adolescence only in light of psychological theories.

While developmental psychology has been very helpful in its capacity to focus ministry on the specific needs and tasks of an age group, the conversation in youth ministry often engages adolescent development as human development only: identity, individuation, and identity foreclosure versus identity moratorium. Spiritual development is generally discussed only as a layer of application of Erik Erikson’s or Robert Kegan’s developmental schema, rather than the church claiming the developmental task in any age as created by God. Kenda Dean of Princeton Seminary points out, “Erikson’s work has influenced Protestant theology, practical theology in particular, more than any other developmental theorist.” (Dean, 12)

One could also argue that perhaps Erikson has influenced ministry with young people more than any theologian as well.

Further, because we begin by thinking about ministry with adolescents based on developmental theory, do we see their faith as somehow “less than” and “not yet” because stages theories necessarily relegate children and youth to lower levels of cognition? Beyond mere social structures that divide adolescents and adults, adolescent faith is viewed as developmentally inadequate and immature faith. Young people are sidelined in the church not just for their lack of faith, but also for the kind of faith they have.

Not only has adolescence left youth alone, but has it robbed the church of one of its spiritual resources: the fervent faith of young people. Adolescents are no longer encouraged to be in the midst of the community—their faith potentially moving adults to remember and re-connect with their own spiritual journeys, but are relegated to the couches of the youth room. Despite the post-modern questions about the validity and applicability of developmental stages, those who work with youth often carry heavy cultural and psychological images of adolescence and look through those fairly limited—even negative lenses at those they serve.<sup>2</sup> Further, when such stage frameworks are reinforced by those who work with youth, we infuse our already heavily age-segmented ecclesiologies with an underlying concept that inherently limits the church’s ability to see young people as full members of the body of Christ.

While the landmark National Study of Youth and Religion (*Soul Searching*, 2005) provided some data on what they identified as “devoted” youth, these young people were described primarily by the sociological factors shaping them and their religious life such as parent religiosity, relationship with parents, parental marital status, parental education, organized activities, religious tradition, higher desired attendance, close friends, peer influences, gender, and race. The study identified these 8 percent of “devoted” young people as exhibiting qualitatively different faith than did the majority of adolescents who consented to be interviewed. (Smith, 110) However, the NYSR study was not able to examine the nature of this “devoted” adolescent faith or the potential developmental gains produced by adolescent spirituality.

## Church History Tells a Different Story

By contrast, the historical reality is that renewal movements in the church often began as youth revivals, marked by a depth of faith not accounted for in developmental theory. In a recent lecture, historian Douglas Strong pointed to the importance of adolescent faith, not just for adolescents who find themselves in it, but also for the church as a whole. “What has been little noticed is that, throughout American religious history, church renewal and spiritual revitalization have come by way of youth. Youth are also the ones who led the way to a spiritually revived and regenerated church.” (Strong,

83) This reality has gotten lost in the shuffle, but according to Strong, “in the Great Awakening of the 1730’s and 1740’s, the importance of young converts has not been sufficiently mentioned in historical accounts of the period, although it is a prominent theme in the primary documents” (Strong, 84). Strong’s historical corrective provides a stark contrast to the current expectations of the role of adolescents in the life of the church.

Alongside the recent groundbreaking global study of spiritual development by the Search Institute, there has been recent psychological acknowledgement of the role of the spiritual in the human developmental process.

Systematic collection and analysis of such narratives as well as refined interview techniques that permit respectful dialogues with young children consistently support the understanding that children do have religious or spiritual experiences and that such experiences are not just due to the influence of a specific type of nurture to which they were exposed in their families. Rather the ways in which children experience their social and natural environment seem to imply something like a transcendent overtone or dimension. (Schweitzer, 93)

## It All Depends on Where You Begin

Has a predominantly psychological approach to adolescent development in fact limited our theology? Can we declare and teach the transforming work and person of Jesus Christ as Savior when we continue to talk about development as a separate biological and psychological process from spiritual growth? Do we as Christians actually claim the biblical assertion: “But to all who receive him, who believe in his name have the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13, ESV).

Youth ministry, by embracing a predominantly psychological developmental approach to adolescence, minimizes the theological nature of human life. But what if those who nurture faith development in young people were to claim the notion that the various phases of the human life cycle could be a “sign,” as in the Gospel of John, each pointing us to experience unique aspects of God’s

nature, and the way of Jesus.<sup>23</sup> If so, along with observing and working a theological frame for each life phase, what if the church were to claim development itself as a process of God, progressively revealing to us God’s nature and being, as we are biologically and psychologically most receptive to comprehending and taking them in?

This is a very different picture of development. As Christians, we can see development as a gift given by God for the purpose of drawing us nearer to God, not just a biological or psychological stage. It could be that each stage provides us with unique learning about the nature of God—to be absorbed and integrated into our very selves and faith as well as providing the momentum for psychological growth.

## A Study of Committed Christian Adolescents

This article reports on research with young people designed to explore and test out the notion that persons in any phase of life are actually engaged in experiencing and exploring discrete aspects of the nature of God. In order to see the validity of a theological framework in action in the adolescent life phase, one would have to listen to young people who are committed Christians. Will adolescents of committed faith point to the theological emphases of adolescent development, and could the church actually use theology—specific theological themes reflecting various aspects of the nature of God—to explore the content of development?

Lutheran theology was chosen as the initial framework for adolescent theological themes, due to Luther’s focus on the work of God in everyday life, and because of the historical twist that took place in the Reformation’s concentration on the self in relationship to God. Luther focused his writing in a pastoral direction: on the living faith of real people. All these factors resonate well with what we do know about adolescents.

Three Lutheran theological themes were chosen to ground this look at adolescent development from a theological perspective: *simul justus et peccator* or the Christian is always at the same time saint and sinner; justifying faith as knowing, trusting, and affirming; and the *larvae Dei* or the masks of God. It was hoped that these descriptive themes about the nature of God and humans in relationship to God would find

expression in conversations with adolescents about their faith.

The churches identified and studied in “The Study of Exemplary Congregations with Youth Ministry” (EYM) provided a controlled sample of young people. Youth leaders from several of these congregations whose young people had scored higher on a measure of Mature Christian Faith were contacted for the names of some of their most committed youth.<sup>4</sup> This study consisted of conducting in-depth interviews with twelve adolescents from four EYM churches. In addition, a dozen other students at Christian high schools in two focus groups were interviewed to triangulate the data. There was a complete qualitative theme analysis of the interviews.

These twelve disciples were all from small town mid-sized or suburban churches of a variety of denominational affiliations.<sup>5</sup> They had all been a part of churches for their entire lives, and they all reported parents who were faithful Christians. Although there were wide individual variations in the faith experiences of these twelve disciples, the content of their conversations about faith—what was naturally on their mind—their “faith energy”—was remarkably similar.<sup>6</sup> The results of this qualitative study of committed Christian adolescents showed them engaged in a significant Christological process, deeply identifying with the identity and work of Jesus.

## The Study Results

After the interviews were processed they were analyzed to hear common themes. The primary one was: *Faith is a living relationship with Jesus*. There were several ideas that clustered together to create this theme, but it was by far the most concentrated topic of their conversations. Luther’s theme of justifying faith as knowing, trusting and affirming (all relational attributes, according to Luther was the most prominent topic of their conversation. These were hands down, the expressions of a newly re-defined relationship with God for all twelve of these adolescents. Several said: “When I was younger, I knew *about* God. Now I know *God* because I know what Jesus did for me.” Expressed in a variety of ways, the concept of a newly shaped relationship with Jesus is the single most significant theme to emerge from the interview data. These twelve disciples affirmed this theme as the most important part of what they knew about God, and distinct from how they may have understood God before. This is how some of them talked about it:

Carrie: *I was a baby Christian then. Back then, I got the concepts like Jesus died on the cross to save our sins, but that was about it. Now I understand more about who God is as a person. I’ve grown more to understand him. I’ve gotten to know him.*

Lindsay: *After becoming a part of Trinity, we have our youth classes for the juniors and we’d hear talks from the youth leaders, and you would listen to those, and be like, wow, that really does make sense. and I went to a few Christian camps too. Sixth grade I went to a horseback riding camp, and I really didn’t understand the whole relationship thing quite well yet. And in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I went to camp for teenagers. It was through a group we have in our town and I went to camp, and that was just a really good time to get away from everything in this world and focus on God. It just kind of helped me to figure out what it means to have a relationship with God.*

## Not Just Any Relationship

While each of the twelve talked about knowing God relationally, all of them also reflected a remarkably intimate relationship. Even more, their experiences with God had all generated an expectation of a level of intimacy with God that was noteworthy and even astonishing. All the different ways that they talked about this is certainly another facet of adolescent faith Here is some of their testimony about the shape of that bond:

Adam: *He put it in words that I understood for the first time, and something just clicked, that you have to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I’d never heard that before. I am sure I had heard it, but that was the first time that I heard it and understood it. Right there, while he was doing the invitation I never raised my hand, I was pretty shy, especially in middle school I was pretty insecure, I never liked going in front of people, but I accepted Christ right there in my seat. I started crying and stuff, I prayed. I wanted this relationship that he was talking about, and I want to go to heaven, I want to be a better person, he definitely poured his Holy Spirit into me right then and there. It was an instantaneous thing.*

Alicia: *I love spending time with him, I love doing my quiet times. I love praying, I’m not that good at*

it, I don't always remember to, but it makes me feel a lot better.

Ruth: So there have been times when I am like, "Lord, I know what I need to do, I just can't do it. I need your strength so I can focus on it." So that constant communication with God is a perpetual encouragement, and so it's also the way that you keep that line open. God talks to you even when you don't ask him for things. So I'll be walking down the hall, and he'll be like, "Ahem, that person over there." So prayer is just a constant thing.

Lindsay: At first I thought God was just the one who sat above and just watched us, but the whole relationship thing is like having him here with you. He's here to be with you and he's feeling all the emotions that you are at the same time, and he's like your best friend and he's the person who's going to understand you the best, better than you know yourself, and he's just really important to have as a friend, and he's like your livelihood in a way, because he's the one who can breathe life into you when you don't feel like you have any.

## Faith as Transformation

Not only did these young people talk about their newly re-shaped relationship with Jesus, but they also talked about that relationship as transformational in its very essence. They celebrated the ways that faith had driven and focused their psychological growth.

Adam: It's kind like a voice just up there in my head and over a gradual period of time, I began to humble myself extremely. I'd constantly humiliate myself in public, so you know; I'd have a humbling process every now and then, just right then and there. Over a gradual period of time, your cockiness level just drops, I know mine did, because I was a pretty cocky kid, and it was just about until about two years ago that I really had a huge attitude change in the way that I'd carry myself. so that's another huge change in my life is the humility factor. It's still something that I work towards every day, because you can never be too humble. Jesus said that the humble would inherit the earth.

When asked, "Are there parts of what you know of the Christian story that you connect with particularly?" Adam responded with:

Probably Jesus not being accepted. Just because of where I am spiritually. I'm not included in too much socially, because of that. Because people see me as... They know I'm cool and everything, especially the people that I work with, we've got great relationships, but they know I'm not going to do anything if I go to parties, and they don't want just this corpse sitting around, not doing anything, and plus I don't really like going to anything like that, because there is no reason for me to expose myself to that, or to just go if you're not going to do anything, its just pointless, you shouldn't do anything, I'm kinda sounding bad right now. I think its definitely he wasn't accepted, and that he would set aside all of his powers and resist urges to flex his muscles and show off, and that kinda gets me, and that I can relate with.

Ruth: And so when I get back this year, our school is blessed again with an eclectic bunch, and while you wish you wouldn't have some of the diversity, regardless of personality, I try to remember that Jesus was the God of the outcast, and it reminds me that I need to try to love this person, and just not hating them would be a step in the right direction, and I've really been trying to work on that in living out my faith.

Eliza: A Christian is to me a person who believes that Christ is the Son of God, and actively tries to become more Christ-like. Being a Christian is unique, because you are not searching for Nirvana or enlightenment, you are searching to become more like Christ. My tendencies are not towards Christ, which makes it a lot harder, but as a Christian you are trying to develop that meekness of spirit and that passion for others that allows you to be there for your brothers, and stand against the grain. All those qualities that Christ possessed.

Here's how Kenda Dean has theorized about what these disciples described:

Our identities take shape in relationships that mirror back to us "who we are" and the kind of person we are becoming, but not just any relationship will do. Ultimately identity requires the self-confirming presence of reliable love.....and when we do find it, this authentic love reorders our view of the world and our place in it. (Dean, 55-56)

In contrast to the limits of an exclusively psychological adolescent search for identity, our theological frames have long accounted for such development in the life of the believer. “A central point of patristic Christology was that God became man, took flesh in order to redeem humanity to a new human nature in Christ” (Newlands, 108). While Christian practitioners and youth ministry leaders have called again and again over the last half century for baptismal identity to have a voice in the how we minister with adolescents, this data would in fact suggest that faithful adolescents are very much interested in seeing identity as unfolding from their newfound relationship with Jesus.

## Adolescence as Christological Exploration

Of the theme used as a theological frame for this study, Luther’s “justifying faith as knowing, affirming, trusting” was clearly the unique theological expression that claimed the focus of adolescent faith energy.

“I am my faith.” (Julie)  
“I am a Christian.” (Mark)

Luther wrote that justifying faith has three areas of activity: knowing, affirming, and trusting. In exploring these three aspects of faith, we can further understand the remarkably Christological nature of adolescent development. The amount of “faith energy” displayed by these adolescents around these three activities was the central finding in the theme analysis. Their faith journey at this point is remarkably wrapped up in allowing these notions about what faith *is* and *does* unfold into reality in their lives.

The reason, Luther asserts that people don’t believe faith justifies is “because they don’t know what faith is” (McGrath, 111). Luther used the term “justifying faith as knowing, trusting and affirming” to describe the kind of relational faith that these twelve adolescents were so excited to have received. This phrase does not automatically translate for contemporary ears, but allow the description that follows and the words of the twelve committed Christians to identify important aspects of a Christ-centered focus in faith development.

## Beginning with Knowing

A historically significant part of Luther’s theological breakthrough came in the way that Luther approached Jesus Christ. Luther’s focus on justifying faith led the way for a discovery of history, of the self, and provided a fresh Christological language:<sup>7</sup>

... first of all from the standpoint of life-experience: First Luther’s own, and then that of the believer. We know Christ only as we know what he has done for us—hence the work is key to understanding the person. Faith in him is not mere intellectual assent, but the thankful, confident, trusting response of one’s whole self to God’s live in the midst of our won estrangement and pain. (Houlen, 581)

These adolescents talked about their relationship with Jesus as the significant appreciation to emerge from their varied recent experiences of God. They expressed new understanding of the reality that God loved them and that they now know Jesus. Their Christology is also apparent in how frequently they expressed, “God speaks to me.” Even though they had all grown up in the church, if they understood and experienced that Jesus had died “for me,” it was not real before for many of them prior to this. This is just the kind of personal knowledge of Christ that Luther described.

*Adam: He [the speaker] put it in words that I understood for the first time, and something just clicked, that you have to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I’d never heard that before. I am sure I had heard it, but that was the first time that I heard it and understood it.*

*Lauren: For me, when I was younger, having God was just an abstract concept, and it wasn’t really that real. It was just kind of like how we dream about talking horses or something like that when we were younger. It was just something that just really didn’t make sense. And as I said, I wasn’t a big fan of going to church, and pretty much the only reason I would go is to socialize with my friends. And then when I moved and I realized that I don’t have my friends, its just me alone, and I realized that there was just something missing in my heart, and I felt really incomplete, and then heard about God, well I had heard about him before, but I heard what he was trying to get me to*

*hear for a really long time and now its kind of like he's always there when I am down.*

Biblical scholar, Richard Peace wrote at length about this phenomenon. He noted that Christians have often shied away from acknowledging the importance of faith that knows that God has come “for me” as a distinct step in the process of faith.<sup>8</sup> Not only can adolescence be an exploration of new personal information about God, but for these twelve, that “for me” relationship has been incorporated into their self-understanding, and shaped (even become) their very identity. Julie said:

*Just who I am has a lot to do with my faith. I'm pretty conservative. I'm against a lot of things, like sex before marriage and drinking, and lot of that makes up my faith, and my values and that's just who I am. My faith is just who I am pretty much. My faith is just so much a part of who I am that it's me.*

The analysis of the interviews indicates several ways that this new understanding developed: several talked about a gradual opening of their eyes, some experienced a type of Damascus road experience either in the context of a church event or a negative life experience. Eleven of the twelve pointed toward an established pattern of personal prayer and engagement with Scripture that appears to have provided additional depth to their connection with God. However, this relationship with God: knowing that Jesus died “for me” is the lens that these adolescents now use to view themselves and the world. This is a critical part of their functional Christology and is at the center of their identity formation. “For me” means *I am* the work of Jesus.”

## Moving from Knowing to Affirming

The second move in Luther's description of faith is from knowing to affirming. Luther described affirming as “Faith that is not just about believing that something is true. It is being prepared to act on that belief and rely on it” (McGrath, 112).

In the interviews with these twelve disciples, adolescence is not as much about the right date for the prom as it is about how these newfound theological insights play out in the way that they live. They show remarkable interest in seeing the world as the setting for living out their faith.

The twelve talked about some aspect of this frequently in themes that focused on “Faith is living it,” and “Faith makes moral choices.” They displayed a profound engagement with this piece of a newfound Christological understanding. The following quotation from Travis deserves repeating, because it so deeply expresses the power and centrality of a public affirmation of faith in life experience:

*He (Travis' youth minister) helped me and it showed me that out of the parts of my life, that's where I found comfort, and the people from my secular life, they just like ignore it after a few minutes, and like it says in Matthew 5:12, Blessed are those who are persecuted for me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, more than just being Christian, I've had an experience where I've been persecuted, and God's proud of me, and it wasn't so much “poor me” any more, it was like, “I stood up for you” and “I'm going to keep on going because I'm a disciple,” not that anything ever goes wrong, and to have a big big challenge was important for me and to overcome that.*

For Travis, faith also became real in his witness of “living it” despite the negative social consequences. In addition the desire expressed by several of the twelve to have a community of faith that is about “accountability” is another facet of this affirming faith.

## Moving from Affirming to Trusting

Finally, for Luther, faith is “being prepared to put one's trust in the promises of God, and in the integrity of the God who made those promises” (McGrath, 88). This facet of faith as learning to trust, and focusing considerable energy on the nature of the one in whom trust is placed was repeated by these students again and again throughout the interviews. The frequency of these comments confirmed a new understanding of the very nature of the one who can be trusted: God was described as “best friend, father, counselor, always there, love.” In addition the interviews reflected numerous instances where these adolescents built conversation around learning to let go and trust this God who can be trusted.

*Julie: I don't know, when something is getting me down, or I am stressed out, I can just be like, “Okay, just chill out, God is with you.” You can realize that, God is with you it will all be okay.*

Amanda: *Everyone always says that your parents will always be there for you, but I really have to contradict that, I really don't think that they are always going to be there for you, there are times when my parents aren't there for me, and there's only one person I can go to, its not my friends its not my boyfriend, its not my family, its God and he's the only one who's always going to be there for me, and he's the only one who's going to love me no matter, what, and sometimes, its hard to accept the choice he makes, but then you have to know that he sees the bigger picture of things, no matter what I'm doing.*

*I've never been one to trust people, I'm so skeptical, beyond you're imagination, because of my past, I'm used to people judging me, so I have to judge them before, I've got to stop them, I'm trying to get over that, but it's been very hard for me learn to trust God, because I've always shut out people, I would never let anyone get close to me, I'm always afraid they are going to hurt me or judge me, so I judge them first, which is very wrong, but learning to trust God, I think accepting myself was a big part of learning to trust God. And that was the next step in my faith. I had to get over that one boundary, I had to trust God, I had to give everything to him, I was not giving God everything, I was giving him my prayers, that's about it. If you can give up your biggest fear to God, that's when you really trust him. That's when you really let God take over you life, and that's when he's in charge of everything you do, and that's when you take that step of faith, and you put your most fearful thing in him that's how it should be.*

All of the students applied the commitment to trust God consistently and directly as they face change and the future. Ruth used it as one more thing that she needed to tell before her interview ended:

*Actually my favorite passage in the Bible is Psalm 91, that whole thing of God's protection. That is one thing that is constantly coming back to me. That God is always there to protect us. Even when you are in the pit of the viper, he will protect you, and that is one thing that has just pervaded my live and faith, that I really have nothing to fear. God is always there, and he will never fail me even though fail myself, and I fail him. I really don't have to worry about it. I think it always comes back to the point where when I think of the Psalms, and know*

*that he's done it before. Even though my life is perfectly unique, God has sculpted it, and God knows what's going to happen.*

This is not assent to an abstract set of doctrines. Rather, according to Luther, it is like a "wedding ring" pointing to mutual commitment and union between Christ and the believer. It is the response of the whole person of the believer to God, which in turn leads to the real and personal presence of Christ in the believer. (McGrath, 100)

This aspect of Luther's description of faith as "union with Christ" parallels the Orthodox understanding of "theosis" (God's presence in us). It is a fascinating counterbalance to the focus on forensic justification that post-reformation justification theology emphasized. Luther believed that "Christ is really and personally ("ontically") present in the believer in faith, and that the believer in turn really (ontically) participates by faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ" (Braaten and Jenson, 78). Christ as *ontologically* present in faith means real participation in God. This theological expression finds expression in the functional Christology that characterizes the faith expression of these adolescents.

In fact, Travis described this aspect of justifying faith as:

*I can laugh about it, because it's part of who I am, and faith isn't like separate parts of my life, my life is constantly like, pray at this time, and don't pray at this time, my life is constantly like, "God what do you want me doing right now?"*

*But just that everything I think and everything that I do is God centered, as opposed to before when it was just a part, and now it's all of it.*

These twelve were able to articulate how their new insights about God moved them developmentally. They went on to declare the many ways this new knowledge of God has created change in them. When these three aspects of the nature of justifying faith are viewed all together, one wonders if this new Christological exploration is actually what drives further self-understanding and development. For them, "faith unites the believer to Christ; I get what is Christ's" (McGrath, 111).



# Implications

In churches, where we often provide ministry driven by our fears of losing youth, a greater question needs to be asked. What if youth stay, and we never let the uninhibited, unencumbered power of their newly formed or re-formed relationships with Jesus shape and remind adults? The results of this study have implications for the faith formation, for youth ministry in churches, and for the very ways that we as Christians think about the process of human development.

## Claiming a Full Christology

“You already know me name.” If young people can talk about a relationship with Jesus that shapes their very selves, transforms them, and allows them to move from a focus on self to the ability to genuinely care for others, then can Christians also claim faith in a Savior who does no less? Can Christians talk in very real terms about what it means to see development as a function of relationship with our Creator? Does our Christology suffer from our desire to claim the therapeutic culture of growth toward the psychological goal of wholeness? Like it or not, adolescence is the most recognized (and studied) of all the developmental stages. The results of this study would indicate once again that the faith of young people can and should lead us.

The fact that there was minimal conversation by these adolescents around Luther’s theological notion of “at the same time saint and sinner” could also indicate that young people are engaged in this Christological focus to the exclusion of other understanding about the nature of God. These are theological ideas that we likely absorb into our selves in other phases of life.

## Re-Claiming Adolescence

While developmental theorists like Erikson, Piaget, Kegan, and Fowler all need to be part of the conversation about working with persons of different ages, this research points to the value of Christians claiming a theological framework for development, and that development is by its very nature about the human in relationship with God, and not just all about us. This insight also provides important tools for shaping ministry in the church.

One of the goals of this project is help parents see their adolescents through the lens of an active God, rather than a lens of fear. Those working with youth are often stymied by how little even church-attending parents realize about their importance in the process of faith formation and their children.

There is a great need to help parents normalize and expect the behaviors that are the signs of Christian commitment as a part of development. Many parents spend their energy during these years focused on fear and keeping their children busy. This kind of committed faith in adolescence simply amazes adults, but it doesn’t need to. If the adolescent life phase is all about God’s calling young people into a reshaped relationship, and if that moves their child into empathy and a sense of the needs of others, parents need help looking for and affirming *this*, not rebellion.

This will mean supporting parents to encourage their own development. As a result of this study, helping to sustain parents in supporting the faith of their adolescents to new levels of commitment should be an important focus for youth ministry. There are several important understandings to teach parents about adolescent faith based on this study:

1. We can’t take adolescents seriously unless we take religious *experience* seriously.
2. Help your children pay attention to all the ways that they are seeing God come to them.
3. Never underestimate the power you are having on the faith of your kids.
4. See the other sirens in their lives as just that. Look for and affirm the ways that adolescents may be connecting with God in spite of themselves.
5. Don’t be embarrassed about the cost of discipleship.
6. Help expose them to the great needs of others in the world. It will aid in their development.
7. Allow their faith to lead you. They have a lot to teach you about loving God at this time of their lives.
8. Anticipate changes in the “faith energy” of your child, as his or her faith develops.
9. Let your adolescent’s faith expressions teach you about how God is working in the world.

Could it be that part of the reason that adolescence has become such a turbulent and elongated process in our culture, is because we are not looking for, encouraging, or accompanying this

kind of transforming activity of God in the lives of young people?

## Re-Claiming Adolescents

The practice of hearing and telling faith stories is a tool for youth ministry, and for the work of helping the faith of young people shape the entire congregation.<sup>9</sup> No one had ever asked these twelve disciples to tell their stories before. Adults working with youth can and should build ministry around the questions that will draw young people (and people of all ages in their churches) into reflecting on and telling the story of God's action in their lives. It is in reflection on faith stories that we gain a picture of development that is God's creative action and gift in the lives of adolescents. It is in sharing those stories that we build real faith communities. For those from churches with a history of testimony, exploring faith stories with people of all ages will help re-claim that history with a new purpose.

Finally, the more we teach stage theories, the more we will continue to relegate adolescents to a "less than" role in the church. A theologically-driven developmental framework allows every portion of the life cycle to be an exploration of the various aspects of the nature of God and allows each part of human life and experience to be equal and valuable. The exploration of specific God-themes that are "signs" pointing to Jesus in childhood become no less important to the whole church than the unique foci of "faith-energy" of old age. We can genuinely be different but equal. We are all exploring the nature of God. We can remind one another what we might have forgotten about how God works. We can encourage ecclesiologies based on the appreciation for the theological strengths of each age, rather than on the limitations of stages. Development can become the way of Jesus.

Until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. (Ephesians 4: 13-15, ESV)

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Epstein, Robert. "The Loose Screw Awards: the Ten Worst Ideas in Psychotherapy." *Psychology Today*, Jan/Feb, 2005. P. 58-62.
- <sup>2</sup> These questions are the primary thrust of Fredrick Schweitzer's book *The Postmodern Life Cycle* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> Trokan, John, "Stages of the Marital and Family Life Cycle: Marital Miracles." *Pastoral Psychology*, 46(4), 281-295. I was first exposed to the idea of life as pointing to God in this article by John Trokan. Trokan uses the frame of the family life cycle from Family Systems theory and believes that each stage of life offers varied opportunities for encountering God's revealed presence. He encourages perceiving the growth demanded by each stage in the life cycle not just as hurdle to be mastered but rather as "the work of the Spirit to cultivate love." He asks if the phases of a family's life aren't designed by God to point us to various aspects of God's very nature. "There are those who hope for physical wonder within their life transitions, but fail to perceive the faith-relational invitation of these events and stages." I wondered if that idea could be equally applicable to the human life cycle. One ideological value is the way that such a framework frees us from the greater than/less than and questionable end goals of stage frameworks.
- <sup>4</sup> The Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry (EYM) study was done by representatives of seven denominations under the auspices of a Lilly grant, and was completed in 2003. It sought to identify the characteristics of congregations whose young people scored higher on levels of mature Christian faith.
- <sup>5</sup> The EYM Study sought to identify exemplary youth ministry practices in churches from seven quite different denominations: Lutheran, Southern Baptist, Assemblies of God, Presbyterian, Methodist, Roman Catholic, and Covenant.
- <sup>6</sup> I use the term "faith energy" to describe what these twelve adolescents talked about the most frequently and freely.
- <sup>7</sup> Luther scholars trace his having been immersed in nominalism as a philosophical frame during Luther's years at Erfurt. Nominalist influences would have encouraged the interest in the particularity of individual faith for Luther. See "Martin Luther" in *Jesus in Thought, History and Culture*, Leslie Houlen, ed. (Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2003), p. 581.
- <sup>8</sup> Peace described "for me" experience as a kind of experience that takes place when a person is

confronted with reality as it really is. ...This is what James Loder would call a “convictional experience.” In that moment caught up in this experience, suddenly a person “knows.” No argument or proofs are necessary to understand that one has encountered God. The experience is self-validating. It is its own proof. *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve*. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999) p.77.

<sup>9</sup> Dorie Baker’s *Doing Girlfriend Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005) also points to faith stories are a remarkable tool for nurturing, celebrating, and exploring spiritual development.

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