

## **Changes in Core Identity and Cultural Engagement after Expansion of Theological Understanding**

Zachary Badon and Jonathan Wynne  
Department of Biblical Studies  
Lubbock Christian University  
Lubbock, Texas 79407 USA

Faculty Advisors: Dr. Steven Bonner & Dr. JoAnn Long

### **Abstract**

Suicide is the third leading cause of death in youth ranging from ages 10-24, affecting approximately 4,600 individuals annually in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Research suggests that adolescent suicide may be connected to cultural obstacles which delay youth identity development.<sup>2</sup> This multifaceted crisis of the self is believed to affect the processes of cognitive development, moral discernment, and participation in culture.<sup>3</sup> However, few solutions have emerged to orient youth towards healthy identity development. In an increasingly pluralistic world,<sup>4</sup> little is known about the potential impact of theology on adolescent identity development and subsequent cultural engagement. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore adolescent perspectives of Christian theology before and after participating in youth theological institutes and to explore how this affects youth identity formation and subsequent cultural engagement. This study used a qualitative comparative analysis research design. Qualitative focus group data was collected from an n=27 group of high-school students attending *Vocati*, a Youth Theology Institute. Narrative data was analyzed using Atlas.ti7. Word counts were used to visualize emerging themes before and after participating in *Vocati*. Themes of loving and serving others, character, unity, and reconciliation surfaced following this theological encounter. These findings suggest that engagement with Christian theological material supports adolescent core identity development and potentially contributes to healthy functioning as an individual participating in culture.

**Keywords:** Trinity, God, Jesus

### **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore adolescent encounters with Christian theology and to examine how engaging Christian theology affects youth identity formation and subsequent cultural engagement.

### **2. Methodology**

This study used a qualitative comparative analysis research design. Qualitative focus group data was collected from open-ended questions in an n=27 group of high-school students attending *Vocati*. Narrative data was analyzed using Atlas.ti7. Word counts were used to visualize emerging themes before and after participating in *Vocati*.

## 2.1 Christian Vocation

### 2.2.1 *moral deism*

A considerable amount of research has specifically aimed at the topic of discernment and its impact on adolescent identity. One area requiring discernment is one's understanding of vocation. Vocati functions as an existing High School Theology Institute (HSTI) funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc., which focuses on approaching vocational discernment as a social practice.<sup>5</sup> Scholars who participate in HSTI's develop a better understanding of Christian community and theological reflection, allowing scholars to confidently profess their faith and articulate their desire to serve Jesus. Ketcham states, "We live in a pluralistic culture where Christianity is increasingly becoming one voice among many."<sup>6</sup> If vocational discernment is rapidly becoming blurred among youth inundated by the noise of North American culture, then this blurring creates a gap between the adolescent's sense of duty and identity. High School Theology Institutes such as Vocati seek to bridge these shortcomings by grounding theological vocational discernment together with the development of an adolescent's core self.

Unfortunately, the task of bridging these gaps is not always easy. Most congregational youth ministries are not designed for the rich theological engagements that HSTI's provide. In fact, the 2004 National Study of Youth and Religion dubbed "moralistic therapeutic deism"<sup>7</sup> as the type of faith that is catered and taught by most youth programs nationwide. This bland, superficial faith primarily teaches youth how to be nice to others and feel good about themselves, while at the same time keeping God far in the background of their lives. This kind of teaching takes place when youth ministries attempt to cast a "wide net" to attract a vast array of teens whose spiritual appetites are uninterested or dry. Combined with a pluralistic world, this situation leads Christian young people to see the Church as a place where vocational discernment is not possible. High School Theology Institutes such as Vocati provide opportunities for scholars to grow in their confidence and self-efficacy for theological leadership through engagement and dialogue with different theological and cultural issues. Therefore, HSTI's not only affirm the many gifts of adolescents but challenge them to grow as they experience God in a variety of ways.<sup>9</sup>

### 2.2.2 *cultural context*

Given the ways communities of faith struggle to address the cultural challenges faced by today's youth, cultural context is often seen as a problem for discerning vocation. Both the nature of the Church and the kind of theological formation needed to shape those who serve it, is a consistent battle for Church leaders who recognize the complexity of what Csikszentmihalyi calls "the cultural domain" and the importance of the Church's ability to speak into it.<sup>10</sup> Csikszentmihalyi views the cultural domain as a necessary element for realizing creative vocational potential. Without specific needs and social attitudes dictated by context, an innovation can fall flat or be ignored.<sup>11</sup> For vocation to be true vocation, the culture it serves must both need and recognize the gifts that a certain calling offers. Each culture has its particular concerns, achievements, and moral failings; each culture and age hears the Gospel in distinct ways. Keeping these things in mind means that the content of vocation is never predetermined. Thus, the contexts that shape our response to God's call must be the actual circumstances facing the world at that time.<sup>12</sup>

Understanding vocational formation as a series of overlapping, mutually activating systems reframes the way churches view our cultural context. Instead of the "secular age"<sup>13</sup> being an evil force dissuading future leaders from ministry, it serves as a social domain that makes these leaders' innovations possible and meaningful. Unless we take seriously adolescent's social, political, economic, and physical contexts as places that give vocation its meaning and purpose, vocation remains an individual decision rather than a result of the Holy Spirit's presence in overlapping systems of human community.<sup>14</sup> HSTI's like Vocati seek to work within the cultural domain of young people and bring clarity to both the fact and content of Christian vocation.

### 2.2.3 *individualism*

Embedded in the larger cultural domain of the North American context is the issue of extreme individualism. By describing vocational discernment as a social practice, HSTI's model ways to resist individualistic understandings of Christian vocation that reduce it either to following personal happiness or Christian vocation that is abstracted from its social context. Still, the individual does play a part in a systemic understanding of vocation.<sup>15</sup> Young people are

drawn to HSTI's partly out of their sense of curiosity and wonder and have access to domains associated with Christian leadership. Vocational discernment requires teenagers to internalize the entire system that makes vocation possible, which takes time, intentionality, and attention on the part of the teenager. HSTI's set aside time for busy young people to focus their attention on vocation, while immersing them in practices that help them lead a community's participation in God's redemptive work in the world.<sup>16</sup> Thus, HSTI's help youth strategize how to ensure that their ideas are accepted and carried forward in the field of their home congregation. Vocati approaches vocation as a creative, constructive pursuit.

#### 2.2.4 historical shifts

To better understand Christian vocation and the level of struggle that adolescents face in comprehending it, it is important to have a brief understanding of the historical context and development of Christian vocation while also locating the various shifts of thinking regarding Christian vocation. Throughout Christian history, spanning across different cultures and regions, "vocation" has generally been understood as a type of profession or occupation. However, in the early Church, "vocation" generally had a dual meaning. First, vocation was the active discipleship and holy living that Christ called his followers to live. Second, vocation was defined strictly by the full-time profession that reflected Christian manner and "would reflect Christ's likeness in intentional, intensified ways as representatives of the Church."<sup>17</sup> This dual understanding of vocation becomes a common thread of thinking for nearly the first twelve hundred years of the Church.

In the scholastic period (roughly 800-1300), a shift in thinking arose and was espoused concerning vocation; vocation was strictly limited to the livelihood of religious representatives such as priests, monks, nuns, etc. This sense of vocation allowed those called to live in a manner parallel to the life of Jesus in suffering, service, and love. Vocation in this line of thinking was practiced predominantly by the Roman Catholics to allow or force themselves to live in complete holiness – lives surrendered completely unto God through acetic practices often seen in monasticism.<sup>18</sup> However, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, the belief went beyond that of a profession. They did have religious professions, but the vocation given by God was not an individual calling. Rather, it was a calling for all of humanity. People of faith were called to participate in *theosis*, which is "to become partakers in the divine nature."<sup>19</sup> The Orthodox perspective concerning the nature of sin also comes into play regarding vocation, a perspective of sin that does not take one away from God or remove His image from a person. Rather, sin is a temporary negative experience and an error while on the path of *theosis*.<sup>20</sup>

Continuing in this broad narrative of history, there are two specific theologians who espoused their own interpretations of Christian vocation. These recent historical interpretations were passed down from the sixteenth-century and caused a ripple effect that heavily influences the Church today, especially post-modern Protestantism. For example, Martin Luther understood Christian vocation in terms of "occupations," and that all occupations are a calling given by God. These "callings" were dictated by the societal class that one was born into and that people should accept these callings as faithful obedience while participating in God's Kingdom. Unfortunately, Luther's ideology also reinforced the notion that one should always be joyful in their particular calling, even if their calling was unjust or debasing to others.<sup>21</sup>

The second theologian to consider is John Calvin. Calvin's perspective of Christian vocation was closely tied to Luther's. However, Calvin believed that the individual's effectiveness and positive contribution to society mattered more than their societal position. This development allowed for a more fluid participation in Christian vocation in comparison to the stagnant understanding that Luther's ideas evoked.<sup>22</sup> Both of these ideas were frequently disagreed upon, and many theologians that proceeded Luther and Calvin did not understand Christian vocation being defined solely as a profession or occupation. According to Martin, the Reformers' ideology unsuccessfully and unintentionally led to the exploitation of workers, or to "the incipient danger of theologizing, mystifying, and romanticizing all forms of work as theologically and morally good."<sup>23</sup> Martin concludes, "By upholding an unambiguously positive notion of works as vocation without criticizing the social relations of the changing political economy, the Protestant tradition was left with no theological or moral recourse for challenging exploitative work."<sup>24</sup>

These historical and theological developments have shifted the entire landscape concerning Christian vocation. While these historical developments sometimes seem to contradict one another or negatively contribute certain consequences, these developments have molded the post-modern North American understanding of Christian vocation that one sees today, which has often cast a fog over adolescents' identity development; specifically, obscuring the defining traits of what Christian vocation is and how one is to participate in their surrounding cultural context while maintaining Christian faith. These developments of thinking concerning Christian vocation led to numerous consequences in the future of the Church that Luther and Calvin never intended, such as the heavy emphasis on the

penal substitution theory of atonement and the intensified individual focus on faith, sin, justice, and human nature. These historical confusions have set into motion complications of vocational discernment of the adolescent and have conceived a relatively new phenomenon of identity crisis known as “multiple selves.”

### 2.2.5 *multiple-selves*

In regards to adolescent core identity, it can be assumed that the difficulty of vocational discernment is most likely connected to the emerging issue of multiple-selves. According to Harter, from a developmental perspective, multiple self-representations can also be observed in the proliferation of role-related selves during adolescence. Thus, adolescents come to describe themselves quite differently across diverse interpersonal contexts, for example, with parents, teachers, classmates, close friends, and those in whom they are romantically interested.<sup>25</sup> James states that “a person has as many social selves or personalities as they do people who know them and have a certain thought or idea on who that person is in their mind.”<sup>26</sup> These isolated selves respond differently to situations that require particular and appropriate reactions. These inconsistencies are what James calls the “conflict of the different me’s.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, an adolescent’s actions are dependent on the people they are surrounded by and the situation they find themselves in. These multiple influences negatively impact the developing adolescent by causing issues, such as when adolescents attempt to discern themselves and their vocation. Young people, in particular, have the difficulty of distinguishing the “real me” from the multiple-selves, especially when they are aware of these different selves. Indeed, the difference between a joyful person and a depressed person could depend on the company they are keeping at a given moment.<sup>28</sup>

The reality of multiple-selves affects adolescent’s attitudes and interactions with others and how they think others view them. The implications of multiple-selves branch out past discernment and into their life of servitude. Adolescents often become confused in their multiple-selves in that they are unable to distinguish Christian stewardship from complete obedience or compliance. Harter argues that, “high self-monitors... are presumed to be adjusting their behavior, and thereby suppressing their true self, in order to gain the approval of others.”<sup>29</sup> Instead of being curators of service, they force themselves to become subject to the approval of others at the expense of “their true self.” Harter also concludes that this problem stems from a lack of proper support from the parents and friends whom adolescents interact with, which results in adolescents suppressing their identity to appease these groups. Thus, this suppression frequently causes adolescents to become unaware of the difference between being good servants and loyal slaves.

With all the research taken into consideration, it can be concluded that the issue of multiple-selves causes fragmented distress for adolescent discernment and development as individuals and as members of a Christian community. High School Theology Institutes like Vocati enable adolescents to develop their core identity and immersion in Christ. Through this newly revealed identity, adolescents leave the mental state of “loyal slavery” and discover the *imago dei* (image of God) as they become good stewards. There is a great necessity for HSTI’s like Vocati to assist adolescents in the course of comprehending their identity in Christ, participation in stewardship, and understanding Christian vocation as it is meant to be practiced. Along with this assistance, it is also necessary for mature Christian mentors, leaders, and ministers to understand their shared calling to be stewards and servants. With this understanding, it is these leaders’ responsibility to create and sustain theologically rich environments for adolescents with the intention of cultivating an awareness of the Triune God, who creates and sustains adolescent identity. Once Christian leaders accept and understand this complex cultural, social, and historical reality of Christian vocation and the psychosocial dilemma of multiple-selves, they must guide adolescents to adequately explore and integrate themselves in the holistic reality of Jesus the Messiah.

## 3. Limitations and Strengths

This project has a number of limitations and strengths. The narrative data analyzed in this study was obtained from open-ended narrative questions. Individual interviews were not conducted with the participating Vocati scholars. Second, because this is the first year of Vocati’s existence, we were only able to utilize narrative thoughts expressed at one point in time to explore themes emerging from the scholar’s experience of Vocati. Last, we were not able to witness first-hand the subsequent cultural engagement of each scholar after the exposure to the theological material presented at Vocati.

Likewise, this study has strengths. The first strength is that we both participated as Vocati scholar mentors, so not only did we conduct the research, but we also witnessed first-hand the impact the program had on the scholars and ourselves during the residency portion of the institute. Second, our research mentors also have first-hand experience

because they played a crucial role in the creation and sustainment of Vocati. Finally, due to our education through Lubbock Christian University's Department of Biblical Studies, both of us have been given a solid foundation concerning Scripture, Church history, theology, and congregational youth ministry.

## 4. Results & Conclusion

The results of the narrative analysis suggest that following the theological encounter with the week-long Vocati residency, themes of loving and serving others, character, unity, discernment, and reconciliation surfaced in the open-ended questions answered by participating scholars. In conclusion, these findings suggest that engagement with Christian theological material may support adolescent core identity development and potentially contributes to healthy functioning as individuals participating in culture.

## 5. Acknowledgments

We have many people to thank for the help they offered in conducting this research. Steven Bonner and JoAnn Long, our academic mentors, guided our efforts in pursuing disciplined, high level, and focused undergraduate research. Without them, this research would not be possible. Second, we had lively and beneficial conversations with several other faculty members of Lubbock Christian University's Department of Biblical Studies including Dr. Mark Wiebe, Dr. Brandon Fredenburg, and "Master" Jim Beck. Along with LCU faculty, we are indebted to the long hours of dialogue shared with fellow students and researchers such as Taylor Bonner, Jamie Stewart, and Ashley Van Meter.

## 6. References

1. CDC, "Suicide Prevention," *Centers of Disease Control and Prevention* (CDC, March 10, 2015), [http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/youth\\_suicide.html](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/youth_suicide.html).
2. Adam B. Miller, "The Relation between Child Maltreatment and Adolescent Suicidal Behavior: A Systematic Review and Critical Examination of the Literature," *NCBI* 16, no. 2 (2013), 1-15.
3. Chris Tanti, "Tripartite Self-Concept Change: Shifts in the Individual, Relational, and Collective Self in Adolescence," *Self and Identity* 7, no. 4 (2008): 360-79.
4. Sharon G. Ketcham, "A Question of Capacity: Can Adolescents Practice Discernment?," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 6, no. 2 (2008): 11-29.
5. Kendra Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson, *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education - If We Let It*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2016) 7.
6. Sharon G. Ketcham, *A Question of Capacity: Can Adolescents Practice Discernment?* *JYM* 6 (2008): 11-29.
7. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009) 47.
8. K. C. Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010) 23.
9. Chris Hughes, *Foundation for Christian Formation*, (Winston-Salem, NC: Personal Interview, 2014)
10. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2009) 23.
11. Dean and Hearlson, *Theological Education*, 37.
12. *Ibid.*, 38.
13. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007) 19.
14. Dean and Hearlson, *Theological Education*, 38.
15. Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, 47.
16. Dean and Hearlson, *Theological Education*, 40.
17. *Ibid.*, 14.
18. *Ibid.*, 14.
19. Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*, (Westminster John Knox Press 2002) 74.

20. Dean and Hearlson, *Theological Education*, 15
21. *Ibid.*, 16.
22. *Ibid.*, 16.
23. Joan Martin, *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) 180-181.
24. *Ibid.*, 180-181
25. Susan Harter, "The Development of Multiple Role-Related Selves during Adolescence," *Development and Psychopathology* 9, no. 04 (1997) 835.
26. *Ibid.*, 836.
27. *Ibid.*, 836.
28. Susan Harter, "A Model of the Effects of Perceived Parent and Peer Support on Adolescent False Self Behavior," *Child Development* 67, no. 2 (1996) 360.
29. Harter, *Model*, 361.