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CONCORDIA SEMINARY
SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

PREPARING THINKING CHRISTIANS TO SURVIVE
AND THRIVE IN A CULTURE OF CHOICE

A MAJOR APPLIED PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY STUDIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
SCOTT G. SOMMERFELD

SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI
8 MARCH 2007

PREPARING THINKING CHRISTIANS TO SURVIVE
AND THRIVE IN A CULTURE OF CHOICE

SCOTT G. SOMMERFELD

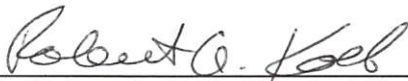
MARCH 8, 2007

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This project is dedicated to my wife Cindy; and my dear children Christopher, Matthew and Anna the most important youth God has placed into my heart and life. I love you!

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ABSTRACT

Sommerfeld, Scott G. "Preparing Thinking Christians To Survive And Thrive In A Culture Of Choice." D.Min. Major Applied Project, Concordia Seminary—St. Louis, 2007. 211 pp.

Youth are ill-prepared to think and live as Christians in our post-modern world. A retreat for high school seniors and graduates is one way of preparing youth to survive and thrive in a culture of choice, where perhaps the greatest challenge regards rationality for choosing ones religion. Here youth are introduced to the real truth regarding the Bible, choosing God, and living as disciples. While youth were assisted in thinking theologically through the retreat, this should have happened earlier in life. Therefore sample resources for covering these same topics in a confirmation program involving youth and their parents were developed.

calls the “heretical imperative.”¹ This is a prevalent notion in our culture that intentionally and unintentionally promotes individuality, independence, and self-autonomy at every turn.

I am concerned for the youth of my parish and my two sons as they seek to live out their Christian faith in a world that seems to undermine or dismiss the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of God the Father who created heaven and earth. It is my desire to see them continue in their faith, gaining maturity as they withstand the threats of our culture that will come in the college setting—and beyond.

The Purpose of the Project

The goal of this project is to develop a component of youth ministry that will help to prepare thinking Christians to survive and thrive in a culture of choice. This involves helping college-bound youth to think as Christians about their culture and about themselves. In the midst of challenges and temptations relating to how they think, believe, and live in a non-Christian world, the retreat gives resources that may help them to remain strong in their Christian faith. In particular, it is hoped that later they will be able to view and reflect on the world around them ultimately as Christians, that is, in terms of Christian theology, and not ultimately through the “lenses” of democratic politics, the marketplace, psychology, postmodernism, popular media, etc. The church needs to guide its youth to learn to examine critically the society in which they live, in order that they are prepared for some of the challenges that the high school and college environments will pose for them.

¹ Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1979), 28.

CHAPTER 1

THE PROJECT INTRODUCED

The Problem or Need that the Project Addresses

Many youth wander away from the faith. They become convinced that their Christian faith is no longer a viable guide to the *real* world they experience. This is especially true of youth who go away for college and university educations, where much of what they may have taken for granted or held unthinkingly is explicitly challenged and/or denied. This demise of faith relates to the non-Christian way the world is explained to them in the college setting. Not the least of the challenges that face youth in a culture of choice is the very issue of choosing one's religion.

Today's Christian youth also need a rationale for Christianity's exclusive claim to truth in the face of increasing religious diversity. They will need to know how to answer the cultural claim that each religion is just as viable as any other.

Today's Christian church, unfortunately, often does not do enough to prepare youth to identify and withstand the ways Christian faith is typically undermined in a pluralistic culture. Nor does the Christian church do enough to communicate and demonstrate that the Christian faith is the Truth, and for that reason youth are not equipped to lead Christian lives on their own. It is all too common for them to accept the ways of the world unthinkingly. For example, each year when I survey 7th grade confirmation students on the topic of marriage and the sixth commandment, at least 3 or 4 believe that living together before marriage increases a couple's chances of a long-term marriage. Even in the face of clear teaching from the Bible, Christian students can unthinkingly succumb to what Peter Berger

This component of youth ministry is an over-night retreat for high school seniors (and some juniors) followed by an evaluation interview 5-6 months later. Through the retreat each student will begin to be equipped to characterize and evaluate the behavior, ideas and beliefs of this culture of choice (i.e. pluralistic world) and one's sinful self in light of the Christian faith.

Before crafting the objectives and criterion for evaluation it is worthwhile to revisit the anticipated findings of this project that were originally in the proposal for this Major Applied Project. Those original five anticipated findings were:

It is expected...

1. that the youth at the retreat will not initially be aware of the pervasive and destructive nature of the American quest for self-autonomy and its effect on their own beliefs, behavior and thinking but will be able to identify examples of such in the follow-up questionnaire and later interview.
2. that youth will be better able to think critically and theologically about the beliefs, behavior, and thinking presented in their high school or college experience and classroom and give examples that betray the preeminence of self-autonomy in these settings.
3. that youth less connected to Biblical influence will have an even harder time theologically evaluating the beliefs, behavior and thinking in themselves and their world.
4. that parents of the participating youth will appreciate the efforts of their church to help their children think critically and theologically so they are more likely to remain faithful in college.

5. that the youth will find their identity in their baptism and their participation in the greatest story ever told a new and helpful way to think of their story and God's story intersecting.

In the course of developing the retreat itself, however, the nature of my project became even clearer and this led me to reorganize my goals and standards for assessment. This is why the five anticipated findings have been replaced by the four criteria stated below. The four criteria do not represent new thinking or concepts but a clearer presentation of my thoughts originally stated as the five anticipated findings.

The specific objective of this project is to develop a retreat that will begin to prepare college-bound youth to think as a Christian about their culture and themselves. The accomplishment of this objective is based on the four criteria stated below. Eventually these four criteria will provide the framework for evaluation and for proposing suggestions for further improvement to this retreat. The four criteria are drawn from the expected findings (hypotheses) from the Major Applied Project Proposal and they are treated below.

If this project is to reach its objective and have a positive impact on youth it is important that they are able to evaluate themselves (see expectation 1 above) and their world (see expectation 2 above) in light of the Christian faith. It is essential that they are able to recognize the influence of pluralism on the behavior, ideas and beliefs of self and others.

Therefore the first criterion to assess the helpfulness of this retreat is

1. that college-bound youth see (characterize and evaluate) the behavior, ideas, and beliefs of this pluralistic world and oneself in light of the Christian faith lived under God. (Evaluating Self and World in light of the Christian Faith)

offered by the church. This project will seek to inform parents of the need for their child to grow in theological thinking through retreat participation. And it will seek also to help parents grow in their theological thinking during the parental component of this project (see expectation 4 above).

Therefore the fourth criterion to assess the helpfulness of this retreat is

4. that parents of youth embarking on life after high school will participate in the parental component of the project and appreciate the efforts of their church to help their children think critically and theologically so they are more likely to remain faithful after high school. (Parental Support)

The Process by which the Project is Conducted

The process for this project began to take shape four years ago. This project is the next step in my attempts to help college youth remain faithful to Christ and Christianity during and after the college experience. In 1999 and 2000 a two-session Sunday morning seminar called the “Senior Seminar” was offered to college bound high school seniors. The topics included: identifying the humanist worldview and exposing the anti-religious themes in the theory of evolution. In the summer of 2001 a two-hour Sunday evening seminar was presented for thinking college students and high school seniors called “Proper Confidence.” The title and much of the content was borrowed and recast from Lesslie Newbigin’s book with the same title.²

² Leslie Newbigin provides a clear and compelling rationale for embracing the truth of the Bible as real and valid in *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 65-92.

It is also important that youth will be able to defend and understand Christianity's exclusive claim to truth in the face of increasing religious diversity. To accomplish this it will be helpful for youth to see their story and God's story intersecting (see expectation 5 above) and to embrace the truth and influence of the Bible (see expectation 3 above).

Therefore the second criterion to assess the helpfulness of this retreat is

2. that college-bound youth will be able to recognize temptations to doubt the validity of their Christian faith and be equipped to either consider, begin, or continue embracing the validity of the Christian faith based on the true nature and authority of the Bible.

(Embracing Christianity as Truth)

Life in North America is understood as a life of choices. Under the influence of the pluralistic worldview, youth (and adults) unthinkingly accept that life is primarily about individuality, independence, and self-autonomy. To combat this pervasive worldly influence it is important for youth to discover their true identity and to be set free to live life in community as part of the metanarrative of God's people in the Bible (see expectation 5 above).

Therefore the third criterion to assess the helpfulness of this retreat is

3. that college-bound youth see themselves as baptized children of God (disciples) living out their Christian faith in connection to God's people in the continuing story of salvation which gives them the certainty of forgiveness for their past, purpose for their present and hope for their future (discipleship). (Living the Christian Life as part of the Ongoing Salvation Story)

Christian parents of youth embarking on life after high school will benefit from a helpful and active partnership with the church. Sometimes this is not sought by parents or

This attempt to address thinking youth is altogether different. The organizing theme relates to our life of choices cast against the biblical truth of a choosing God. Since these are themes I have not previously taught it will be helpful to “practice” teaching and discussing this with adults at Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer in advance of the youth retreat.

Therefore, I will teach the theological and cultural concepts relating to “choice” during Sunday morning adult Bible study in the weeks preceding the retreat. In this way, I will gain valuable experience communicating these truths. It will also allow for refinement and clarification of language and concepts before the youth retreat.

A retreat format was selected for presenting the concepts of “choice” relating to theology and culture. The retreat format permits a number of sessions in a concentrated period, instead of trying to meet on a number of separate occasions. This allows for integration and continuity of thought between sessions and even the possibility of using a popular movie or TV show as a media vehicle to illustrate cultural and theological topics. A retreat also fosters both structured and spontaneous opportunities for conversation. This retreat at a lake front cabin will allow for water recreation in between sessions which adds to the informal, relaxed, comfortable retreat setting.

The following topics were selected for the retreat:

1. Life in America as a life of choices.
2. The Christian understanding that life is not just a matter of personal choices but is lived under God, where God and His choices influence our lives and all of life.

Related to this topic is the Christian understanding that man is impacted today by the fall, that man is not able to choose God and the radical idea that the God of the Bible is an electing God who both chooses disciples and hardens hearts in unbelief. These

Christian understandings will be compared with those of contemporary American culture.

3. The Bible as the story in which we operate as Christians.
4. Christianity's exclusive claim to truth in the face of increasing religious diversity, and when and how they might need to or want to defend this claim.
5. Evaluating the belief, behavior and ideas of their culture and themselves. Evaluative questions will be asked regarding the key concepts presented (e.g. upward fall, an electing God, ultimate truth is personal, baptism as source of identity): "What does a church look like that believes this?" "What does a Christian look like that believes this?" These questions will encourage youth to apply what they learn in the retreat to real life, to their life, and to their church.

During the retreat, each participant was encouraged to speak openly, even challenging the leader. This open conversation provides a benchmark for their initial understanding of their world and themselves. Only after careful listening, can the leader effectively guide them to see the truth about their world and themselves.

A follow-up questionnaire was given to each participant at the conclusion of the retreat. They reflected on and responded to the concepts covered in the retreat: the impact of the fall of man on the search for God and truth; an electing God; ultimate truth as personal; baptism as the source of identity for their life and the pattern for repentant living; seeing their life as part of "The Greatest Story Ever Told"; confidence to live by faith in a world that wants certainty beyond doubt; and the ability to see the dangerous and pervasive effects of self-autonomy in their culture and in themselves.

Parents were invited to a post-retreat session relating to the topics covered with the youth. This allowed parents to ask questions about the content of the retreat, especially if confusion arises in the family based on their child's grasp of new theological insights. I also sought feedback on what their son or daughter gained or did not gain from the retreat. The topic of caring for a child in the college environment also was addressed.

The ongoing effectiveness of the retreat was evaluated via interviews with each participant. These interviews took place six months after the summer retreat during the Christmas holiday. Each interview consisted of a series of questions intended to gauge each student's ability to theologically evaluate cultural beliefs, behavior and thinking by exposing radical autonomy first in society and then in his or her self. The initial follow-up questionnaire at the conclusion of the retreat provided a basis for further questions and conversation relating to the participant's ability to think, behave and believe in a Christian manner while living in a pluralistic world.

The Parameters of the Project

Preparing Thinking Christians to Survive and Thrive in a Culture of Choice is just one component of youth ministry. It involved nine youth from Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer: seven recent high school graduates and two youth entering their senior year of high school. It took place at a lakeside cabin at Lake George, MI. It will be the first youth retreat in over 5 years. For this reason I limited the time span of the retreat to make it more attractive and not overwhelming. We were at the cabin from 1 p.m. Tuesday, June 10, until 2:45 p.m. Wednesday, June 11, 2003.

Addressing Christian youth in a pluralistic society is both a cultural and theological enterprise. We live in a society that intentionally and unintentionally promotes and

encourages autonomy by forcing us to make choices in nearly all matters. Peter Berger refers to this aspect of western culture as the “heretical imperative” that leads to relativism and pluralism.³ Exposing the impact of such radical self-autonomy is a theological enterprise that tells the truth about the impact of sin, the fall of man, and the bondage of the will—all of which have definite implications for the conception of salvation and life in a culture of choice.

One who tells the truth about such things is called a theologian of the cross, and this project makes use of this concept and the concept of the theologian of glory. A theologian of the cross will communicate to our youth and all Christians that the only hope we have of surviving and thriving in a culture of choice is to give up our quest for freedom and self-autonomy by dying to self. Since choosing to die to self is not possible by one’s own efforts and desires this project will go beyond explaining the problem of self autonomy to proclaiming the killing God who makes us alive in Christ. It is the goal of this project that youth will find their life story linked to the life of Christ and the story of the Bible which will give them forgiveness for their past, purpose for their present and hope for their future...even in such a fallen world as this! Then they will be able to faithfully think, believe and live in a non-Christian world. To God be the glory!

³ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROJECT IN PERSPECTIVE

The Biblical and Theological Foundation

Introduction

Preparing thinking Christians to survive and thrive in a culture of choice is both a cultural and a theological enterprise. Therefore this chapter addresses both the cultural setting in North America and the theological teachings of the Bible. This cultural study identifies our context for ministry in North America. Therefore, in the arena of culture we will describe the advent and effect of postmodernism based on the insights of sociologist Peter L. Berger, as well its impact on Christian youth and adults today based on the research of George Barna and this pastor's insights from parish life.

While the cultural study outlined above gives needed understanding of our times and identifies important topics for this project it is the theological component of this chapter that is most essential. The focus of the entire project is about helping youth and all Christians to think theologically about their world and themselves. Preparing thinking Christians to survive and thrive in a culture of choice is deeply theological. It is essential to identify and expound on those theological topics that will best help Christians address the challenge of having to defend their teaching as "true" and not just one option/opinion among many in our pluralist culture. Therefore, special focus will be given to two major topics of the Christian faith: the search for truth and election. While these topics may not initially seem most essential, their relevance will come clear.

To establish a solid and lifelong biblical and theological foundation for Christian youth we begin with the search for truth. In our quest to know the truth the insights from Lesslie

Newbigin lead us to explore *knowing* as both investigative and interpersonal.¹ The often neglected aspect of *interpersonal knowing* gives explanation to the biblical claim that ultimate truth is not relative or investigative...but personal. As Jesus says in the Bible, “I am...the truth” (John 14:6 NIV).² Having affirmed that Jesus is ultimate truth we move on to the second topic, election. Election seems altogether out of place in a world full of individual choices—where one of the greatest relates to choosing God. Election tells us the bold truth that the real God is not chosen but chooses. This seemingly nonsensical and repulsive teaching to the postmodern hearer actually brings comfort and certainty in the midst of our pluralist culture. These two topics of the Christian faith are particularly essential as Christians are challenged to defend their teachings as “true” in our pluralist culture.

It must also be noted that in the midst of exploring these two topics a solid theological foundation is laid that addresses the nature of God, man and the Bible as well as telling how life is.

Cultural Understanding of Postmodernism and Pluralism

An Overview

Life in North America in 2006 can be characterized by the concept of choice. Not only consumer choices abound but value choices too! Today a person feels free to choose their favorite brand of breakfast cereal, their sexual orientation, and their religious preference. Sociologist Peter Berger traces the origin of this life of choices by contrasting what in 1979 he

¹ Ibid., 10.

² All biblical quotations taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*[®]. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

called the “pre-modern” and the “modern” way of life. According to Berger, “pre-modern man lived in what was, for the most part a world of fate.”³ In other words, much of life then was determined by tradition and a sense of destiny; not a matter of personal choice. “Sociologically speaking, pre-modern societies are marked by...a very high degree of taken-for-granted certainty.”⁴ In a traditional society a person’s “available repertoire of identities”⁵ is limited. “In other words, both society and self are experienced as fate.”⁶ This life of certainty, destiny and objectivity is invaded by the modern way of life. Berger does not discount the proliferation of different courses of action due to new technology and tools, but primarily emphasizes “the proliferation of institutional choices.”⁷

Modern life is characterized by the division of labor which pluralizes the institutions of society. “Thus, what happens is that where there used to be one or two programs in a particular area of human life, there are now are fifty.”⁸ This creates the opportunity and the need to make choices. An example of this proliferation of choices relates to the area of sexuality. The traditional way of life has expectations for acceptable weddings, marriage partners, and child rearing practices—with little room or need for choices. Today there is a “steady expansion of accepted alternatives”⁹ which include crossing racial, ethnic and class groups and may also

³ Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1979), 10.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Ibid.

include same sex partners and even sex change operations. The modern term “sexual lifestyle” makes it clear that “even sexuality can now be experienced as an area of individual choices.”¹⁰ This is one example of how certainty in traditional life has been replaced by the need to make choices in *modern* life. As Berger puts it “what previously was fate now becomes a set of choices. Or: Destiny is transformed into decision.”¹¹

Choices are not just limited to products, occupations and sexual lifestyle in modernity but also impact one’s worldview or religion. How one thinks about the world and tries to bring order to it is now a matter of choice. To explain the pluralization of worldviews Berger introduces the term “plausibility structures” which is a “central concept for an understanding of the relationship between society and consciousness.”¹² In other words, plausibility structures describe Berger’s notion that a system of social support provides the clues for choices that are plausible or typically available to members of that society. Thus even “morality requires particular social circumstances in order to become and remain plausible to the individual.”¹³ He proposes the “sociological generalization that human beliefs and values depend upon specific plausibility structures.”¹⁴

The contrast between pre-modern and modern life relates to the plausibility structures of each. As one would expect, traditional society is marked by consistent and reliable plausibility structures that define and support particular values and beliefs. “Conversely modern societies

¹⁰ Ibid., 15.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 16.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

are characterized by unstable, incohesive, unreliable plausibility structures.”¹⁵ In other words, it is hard to take much for granted in modernity. “The modern individual must stop and pause where the pre-modern men could act in unreflective spontaneity.”¹⁶ The plausibility structures of the pre-modern setting gave a person a sense of objective confidence in terms of values and beliefs. In the unstable, unreliable plausibility structures of modernity, man is forced to reflect on his options and in so doing becomes much more aware of himself. Thus a shift from the objective to the subjective begins. Berger states, “If answers are not provided objectively by his society, he is compelled to turn *inward*, toward his own subjectivity, to dredge up from there whatever certainties he can manage.”¹⁷ Modern man, without objective certainty in the outside world, finds himself needing to make more choices which require more reflection which causes greater awareness of self and his own subjectivity.

Berger’s premise is that modernity’s pluralization of plausibility structures in the social realm also has a direct effect on the modern religious experience. He states “a religious world view, just like any other body of interpretations of reality, is dependant upon social support.”¹⁸ Thus, as social support rises or falls, so does plausibility of one’s beliefs. Therefore the pluralization of plausibility structures makes religion in modern society less a matter of objective certainty and more and more a matter of subjective choice for the individual. “The typical pre-modern society creates conditions under which religion has, for the individual, the quality of objective certainty; modern society, by contrast undermines the certainty, deobjectivates it by

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁸ Ibid., 24.

robbing it of its taken-for-granted-status, *ipso facto* subjectivizes religion.”¹⁹ Thus one can see that the pluralization of plausibility structures has the effect of subjectivizing religion and making religion a matter of choice. “The modern individual is faced not just with the opportunity but with the *necessity* to make choices as to his beliefs. This fact constitutes the *heretical imperative* in the contemporary situation.”²⁰ According to Berger, in religious life as well as all of life, modern man is forced to make choices which have the effect of making life less objective and certain and more subjective and uncertain.

In an effort to maintain a sense of objectivity in the outside world in the face of the pluralization of choices, some have attempted to bring order to the chaos. This is the way of life for the Christian, the Jew, the Muslim and the secular humanist. Each orders all of life in a cohesive worldview. This ordered approach to life minimizes the subjectiveness of one’s choices which are related to the objective precepts of one’s cohesive world view. Choosing to believe an overarching theme or understanding of life and its purpose determines many other potential choices and restores a sense of objectivity and certainty to life in a world of pluralization. This was the way of modernism—a time when faith and reason both fought to prove their own way to order all of life was best...even right.

Today there is another, much different way to approach the pluralization of choices. The new way is in direct defiance of modernism’s attempt to order life. It is post-modernism—a celebration of this order and chaos. G. Edward Veith, Jr. contrasts the modern and post-modern approaches to life based on the insights of David Hardy.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 28. Emphasis mine.

Faced with the inherent meaninglessness of life modernists impose an order upon it which they treat as being objective and universally binding. Post-modernists, on the other hand, live with and affirm the chaos, considering any order to be only provisional and varying from person to person.²¹

Whereas modernism sought to objectify life, seek truth, and minimize the role of subjective choices, the over-arching themes of post-modernism are 1) the celebration of choice; 2) the elevation of subjectivism; and 3) the denial of objective truth.

Post-modernism is perhaps best understood against the backdrop of modern thought. In modern thought it was accepted and believed that science would bring the golden age, that government would solve social problems, and that religion was obsolete. It has become evident that science and technology have created as many problems as solutions, socialism and communism have collapsed in many failures, and suddenly spirituality and things non-scientific are gaining a hearing. It is a new age with new possibilities and new challenges.

Walter Truett Anderson describes the post-modern world in terms of choices — unavoidable choices.

In the postmodern world we are *required* to make choices about our realities. You may select a life of experimentation, eternal shopping in the bazaar of culture and subculture. Or you may forego the giddy diversity of contemporary life-style swapping and fall into step with some ancient heritage: be an Orthodox Jew or a fundamentalist Muslim or a Bible-toting Christian or a traditional native American. The range of choices is enormous, but the choice is still a choice and requires an entirely different social consciousness from that of the Jews, Muslims, Christians, and Native Americans who knew of no alternatives. The contemporary traditionalist may resemble in some outward ways the premodern individual but the actual lived experiences of the two are utterly dissimilar. Today we are 'forced to be free' in a way that Rousseau could not have imagined when he coined that famous phrase.²²

²¹ Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Post- Modern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 42.

²² Walter Truett Anderson, *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be* (San Francisco:

Anderson describes three major processes that are shaping post-modernism. First, the post-modern world is marked by a “breakdown of old ways of belief” which has led to “a kind of unregulated market place of realities in which all manner of belief systems are offered for public consumption.”²³ Second, there is a new kind of polarization. “The new polarization is a split between different *kinds* of belief, not between different beliefs.”²⁴ It pits fundamentalists against relativists. Fundamentalists are “those who hold firmly to a set of truths that they declare to be *the* cosmic reality.”²⁵ And the “relativists are who hold all truth to be human invention.”²⁶ The third process is a “birth of a global culture....in which all belief systems look around and become aware of all other belief systems, and which people everywhere struggle in unprecedented ways to find out who and what they are.”²⁷

Our culture inculcates and treasures individuality and freedom. It is even promoted among the young. As Gary Althen writes in his guide for foreign students to the United States,

The most important thing to understand about Americans is probably their devotion to ‘individualism.’ They have been trained since very early in their lives to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life and their own destinies. They have not been trained to see themselves as members of a close-knit, tightly interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or other collectivity. A parent will ask a one-year-old child what color balloon she wants, which candy bar she would prefer, or whether she wants to sit next to mommy or daddy. The child’s preference will normally be accommodated.²⁸

HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 7-8.

²³ Ibid., 6

²⁴ Ibid., 19.

²⁵ Ibid., 13.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 6.

²⁸ Gary Althen, *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States* (Yarmouth, ME:

An American student taking Psychology 101 in Malaysia using the Indiana University curriculum wrote, “it is a great challenge to these (Malay) kids who have very little, if any, exposure to the concepts of Western psychology....The American (while growing up) is surrounded, maybe even bombarded, by the propaganda of self-fulfillment and self-identify. Self-improvement and self-help-doing my own thing—seem at the core of American ideology.”²⁹

Robert N. Bellah’s sociological description of American culture decries the pre-eminent role of individualism that has little or no sense of civic responsibility. He refers to this change in the American spirit as “radical individualism.”³⁰ This is the term we will use to describe individualism run amok in this project. It is his concern that “this individualism may have grown cancerous.”³¹ When lacking a sense of community, from which care and the welfare of others are fostered and learned, radical individualism arises. This radical individualism is characteristically described in an interview with a young nurse, Sheila Larson, “who describes her faith as ‘Sheilaism’.”³²

I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice. In defining ‘my own Sheilaism,’ she said: ‘it’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other’.³³

Intercultural Press, 1988), 4.

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

³⁰ Robert H. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Updated Edition with a New Introduction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 236.

³¹ Ibid., xlii.

³² Ibid., 221.

³³ Ibid.

In other words, radical individualism has a religious application “radically individualistic religion,”³⁴ which in the case of Sheilism “takes the form of a belief in cosmic selfhood...God is simply the self magnified.”³⁵

It becomes less plausible in America to avoid pluralism according to the sociologists. Even the person who submits himself to a life ordering worldview with external claims to authority often does so as his personal choice—one choice among many. And if there are many choices and none more right than another, then pluralism begets subjectivism *and* relativism.

Never has it been more true that the Christian and the Christian Church are to be *in* the world but not *of* the world. The Christian Church is a distinct community in the North American collection of peoples and people groups. But Christians in North America are no longer supported by the wider culture and now, like the Jews in Babylon, face the challenge of living as “exiles” according to Walter Brueggemann.³⁶ And since the Church has little recent experience on how to be God’s people without the support of the wider culture, this is a challenging time for individual Christians and for the Church. The evidence of these challenges is described in the next three sections. Then we will return to addressing how to live in this world as an “exile” in the section titled “Identifying the Impact of Pluralism on North American Christians.”

National Youth Survey and Pluralism

Today’s youth who claim to be Christian betray a strong relativism in their beliefs. In George Barna’s research two-thirds of the surveyed youth believe in the God of the Bible; yet

³⁴ Ibid., 235.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 14-15.

“sixty-three percent also believe that Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and all other people pray to the same god, even though they use different names for the god.”³⁷ According to Josh McDowell, “the problem is that young people simply hear truth through their ‘own filter,’ which tells them all truth is subjectively and personally determined.”³⁸ McDowell also describes the typical teen understanding of Christianity as “their own ‘smorgasbord’ version of it.”³⁹ It is not orthodox Christianity but an assortment of Christian and non-Christian beliefs. This is a result of the impact of relativism. According to George Barna, “today’s youth (70%) say there is no absolute moral truth.”⁴⁰ This may not seem as pervasive a view as one might expect, but consider that “eight out of ten claim that all truth is relative to the individual and his or her circumstances.”⁴¹ At one and the same time youth subscribe to no absolute truth (noted above) and the moral certainty that can be found in the Bible. “Yet most of those same individuals—six out of ten of the total teen population—say that the Bible provides a clear and totally accurate description of moral truth.”⁴²

Perhaps the most encouraging news from Barna’s research is that few teens have solidified their position regarding absolute moral truth. “Only one out of every six youths has a firm opinion on moral truth. In some ways, then, the moral foundation of teenagers is still up for

³⁷ George Barna, *Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 124.

³⁸ Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *Beyond Belief to Convictions* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002), 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁰ Barna, 93.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴² *Ibid.*

grabs.”⁴³ When researchers pressed the youth about the certainty of their convictions regarding relativism or moral absolutes, they revealed that their commitment to their position was not firm. One of the conclusions reached in Barna’s research is that adults need to help youth investigate the topics of relativism and absolute moral truth as described in the Bible. He also noted that a lack of proper adult models in this realm is problematic. “We may conclude that teenagers don’t think about moral truth often or deeply because they are *neither challenged to do so nor is such behavior modeled for them.*”⁴⁴ The clarion call is sounded for the church: “Given the importance of this issue, the tentative nature of most teen’s views should sound the starter’s pistol for a focused scramble to influence teen thinking on this pivotal matter.”⁴⁵ Barna calls the church to action. Christian adults must engage youth so they can indeed survive and thrive in a culture of choice.

National Examples of Pluralism

We will briefly consider nationwide examples of pluralism and the life of choices that typify North American culture. Television shows have lately capitalized on the craving for personal choices that characterize pluralism in the United States. One of the first viewer participation shows was a FOX Network show “American Idol,” which aired for the first time in the 2001-2002 television season. The show provides telling insights into “*teen life*” and into “*current American culture.*” A key element of this show is the manner in which the three “experts” critique each talent show performer but do not decide the fate of the contestants. The

⁴³ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 92. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 91.

viewers actually “decide” which singers remain in the contest—not the experts. Viewers call in their votes for their favorite contestant at the conclusion of the show. The “experts” words can be completely rejected, embraced or ignored. American individuals decide. This is an excellent way to talk with teens and adults about the way individuals in our culture deal with topics of much greater importance than a singing contest. This same mindset relates to matters of much greater import in our culture—like religion. Americans may or may not seek advice from the experts...but Americans decide what they will believe. Such was the radical example of “Sheilaism” noted above.

Nationally, life is full of choices. Consumer choices abound regarding stores, brand names, and music styles. Something as mundane as buying potato chips involves a host of choices—the flavor, size of bag, shape of chip, salt content, and brand name. Life in North America is a life full of choices.

Congregational Adults and Pluralism

The impact of pluralism in these post-modern times is not just experienced by the youth of the church. Adults at Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer shared with much frankness and concern the stronghold that the plurality of religions in Kokomo, IN has on them. This was revealed in a Bible class while studying Colossians 2, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principals of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8 NIV) The seventy member class was asked “Does knowing people of different religions impact / affect your speaking Christian truth?” One college senior described his struggle to speak for Christ. “It is like our culture puts its hands over my mouth to silence me.” He related to the group that sometimes he doesn’t make the effort to fight against culture’s attempt to silence his witness to absolute truth in Christ.

Others agreed, echoing the same experiences. “Society respects others ‘truth’ so we do not speak.” “It causes you to question your own beliefs.” When asked, “Is society’s hold that strong, that it seems to be holding you captive?” Again, the response was in the affirmative. Another said, “Society says we are not supposed to talk about politics or religion.” “After all we don’t want to make other people feel bad, we want to be nice, to be liked. So we don’t tell the truth.” Another noted a benefit of our congregation’s recent cross-culture mission trips is that “a person is out of their culture and feels more free to speak openly about the Christian faith.” The comment that really told the truth about our response to pluralism was “We think we can witness without sacrifice. We are waiting for witness without sacrifice.” All agreed that this may not be possible in Kokomo or North America. Sacrifice must be expected! These dedicated, worshipping, studying adults and church leaders clearly indicated that they felt in some ways captive to pluralism. It seems so clear that pastors, teachers and all Christian adults must come to grips with the impact of pluralism on our own faith and witness so we can then take more seriously the shaping of our teens who must to be led to think and believe as Christians in a pluralistic world.

Identifying the Impact of Pluralism on North American Christians

Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon reinforce the truth of the world’s lack of hospitality toward disciples of Jesus. “Paganism is in the air we breath, the water we drink. It captures us, it converts our young, it subverts the church.”⁴⁶ They suggest that the Christian faith is not compatible with pluralism and the world knows it. “Our world recognizes the subversive

⁴⁶ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 151.

nature of the Christian faith and subverts us either by ignoring us or by giving us the freedom to be religious—as long as we keep religion a matter of personal choice.”⁴⁷ Christians know that the claims of Scripture are not dependant on individual acceptance and choice. They are true, because they are God’s words. And this is what we must proclaim to one another lest we become converted by the world.

Walter Brueggemann compares the modern situation of the church with the exiles in Old Testament Babylon. “It is my sense that when the preacher proclaims in the baptized community in our present social context, the preacher speaks to *a company of exiles*.”⁴⁸ The problem of exiles is the temptation to fit in and be assimilated into the new culture. “The primary threat to ancient Jews was that members of the community would decide that Jewishness is too demanding, or too dangerous or too costly, and simply accept Babylonian definitions and modes of reality.”⁴⁹ This is a new challenge for Christians in America. Our baptismal identity is seen by many, if not by most, as quite odd. As Brueggemann relates, “For Christians, however, to stand now—like Jews—in a culture that dismisses, disregards and derides odd identity is a new venture in the west, at least since Constantine.”⁵⁰ This is a theologian’s way of describing the changes in plausibility structures noted earlier by Peter Berger. The plurality of plausibility structures no longer lends support to Christianity. Christians in North America must recognize this and expect no special societal privileges. In fact Christian leaders must prepare our members to go against the flow. The challenge is not only for the mature followers of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 152.

⁴⁸ Brueggemann, 41.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Jesus...but is especially true for the youth, who, like Jewish exiles of old may “see no point in the hassle” of maintaining their odd identity.⁵¹

This pastor believes that it is important to introduce the concept of being exiles in our own county. For we are exiles. Our Christian explanation of life does not fit the pluralism of our culture. We talk in odd ways about man and God, sin and grace, death and resurrection, water that begins new life and bread and wine that sustain it. I am reminded of my first visits in the homes of my parish in Louisville, Kentucky. After politely listening to me speak, I was regularly told, “preacher, you talk funny.” They were of course referring to my nasal Michigan tones compared to their smooth and soft Southern speech. But I have come to believe that “talking funny” is an apt description of the Christian’s telling of God’s truth in our pluralistic culture.⁵² In Kentucky it was very obvious each time I opened my mouth that I was not a native. I talked funny, whether I wanted to or not. As Christians who speak the truth, doing the theology of the cross, we “talk funny.” In fact, it is our task as pastors and parents to teach this odd way to talk and to talk funny with ever greater confidence and frequency in a world that is unknowingly counting on us to talk funny so they can hear the call of God and talk funny too!

Learning to “talk funny” can be compared to learning a second language. “We must learn Christianity, even as we learn a foreign language...to teach what would not be known before it is announced, to cultivate those insights, means of describing, and vocabulary with which Christians describe the world.”⁵³ This is the task of the church that understands that it is the

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1992), 6.

⁵³ Ibid., 114.

people of God in exile in its own country and its own county. Helping youth and adults to think theologically (see below) prepares the faithful to *talk funny* as exiles!

How Christians Address Pluralisms' Challenge to Truth

Introduction

The biblical truth must be told in a manner that prepares youth and adults to stand firm in the midst of the relativism and giddiness of post-modernism's claim that everyone can decide his own truth. The church's answer to pluralism and relativism is not found by adopting the rules and principles of the social sciences but by doing what makes the church the leaven of society: speaking the truth of the cross as if it is the answer to the problem (because it is), even when it seems like foolishness to the learned and weakness to those who look for miracles and signs (1 Corinthians 1:23). The truth of the cross for our society must address the lie that each person is an autonomous individual free to make his own decisions in the quest for personal truth. The person who freely chooses his own brand of truth is not as free as he or our pluralistic society assumes. Bringing the truth to our post-modern culture and our post-modern thinking takes us back to the first chapters of the Bible. The ill-effects of pluralism has its origins in Genesis, chapter 3. But before addressing this under the topic of election, it is important to consider truth and ultimate Truth and how one comes to know it.

Affirming Ultimate Truth is Personal

A culture of choice has the effect of relativizing the Christian faith. In other words, Christianity can be understood as merely one choice among many world religions. This project will reaffirm that the Christian faith drawn from the Bible is indeed the *viable guide* to the *real* world. The age-old quest for "truth" can be considered in terms of the distinction between "investigative" knowledge and "interpersonal" knowledge with special attention on the insights

of John 14:6. For youth to survive and thrive in a culture of choice they must come to affirm (perhaps unexpectedly) the validity and necessity of interpersonal knowledge as it relates to the quest for ultimate Truth.

We begin our understanding of the age-old quest for truth by reviewing the concept of knowing. The English language has the same word for two different kinds of knowing. The first kind of knowing to be addressed and described is what we usually focus on in the pursuit of knowledge and truth. It is “investigative knowing.”

Investigative knowing is used when making observations. This kind of knowing often begins by asking questions based on our experience in the world. For instance, we may want to know more about the tables in a classroom. So we measure them, investigate their construction, and make conclusions. As Lesslie Newbigin states, “In this enterprise we are in control of operations....The things we desire to understand are not active players in the game of learning; they are inert and must submit to our questioning. The resulting knowledge is our achievement and our possession.”⁵⁴ This is the kind of knowing we associate with the physical sciences.

Another kind of knowing relates to how others come to know us. It is “interpersonal knowing.” This kind of knowing is based on self-revelation and trust. It is much different than investigative knowing. It explains why acquaintances share superficial information and may even rely on investigative knowing techniques which allow one to make observations about a person...without having to take the other at their word. Some might conclude that interpersonal knowing is “*risky*” because you have to be aware of the person’s motives. On the other hand, a lasting, trusting relationship must move beyond purely investigative knowing and include the

⁵⁴Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*

validity of self-revelation accepted by faith. The truth is that interpersonal knowing or self-revelation is accepted on faith.

Some may feel that investigative knowing is more trustworthy since it can be “proven” while interpersonal knowing is based on the trustworthiness of the person sharing information which seems to have more risk.

Newbiggin illustrates how “there is a radical break between these kinds of knowing often associated with the natural sciences and the knowing involved in personal relations.”⁵⁵

We experience this radical break, for example, when someone about whom we have been talking unexpectedly comes into the room. We can discuss an absent person in a manner that leaves us in full control of the discussion. But if the person comes into the room, we must either break off the discussion or change into a different mode of thinking.⁵⁶

When the intruder enters the room, we move from investigative discourse, in which the investigator sets the discussion, into interpersonal discourse, which gives the intruder the opportunity to speak, and calls for others to listen or respond. This illustration demonstrates that both kinds of knowing are essential but are not to be used interchangeably. A lasting, trusting relationship must move beyond purely investigative knowing and include the validity of self-revelation accepted by faith that is characteristic of interpersonal knowing.

In the search for ultimate knowledge and ultimate truth, it is often assumed that the search is a quest for *something*. That is, a search for universal truths, timeless principles, or ideals. *Something* that is by definition impersonal. Therefore, the search will / must be conducted in the mode of investigative knowing discussed above. It will be based on observation and reason.

(Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 10.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

(Even as a trained theologian this writer's natural inclination has often been to consider truth as timeless principles, which would be in the realm of ultimate ideas or ideals. Isn't it amazing how influential the worldly perspective can be!)

Let's consider the other option. What if truth is personal? If ultimate truth is a personal being, then the search will / must be conducted in the mode of interpersonal knowing as previously discussed. It will be based on revelation and involve faith.

Only in the Bible can one discover that the ultimate search for truth is not merely a search for timeless principles. Such a search would be misguided since ultimate Truth is not impersonal but personal. Jesus tells us "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32 NIV) and four verses later tells us that he is the truth when he says, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36 NIV). And the most noteworthy claim is Jesus' words "I am...the truth." (John 14:6 NIV) The Ultimate Truth is personal...because the Ultimate Truth is Jesus! However, at every secular college, seeking truth will be reduced to the search for timeless principles. The investigative kind of knowing will take priority. But investigative knowing will never lead to the Ultimate Truth! Ultimate truth is not impersonal after all. "The ultimate reality which is the object of all our search for truth has been made present in history in the person and work of Jesus Christ. 'The word was made flesh and dwelt among us...and we beheld His glory.'"⁵⁷

Jesus came and called disciples into relationship with Him—He said, "Follow Me." He offered no indisputable proof. Lesslie Newbegin states "to regard this (i.e., the call to follow Jesus) as cognitively inferior to the rational demonstration of supposedly certain truths is to

⁵⁶ Ibid., 10-11.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 63.

assume that the ultimate reality with which we have to deal is not personal, but impersonal.”⁵⁸

We are called into a personal relationship with a personal God. “We are promised that as we so commit ourselves we shall be led step by step into a fuller understanding of the truth.”⁵⁹ This is true because knowing Jesus, Son of God, we have the key to understanding all reality: personal and impersonal. “For if we know that Jesus is indeed the word made flesh, the visible and knowable presence in the midst of history from whom and for whom all things exist, then we shall meet new experiences of any kind of reality with the confidence that we are given the clue for their understanding.”⁶⁰ That clue is Jesus.

Notice the shift of the locus of certainty when we embrace the personal Triune God as the ultimate truth. We are no longer placing confidence in our competent knowing “but in the faithfulness and reliability of the one who is known.”⁶¹

Since ultimate truth is personal, not impersonal, interpersonal knowing as the mode for gaining knowledge is not to be dismissed or treated lightly. Knowing God is not based on one’s personal observations and reasonable conclusions. While investigative knowing is a gift from God to better understand the world around us it is not suitable to understand and know God. As Robert Kolb clearly observes,

When the epistemologies of human experiment, human rationality, or human aesthetic judgments try to define the origins and bounds of reality, they have gone beyond the limits of their competence. They go astray when they attempt to answer a different kind of question than the questions for which they were designed. We manage and manipulate the information we gain through our own experiments, our

⁵⁸ Ibid., 95.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁶¹ Ibid., 67.

own logic, our own aesthetic sensitivities. Information about God must be learned through another means of learning. It must be heard from the voice of authority, the voice of God himself.⁶²

Let's return to the illustration of talking about someone when they walk into the room. To speak about God without allowing His revelation to receive a hearing is like ignoring the input of a person who steps into the room, when all along that person has been the subject of the conversation. Leslie Newbigin states this clearly and cleverly:

If the Biblical depiction of the human situation is true; *if* the supreme reality is a personal God whose we are and to whom we are responsible; then there is something quite absurd about the posture of those who claim infallible certainty about God in their own right and on the strength of their own powers. In our interpersonal relations, we would never make such a claim for our knowledge of another person. How absurd to make such a claim with respect to God!⁶³

How absurd indeed for philosophers and others to speak about God as if it were not possible or desirable to speak with God and—more importantly—listen to God! After all won't He tell us what He wants us to know!

Establishing the True Nature of the Bible

We don't believe that ultimate truth is personal because we prefer this concept but because according to God's self-revelation it is true. Christians read the Bible and accept it as authoritative because it is the way God chooses to reveal himself to us. It is how God tells us what He wants us to know. Scripture is understood as God's own testimony about Himself through Jesus Christ. It is in the Bible that God personally reveals Himself to us and for us. We cannot know the true God of the Bible unless he reveals himself to us. In other words, we must

⁶²Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith : A Lutheran Exposition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 25.

⁶³Newbigin, 67.

acknowledge that we may know God only how and when it pleases him. Although God's existence and attributes can be discerned through features of creation, his identity and his person are beyond the capacity of any human creature to reach. No one can find or see God on his own, for God "dwells in unapproachable light," as Paul said; he is one "whom no one has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16). Apart from God's own initiative, we cannot know God, talk about him, know how we stand before him, fear him, or trust in him.⁶⁴

God makes himself known through his Son and through the Scriptures. Therefore, how we understand the use and nature of the Scriptures is determined by our conviction that Jesus Christ is God's revelation of Himself to us in flesh and blood. This is clearly summarized by Dr. Joel Okamoto below:

The apostolic writings, along with the Old Testament, have comprised the definitive witness concerning God to the entire world. In other words, the Scriptures as a whole comprise the authoritative witness about God and his dealings with creation. Since God's dealings are always through his Son and his Spirit, the witness of the Scriptures is always to be understood as centered in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the bearer and giver of the Spirit (i.e., understood "Christologically"). To be sure, not every isolated passage has a clear connection to Jesus Christ, but their total witness is a witness to God made known through his Son and his Spirit. As the definitive witness about God, the Scriptures function as the authoritative touchstone for the Church's faith and life, and as a rule and norm for all that is true, good, and right. According to the will and work of God, they have stood and should always stand over against the Church when she errs, and they have stood and will always stand her up against all questions and challenges.⁶⁵

The Scriptures will also stand up against the pluralist, modernist and post-modernist challenges against its claim to be "true" in a world of competing truth claims. The Bible is not a collection of timeless truths and universal principles. Nor is it a collection of myths and fables. Even though some cultures have used myths and fables to tell the story of life's purpose. The Bible is history. It is a story with real people (genealogies) and real places (archeology). The

⁶⁴ Joel Okamoto, Jeffrey Kloha, et al, "The Bible in God's plan and work of salvation," an unpublished article received from the author in October 2006, 1.

Bible is the true story of human history. It is the history of God and people, and in this story, one comes to know God. “The business of the church is to tell and embody a story, the story of God’s mighty acts in creation and redemption and of God’s promises concerning what will be in the end.”⁶⁶ According to its true nature, the Bible conveys the master story of God and His people that gives the authoritative account of how things are. In this master story we learn that the world and all that is in it are the creations of one true God, and that all human creatures are accountable to Him (Acts 17).

It is important to unmask both the modern and post-modern perspectives regarding the Bible as a source for truth. The modern assumptions for the discovery of truth are biased against the validity and worthiness of a story for the discovery of truth. This is due to the modern assumption that truth is impersonal and thus will be and must be found by investigative knowing, not by the interpersonal knowing of revelation and faith. But since ultimate truth (i.e., the triune God) is personal, He will be and must be found by interpersonal knowing as He is revealed in the Bible and accepted by faith. Ultimate truth cannot be found by using one’s reason and observation in the magisterial sense. “The church’s affirmation is that the story it tells is the true interpretation of all human and cosmic history and that to understand history otherwise is to misunderstand it, therefore misunderstanding the human situation here and now.”⁶⁷

The late modern or postmodern person is quite comfortable with the validity of a story for finding purpose and meaning in life. However, there is no capacity for evaluating one story against another. Thus the story of God and His people in the Bible is not accepted as The Story,

⁶⁵ Ibid., 6-7.

⁶⁶ Newbigin, 76.

only as a story. The postmodern view decries truth claims as a front for the use of coercive power. However, the story of God and people in the Bible, which culminates in the Christ of Calvary, is not a front for coercive power. Rather, in Christ and in Christians who trust in and follow Christ, one finds loving suffering servants—not coercive power. The beauty of the Gospel is the disarming effect of the suffering Christ who is faithful to His Father and devoted to setting man free from life dictated by the bondage of the fallen will.

The Word of God, by the working of the Holy Spirit, creates faith and is the source of our greatest confidence. Proper confidence rests in the God who reveals Himself in the pages of the Bible. This alone overcomes temptations to doubt the validity of one's Christian faith as a trustworthy guide to the real world.

The Christian, once enfolded into the story of the Bible, comes to know that this story is true and liberating. Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31, 32 NIV). As Newbigin states, "The church's affirmation is that the story it tells, embodies, and enacts is the true story and that others are to be evaluated by reference to it."⁶⁸ In other words, all explanations of life in this world are to be evaluated according to the real story told in the Bible.

Teachers of the faith need to relate this bold truth to our youth. Then youth will know that the Bible is not one guide for life among many but is the most trustworthy guide for exploring and understanding the real world as it *really is*.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 76.

The church proclaims the Biblical story and the Holy Spirit draws into the story those who believe. Outside of embracing this message, there is no way for hearers to grasp the story as the most trustworthy. So, the church affirms the truth of its story “by celebrating it, interpreting it, and enacting it in the life of the contemporary world. It has no other way of affirming its truth.”⁶⁹

Having no other way to affirm the truth of the Bible may at first seem a great weakness. Some may naturally want to appeal to how “*wise*” it is, or how “*reasonable*” its universal principles and timeless truths. However, if the biblical story must appeal to “*reasonableness*” (or any other culturally conditioned criterion) to verify its truth then “*reasonableness*” is the ultimate authority, since it is what validates and authenticates the Biblical story. Lesslie Newbigin summarized this observation when he wrote: “to authenticate...by reference to some allegedly more reliable truth claim...it has implicitly denied the truth by which it (i.e., the church) lives.”⁷⁰

It is our intention and desire that this search for truth will lead youth to affirm or reaffirm their confidence in the God who reveals Himself to them in the pages of the Bible and by faith draws them to Himself. This alone relieves the doubts about the Bible’s status and true nature as the most trustworthy and viable guide for life in this world.

As the most reliable guide for life and the source of truth about the human condition and how things really are, the Bible is the true witness for Christians as they address the pluralist notions of relativity and the choosing of one’s god. A serious problem emerges when life in the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

pluralistic society is contrasted with the God of the Bible. A child of God living in the story of the Bible comes to know that God is God and I am not.

In other words, the child of God lives *in* the pluralistic society that promises freedom and control in with and under the life of choice but is not *of* that world. The child of God knows that God determines how life will go. Exposing the pluralistic society's misplaced self importance is a theological enterprise that involves telling the truth. Telling the truth is the hallmark of a theologian of the cross. The Christian response to pluralism includes embracing the theology of the cross; which is another way of saying "telling the truth" about God and man. Following this exploration of the theology of the cross we will see this theology in action as a daring exposé of pluralism's misplaced self importance is revealed in the biblical teaching of election.

Embracing The Theology of the Cross

Telling about God and man is the essence of theology. Telling the truth about God and man is the essence of the theology of the cross. A theologian of the cross tells the truth about all things, including man's sin and need for a savior and removes all hope that is found in the self and its efforts to please God. Being a theologian of the cross is not as easy or as simple as it may sound. The problem is that everyone is naturally predisposed to think of self as the rescuer or the one who supplies the missing ingredient in making life with God possible. This disposition reflects the theology of glory. As Gerhard O. Forde clearly states, "It (a theology of glory) is the perennial theology of the fallen race."⁷¹

⁷¹ Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997), xiii.

There is a titanic clash between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross. The theology of glory leads humanity to place confidence in one's striving for good. But this striving to do good is exactly what keeps one from God. Even our best good works are sins when they separate us from God. "A human work, no matter how good, is deadly sin because it in actual fact entices us away from 'naked trust in the mercy of God' to trust in self."⁷² The slavish control the theology of glory has on each person can be compared to addiction. "It (the theology of glory) is a temptation over which we have no control in and of ourselves, and from which we must be saved."⁷³ Like the addict we "try to hide or explain away or coddle our sins."⁷⁴ "As with the addict there has to be an intervention, an act from without. In matters of faith, the preaching of the cross is analogous to that intervention. It does not come to feed the religious desires of the old Adam and Eve but to extinguish them."⁷⁵ A theologian of the cross does indeed tell what a thing is and it is not pretty!

The clash between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross is no more evident than at the point of the will. "A theology of glory always leaves the will in control. A theology of the cross assumes that the will is bound and must be set free."⁷⁶ It is only the work of the cross that sets the sinner. Jesus said it first and said it best, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25 NIV). And Paul repeats it

⁷² Ibid., 37. Here Forde boldly interprets Luther's Heidelberg Disputation theses 5 and 6 to make this stunning observation about the danger of good works.

⁷³ Ibid., 94.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 9.

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:19a NIV). The theology of the cross leads one to the utter despair of knowing that there is no good thing that self can do or add to be righteous. Therefore God must kill the sinner.

Then, as only God could make happen, the very thing that one tries to avoid leads to the new life that one has always hoped for. God not only kills the sinner but raises the sinner to new life as a saint, his own dear child. In other words, the only way to live is to die. That is, to have the cross do its work to you.

Robert Kolb describes the purpose and insights of the theology of the cross derived from Martin Luther.

Luther’s theology of the cross sought ways to bring the seeming foolishness of the message of Christ’s death and resurrection to sinners (1 Cor. 1:18-2:16), so that they might be turned in repentance to the Crucified One. For this theology was not about suffering but about the Word which comes from Christ’s cross to kill sinners as sinners and to bring them to new life in Christ. This rhythm of the dying and rising of daily repentance was to be accomplished through proper application and distinction of the law of God, which evaluates the sinner’s performance, and the gospel, which bestows forgiveness of sins and life upon the repentant sinner.⁷⁷

The theology of the cross remains the method for doing theology for Lutherans today and is practiced in this project. The clash of the theology of the cross and the theology of glory can be seen (and maybe even seen best) when addressing the topic of choosing God. The theology of glory believes that the human will does the choosing, that humanity at some level and in some part chooses God. But the theology of the cross as clearly taught in the Bible and the Lutheran confessions tells of a loving God who chooses those who are dead in their trespasses and makes them alive in Christ. Therefore in the following section the theology of the cross is practiced so

⁷⁷ Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005), 3.

that the truth of God's love in choosing sinners may be seen in all of its amazing grace! Then sinners will have the true consolation of knowing that their salvation rests securely in God's hands and not in one's own. "Luther sought above all the consolation of the troubled conscience, and he was certain that such consolation comes only from the forgiveness of sins won by Christ in his death and resurrection."⁷⁸ This will be seen below as the theology of the cross is practiced while exploring the sometimes hidden wonders of election.

Election and the Culture of Choice

Introduction

The doctrine of election and predestination, though rarely taught or discussed in our churches and schools, is in fact the key to helping Christians survive and thrive in a culture of choice. It significantly impacts all of the following problems that youth face as they live as Christians in this post-modern world:

1. wondering if their Christian faith is a viable guide to the *real* world they experience;
2. struggling to address the challenge of choosing one's religion;
3. lacking a rationale for defending/understanding Christianity's exclusive claim to truth in the face of increasing religious diversity; and
4. unthinkingly accepting the pervasive pluralistic worldview that promotes individuality, independence and self-autonomy at every turn.

Helping Christian youth survive and thrive in a culture of choice is the goal of this Major Applied Project.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

The post-modern world is so full of choices that one begins to wonder if all objective grounds for certainty have been replaced by subjectivity. According to Peter Berger, modern man is forced to make choices which have the effect of making life less objective and certain and more subjective and uncertain. As stated earlier, “The modern individual is faced not just with the opportunity but with the *necessity* to make choices as to his beliefs. This fact constitutes the *heretical imperative* in the contemporary situation.”⁷⁹

In our age of choice, it is hard to grasp the truth that no one is able to choose God and that God according to his great love is in fact an electing and predestinating God. The biblical teaching of election is totally contradictory to the culture of choice. This may cause Christians to wonder if the Christian faith is indeed a viable guide to the *real* world they experience (see problem #1 above). Yet this orthodox teaching frees the individual believer from the arbitrariness of choices. If one is chosen by God in matters of salvation and eternity then subjective radical individualism is replaced with the certainty of God’s objective choosing (see problem #4 above). Thus we find the mind boggling paradox that when we seek to choose our own god we never choose Him and we lack the freedom and confidence that this choice is supposed to deliver; but when we are chosen by God we have great confidence and will be free indeed!

Doctrine of Election from the Bible

The truth that God chooses us and we do not choose God is taught clearly in scripture. Jesus told his disciples “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16 NIV). Paul speaks of election and predestination in Ephesians 1:1-14.

⁷⁹Berger, 28. Emphasis mine.

For *he chose us* in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love *he predestined us* to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. (Ephesians 1:4-6 NIV)

This topic is rarely addressed in our churches and schools. The tension between the love of choices in our culture and the loving God who chooses his followers is such a contrast that one rarely if ever hears a sermon or reads an article on the doctrine of election or predestination.

It is important to bring youth to the point of facing the hard reality that they *will* not choose the living God and that no one *wills* such a choice. Only God can choose us. Yet one must not consider this lack of freedom to choose God as a matter of our being coerced or forced. Instead, it is our *willing*, *willing* as it pleases, that *will* not choose the God of the Bible. The idea that God is truly above us is grandly offensive, ever since the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter three. A helpful way to describe this twisted will is the concept of the “upward fall.”

It (i.e., the fall) is an upward rebellion, an invasion of the realm of things ‘above’ the usurping of divine prerogative...an ‘upward fall’.

Just as God rules in the realm of things above in perfect peace and harmony, so also humans are to ‘image God’ and take care of things below. Rebellion means refusal, to image God. It is rather the attempt to be God.⁸⁰

The “upward fall” remains an apt description of the human disposition even today. Adam and Eve were beguiled by a serpent—a serpent that convinced them they would become like God. This is the “upward fall”—the problem that humanity faces from this point forward to the end of time. That is why “When we come up against the eternal, immutable, impassible God, and we hear in addition this God elects (saves and damns) we simply cannot allow it.”⁸¹ We

⁸⁰ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 48-49.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

assert our wills in *things above* precisely “to claim our freedom, to declare our independence.”⁸²

But as Forde has wonderfully explained, “our very claim to ‘free choice’ in what is ‘above’ us is, ironically, the mark of our bondage.”⁸³ This is our way of defending ourselves against the ultimate claims of God and is proof that we would rather put our trust in ourselves in matters of eternity.

Election is clearly taught in Ephesians chapter one. In the second chapter of Ephesians we learn the truth about sinful man’s condition outside of Christ: “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-6 NIV). Ponder for a moment about what kind of choices dead people make. It will undoubtedly be a short list. Dead people don’t choose. That means that one’s salvation is totally and completely in God’s hands. This may be an uncomfortable thought for those who are steeped in the culture of choice. Each time I teach this biblical truth people are very uncomfortable with the notion that they have no contribution to their own salvation. Even Lutheran Christians who will readily recount that we are saved by grace are uncomfortable with the truth that we have nothing to contribute to our salvation.

The Christian church often presents God as reasonable and desirable. As if God could be chosen. But the theologian of the cross understands that God intends to kill the sinner, not to improve or help or pacify him. This killing-and-making-alive-God is naturally avoided by unregenerate man. We will not choose such a God. The natural self will try any and every

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

dodge or excuse to escape the real God of the Bible. We will choose a god that only wants to make a few changes in us...as if God were in the “morality makeover” business. He can change me a little bit, but it is still me and I’m still in control. We won’t choose, we can’t choose, we will not choose...a God who elects and a God who kills.

This is why post-modernists are quite content to be their own arbiters of truth. It is much safer than a life-ending encounter with the hidden God of the Bible. But the God who chooses us and kills us is also the God who gives us true freedom and new life. We become a new creation. It’s the death of the old man and a new birth and coming alive of the new man. So it’s not just the end that God brings to us, it is a grand beginning!

If you are dead in your transgressions and sins, then your being in faith today is a miracle! It’s the work of God! This is the only explanation that Scripture presents. The Scriptures are written so that I see the miracle of God’s grace. Being chosen is meant to be overwhelming. After all, one reasons, “why would He choose me?” And there is no answer...except...it is the amazing grace of God. As Paul records, “In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. (Ephesians 1:4-6 NIV) The believer is chosen because it pleased God so to do. It is “in accordance with his pleasure.” Read Ephesians 1:1-14 and listen to the sound of grace. Listen to the sound of grace and praise and thanksgiving that echoes throughout that whole section because Paul is recounting with the people of Ephesus the fact that being in Christ Jesus is a miracle... a miracle of God!

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus:

² Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴ For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵ he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will— ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸ that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. ⁹ And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

¹¹ In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹² in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³ And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:1-14 NIV)

The doctrine of election and predestination exposes the folly of the basic principles of this world and showcases the amazing grace of God which is the bedrock of the believer’s eternal security. St. Paul warned first generation Christians “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8 NIV). The tension between personal choice (i.e., “freedom of the will”) and the Bible’s clear teaching that God chooses his followers is as old as the Scriptures and later found classic expression in the debate between Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther in the 1520’s.

Erasmus took on Luther for the sake of the Holy Catholic Church. Luther admits that Erasmus alone attacked evangelical teaching in the “vital spot.” That is, Erasmus led Luther to defend the vital teaching that man is saved wholly by grace and God’s choosing and that man cannot and will not choose God due to the bondage of the unregenerate will. “You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot; for which I

sincerely thank you, since I am only too glad to give as much attention to this subject as time and leisure permit.”⁸⁴ Their debate is chronicled in Luther’s *Bondage of the Will*, 1525.

Gerhard Forde, in his 2005 book, *The Captivation of the will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, demonstrates the markedly different approach taken by each man in this scholarly and biblical exchange. The core difference relates to their use of Scripture. “Erasmus wants to use Scripture to build his theory.”⁸⁵ “Erasmus set out to win a debate. Luther sought to comfort and rescue the lost.”⁸⁶

For Luther, God the Spirit is the active “player” in this drama. God acts through the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the Word of God, that is, they are not as for Erasmus, mere words about God, but Word from God.⁸⁷

Erasmus and Luther also differ on the problem of clarity in the Scriptures. Erasmus cites examples showing Scriptures’ ambiguity and lack of clarity. On the other hand, “Clarity becomes an issue, Luther maintains, because it is the interpreter who is unclear—not the Scripture.”⁸⁸ These differences are highlighted here because Erasmus’ approach to both the Scripture and the topic of free will still find a large following today. It is the accepted way, the expected way of the 21st century. It is the reigning plausibility structure of our time that can only be overcome or abandoned by the work of the Holy Spirit who sets us free from our Scripture twisting and instead “does the Scripture to us,” as Luther and is fond of saying.

⁸⁴ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 1525, American Edition of Luther’s Works, Volume 33, edited by Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 294.

⁸⁵ Gerhard O. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005), 27.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

One must constantly keep the urge to misuse theology in check. “It is not the task of theology to construct a theory of God that is supposed to win us over by attractiveness. It is the business of theology to foster the preaching of the Word of God.”⁸⁹ Then “the text goes to work on the interpreter [and the hearer—my note] to do what it talks about.”⁹⁰ Luther under the direction of the Holy Spirit lays open the Scriptures and shows that in matters “above” pertaining to faith and salvation we are bound until God sets us free. Here are a few poignant quotes from *Bondage of the Will*:

Paul’s words here [referring to Romans 3:21-5] are absolute thunderbolts against free choice.⁹¹

In a word, imagine whatever you may as being within the power of free choice, Paul will still persist in saying that the righteousness of God avails “apart from” that kind of thing.⁹²

Let us come to John, who is also an eloquent and powerful devastator of free choice. At the very outset, he represents free choice as so blind that it cannot even see the truth, let alone be able to strive toward it. For he says: “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness does not comprehend it” [John 1:5]; and shortly afterward: “He was in the world, and the world knew him not. He came to his own, and his own received him not” [vv.10f.].⁹³

I wish the defenders of free choice would take warning at this point, and realize that when they assert free choice that they are denying Christ. For if it is by my own effort that I obtain the grace of God, what need have I of the grace of Christ in order to receive it?⁹⁴

⁸⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Luther, *Bondage*, 263.

⁹² Ibid., 263-264.

⁹³ Ibid., 277.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 279.

Hence, inasmuch as you maintain free choice, you cancel out Christ and ruin the entire Scripture.⁹⁵

...in the sight of God free choice, with its will and its reason alike, is reckoned as a captive of this sin and as damned by it.⁹⁶

...all the texts that speak of Christ must consequently stand opposed to free choice; and they are innumerable, indeed they are the entire Scripture.⁹⁷

So it comes about that, if not all, some and indeed many are saved, whereas by the power of free choice none at all would be saved, but all would perish together.⁹⁸

Luther's final word to Erasmus is not pride or arrogance but the confidence that comes from knowing that the God of the Bible has miraculously and graciously called Luther by the gospel. Erasmus writes according to his fallen nature, captive in his will to desire and preserve his free will that holds him in bondage. Erasmus cannot see that the election of God brings wonderful peace and confidence. Luther's final word to Erasmus is that God would open Erasmus' eyes so he too may believe and find such comfort and peace. Note also that this is not a matter of open debate to Luther. This a matter to which all must yield assent.

But God has not willed or granted that you should be equal to the matter at present at issue between us.

...I am unwilling to submit the matter to anyone's judgment, but advise everyone to yield assent. But may the Lord, whose cause this is, enlighten you and make you a vessel for honor and glory. Amen.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Ibid., 282.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 286.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 287.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 289.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 295.

Doctrine of Election from the Lutheran Confessions

Our exegetical study of election leads us to consider the ancient teachings of the church as found in the Lutheran Confessions. The Lutheran Confessions clearly condemn the erroneous teaching that man's free will is a cause or purpose in conversion or salvation:

But before people are enlightened, converted, reborn, renewed, and drawn back to God by the Holy Spirit, they cannot in and of themselves, out of their own natural powers, begin, effect, or accomplish anything in spiritual matters for their own conversion or rebirth, any more than a stone or block of wood or piece of clay [Isa. 45:9; 64:8; Jer.18:6; Rom.9:19-24] can.¹⁰⁰

They also remind the Christian of the bound will of every human being regarding matters of the Spirit while unconverted:

For, first of all, even though human reason or natural intellect may still have a dim spark of knowledge that a god exists (as Romans 1[:19-21, 24, 32] states) or of the teaching of the law, nevertheless it is ignorant, blind, and perverted so that even when the most skillful and learned people on earth read or hear the gospel of God's Son and the promise of eternal salvation, they still cannot comprehend, grasp, understand or believe it on the basis of their own powers; they cannot regard it as the truth.¹⁰¹

The Confessions clearly state that it is solely by the work of the Holy Spirit, who uses means, that the dead are raised to life and are made new creatures:

On the contrary, they are and remain God's enemy until by his grace alone, without any contribution of their own, they are converted, made believers, reborn and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word as it is preached and heard [1 Corinthians 2:4, 12-13].¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration, Article II.24. All quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are taken from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, Article II.9.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, Article II.5.

The salvation of everyone is the glorious work and gift of God without any cooperation or effort on the unbeliever's part—to God be the glory!

The Lutheran Confessions also testify that the doctrine of election and predestination can be misused in two destructive ways leading to either 1) faintheartedness or 2) brazen impenitence. Both of these must be avoided and condemned as contrary to the will and intent of the Holy Spirit. The Solid Declaration in Article XI repeatedly condemns the foolish notion that the elect can live willful lives of sin and vice and expect to be saved because of the foreknowledge of Christ:

As a result, people might fall into burdensome thoughts and say: “Since God has foreseen his elect to salvation ‘before the foundation of the world’ (Eph.1[:4]) and since God’s foreknowledge does not fail, nor can anyone change or impede it (Isa. 14[:27]; Rom. 9[:19,11]), if then I am foreseen to salvation, it cannot harm me if I practice all kinds of sin and vice without repentance, despise Word and sacrament, and have no concern for repentance, faith, prayer, or godly living; still I will and must be saved, for what God foreknows must take place.”¹⁰³

God’s foreknowledge is not the cause of such contempt for the Word; the cause is instead the perverted human will, which rejects or perverts the means and instruments of the Holy Spirit that God presents to the will when he calls.¹⁰⁴

Rather, the cause is that they willfully turn themselves away again from God’s holy command and grieve and embitter the Holy Spirit; they entangle themselves once again in the defilements of the world and redecorate their hearts as a haven for the devil, so that their last state is worse than their first (2 Peter 2[10,20]; Luke 11[:24,25]; Heb. 10[:26; cf Eph. 4:30])¹⁰⁵

The will of God is that election is a comfort to the fainthearted and a safeguard against brazen impenitence:

¹⁰³ Ibid., Article XI.10.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., Article XI. 41.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., Article XI. 41.

Similarly, by instructing people to seek eternal election in Christ and in his holy gospel as in the Book of Life, this teaching gives no one cause either for faintheartedness or for a brazen, dissolute life.¹⁰⁶

For, as the Apostle testifies, ‘Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope’ [Rom. 15:4]. However, any interpretation of Scripture that weakens or removes our hope and encouragement is certainly contrary to the will and intent of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰⁷

Election is actually intended as a safeguard against our own weakness. Modern readers may not readily see this. But it remains true today as it was to Luther and the church fathers.

The Confessions clearly teach that our salvation would be easily lost if left in our hands:

Likewise, he desired to guarantee my salvation so completely and certainly—because it could slip through our fingers so easily through the weakness and wickedness of our flesh or be snatched and taken from our hands through the deceit and power of the devil and the world.¹⁰⁸

Thus, it gives the most reliable comfort to troubled, tempted people, that they may know their salvation does not rest in their own hands.¹⁰⁹

Otherwise, at every moment they would lose this salvation more easily than did Adam and Eve in paradise. Instead, their salvation rests in the gracious election of God, which he has revealed to us in Christ, out of whose hand no one can snatch us (John 10[:28]; tim. 2[:19]).¹¹⁰

Martin Luther, in the final pages of *Bondage of the Will*, 1525, declares that he is *relieved to not have free will* in matters pertaining to his salvation. Oh that the youth of today and all Christians would understand his reasoning according to Scripture and share his confidence:

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., Article XI. 89.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., Article XI. 92.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., Article XI. 46.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., Article XI. 90.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

For my own part, I frankly confess that even if it were possible, I should not wish to have free choice given to me, or to have anything left in my hands by which I might strive toward salvation. For, on the one hand, I should be unable to stand firm and keep hold of it amid so many adversities and perils and so many assaults of demons, seeing that even one demon is mightier than all men, and no man at all could be saved; and on the other hand, even if there were no perils or adversities or demons, I should nevertheless have to labor under perpetual uncertainty and to fight as one beating the air, since even if I lived and worked to eternity, my conscience would never be assured and certain how much it ought to do to satisfy God. For whatever work might be accomplished, there would always remain an anxious doubt whether it pleased God or whether he required something more, as the experience of all self-justifiers proves, and as I myself learned to my bitter cost through so many years. But now, since God has taken my salvation out of my hands into his, making it dependent on his choice and not mine, and has promised to save me, not by my own work or exertion but by his grace and mercy, I am assured and certain both that he is faithful and will not lie to me, and also that he is too great and powerful for any demons or any adversities to be able to break him and snatch me from him.¹¹¹

Election and Christianity's Exclusive Claim to Truth

Many people are in fact convinced that there can be no certainty regarding the “right” religion. This is a key topic for Christian youth who may be wrestling with Christianity’s exclusive claim to truth in the face of increasing religious diversity (see #3 above). The notion of choosing one’s religion, though a popular idea even among some Christians, is the ultimate in self love and is tantamount to choosing idolatry. Deciding which faith system, which god, which religion is the right fit for me means that I am playing God. The one who does the *choosing* is god— or God. If I choose the “right” god, then I am god. But if God chooses me, He is God.

Thus the much ignored doctrine of election and predestination actually brings great clarity to the topic of choosing one’s religion and the exclusive terms of Christianity. The idolatry of choice is plain to see. Only Christianity teaches and believes that God cannot be chosen but instead does the choosing (John 15:16). The True God is not naturally “choosable.” Instead, *He*

¹¹¹ Luther, *Bondage*, 288-289.

is the one who *chooses* you to believe. Christianity will forever be unique in this way. By God's grace the very topic of election and predestination that seems so out of place and even wrong-minded to Christians in this culture of choice actually provides the greatest rationale for defending and understanding Christianity's exclusive claim to truth in these pluralistic times (see problem #3 above). Thus the young Christian will be able to see that their Christian faith is the *only* true, sure and viable guide for life in the *real* world they experience (see problem #1 above).

Election and True Freedom

The post-modern world of choice condemns as power mongers those who claim to have truth, especially universal truth. But post-modernism's consumerist move into the realm of religion is in actuality the age-old supreme grab for power. It is just another attempt to dethrone God and insert the self as God. It is ironic that post-modernism is concerned that those hearing about absolute truth claims are in danger of being shackled, made slaves, or manipulated by those asserting truth as a front for power. In reality, when God in Christ calls the sinner to die to self and gives new birth and new life, that person lives life under the Lord. But living life under God is living as one truly set free to love both God and neighbor like never before. Thus, it is the assertion of one's complete freedom in all matters of life including matters "above" that shackles the hearer in greatest bondage not living life under God's rule and will.

The very thing post-modernism and our culture of choice try to safeguard and preserve at all cost is the very thing that is completely and utterly lost and outside one's grasp forever! This is what happens to the one who cherishes personal freedom and radical individualism. It is asserted, acted on and even defended. But in matters of faith and life, one is never free until freedom is lost and personal control is removed and God kills what I cherish most. This is the truth of Jesus' words, "whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me

and the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35 NIV). The only way to freedom is the shipwreck of one’s personal freedom project and then one will be free in Christ. This is the truth we have to tell our youth so they will learn to see worldly freedom’s radical individualism for what it really is, slavery to sin and the bondage of the will. Then young and old alike will be further equipped to tell the truth about our culture’s idolatrous obsession with personal freedom, proclaim the electing God, and give witness to being truly free in Christ.

This Christian freedom is realized in one’s baptism. Living under God as his baptized child is life at its best. Robert Kolb describes it well:

Because in baptism they have been raised to new life in Christ (Colossians 2:11-15), they will have a different way of thinking about how to act within their own cultures. Because they had been crucified to their old, dead nature, with the passions and desires it used to secure its world, they live in the fruit of the spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-24). Thus as individuals and as communities of believers they invade their own cultures and societies with God’s love and goodness.¹¹²

This is real freedom. Freedom from the bondage of the will. Freedom from the folly of choosing one’s own spiritual fulfillment. Such freedom only comes through abandoning one’s self to the Holy God who would rather kill us than try to reform us as we wish. But having been killed, he makes us alive. Alive to the spirit of God. With the spirit of God riding our wills He is opening up new possibilities for life...freedom to love God and neighbor without the need to advance our stock in God’s eyes or our neighbors. We love just because. Because He first loved us. (1 John 4:17) Robert Kolb further describes this freedom in the following manner. “By holding onto the cross, we are given the courage to recognize our own interests and to become

¹¹² Robert Kolb, “Nothing But Christ Crucified,” in Alberto Garcia and Victor Raj (eds.), *The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century: Signposts for a Multicultural Witness* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 49.

free in relationship to them, even to become ready to ignore them, so we can bring true freedom and welfare to those around us.”¹¹³

Election does not shackle the believer but rather sets him free. Free to be the child of God he was chosen to be. Free to love his neighbor as never before. Free to see that the Christian faith is indeed the only viable guide to life in the real world of the 21st century. Free to see that the uncertainty of the pluralist worldview and the predominance of individuality and self-autonomy are replaced by the confidence of being chosen, for a lifetime, for eternity “before the creation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4 NIV) by the God who loves you.

It is my hope and prayer that the churches and schools of our beloved LCMS would readily teach and proclaim that God must and does lovingly elect all believers. This would indeed be a powerful antidote to the insidious infection known as the idolatry of choice, and give God all the glory for the miracle of salvation!

The Historical Context and Literature Review

Introduction

The impact of post-modernism on the youth of North America is of great concern to Christian leaders. Therefore, the goal of helping youth survive and thrive in college is not unique to my project. Nationally known writers and speakers are concerned about this topic. Some are addressing parents and youth workers encouraging them to help youth move from belief to conviction. Others are addressing college students as their primary audience, putting their insights into the form of a college guide to spiritual survival. In our own church body Concordia Publishing House recently provided a resource directed at both parents and youth with

¹¹³ Kolb, 52.

special chapters for parents only. There is much concern about the impact of our culture on the faith life of Christian youth as they move on to college and adulthood.

This review of the literature will address three unique resources. The first is co-authored by Tony Campolo and William Willimon. They have written *The Survival Guide for Christians on Campus* with the college student in mind. The second resource is our LCMS contribution to this topic. Kathleen Winkler has written *College Bound* for parents and youth to help them make this important transition in faith and life. The third was written by Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler. They have partnered to write a volume addressed to Christian adults and parents. They are calling adults to help youth be prepared for the impact of post-modernism in their book, *Beyond Belief to Conviction*. Each of these volumes will be reviewed in light of its approach to addressing the goal of helping youth survive and thrive in this culture of choice and how it relates to this project.

How *The Survival Guide for Christians on Campus* relates to this Project

Tony Campolo and William Willimon draw on many years of campus ministry as they present their guidance to Christian youth who will face the challenging realities of post-modernism on the college campus. Campolo is a sociology professor and thus addresses the sociological aspects of life with faith. Willimon is a campus chaplain experienced in helping students integrate faith into life during the college years. Together they address the challenges of living Christian on campus. I appreciate their winsome approach that would appear to make this book inviting to Christians at different levels of maturity and commitment.

They inform youth that living as a Christian on campus is counter cultural and that our beliefs may seem “weird” or “scandalous” or even “shocking” to others.¹¹⁴ In fact, the key to living Christian in a non-supportive college environment is to surround oneself with those who share the same understanding about life. Here Campolo introduces the concept of the “plausibility structure” from Peter Berger. Berger’s concept (treated above in chapter two) and Campolo’s recommendations are significant for this project. Campolo wisely asserts, “Nobody ever *really* thinks for him-or herself. So the issue is not ‘Will I be a member of a group who tells me how to think?’ but rather, ‘will the group that tells me how to think be committed to biblical truth?’”¹¹⁵ Everyone is influenced by others. Therefore Campolo encourages college students to find a group of Christians who will reinforce the necessity of faith. Campolo writes, “You need a group if you are to have the assurance that you really are a Christian.”¹¹⁶ “Otherwise, the college setting can make Christianity seem crazy.”¹¹⁷ The authors clearly articulate the need for Christian youth to have Christian friends and connections to survive and thrive on campus during these post-modern times.

Their survival guide addresses other foundational theological topics: sin, the Bible, church, sin, evangelism, how to listen to a sermon, worship, sex, and Pentecostalism.

This project also acknowledges that helping youth survive and thrive in a culture of choice is both sociological and theological. While Campolo and Willimon focus exclusively on youth

¹¹⁴ Tony Campolo and William H. Willimon, *The Survival Guide for Christians on Campus* (West Monroe: Howard Publishing Co., 2002), 14.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 18.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 19.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 18.

this project recognizes that the church and church leaders also have a role and responsibility to help thinking youth think Christian.

How *College Bound* relates to this Project

Kathleen Winkler shares the life experiences of real college students and the insights of concerned adults in her book. Eighteen Christian youth tell about their adjustments to college life, sharing both successes and disappointments as a guide for others heading off to college. College counselors and parents share their insights too. The goal of the book is to help youth prepare for college and think about how they can get the most out of college and remain strong in their faith. Her theme is “be prepared.” “There are two ways to approach leaving for college. You can throw your stuff in a bag, drive to the campus, and hope for the best. Or, you can prepare in advance.”¹¹⁸ Winkler’s suggested method of preparation follows, “You can learn what life is like on a college campus today by talking to people who have been there and reading books such as this one. You can think through what kind of experience you are looking for, make some mental plans about what you want your college years to be, pray for the Lord’s guidance, and then, prepared and ready, go for it.”¹¹⁹

Winkler’s book is a very practical guide that addresses the potential issues that a college bound youth will face. She addresses the following practical issues...roommate, staying healthy, sex and dating, drugs, academics, faith, politics, and home visits. She also includes a chapter just for parents.

¹¹⁸ Kathleen Winkler, *College Bound* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998), 6-7.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

This project shares Winkler's interest in preparing youth to think about the changes and challenges that come with college life and involving Christian adults in the process. Just as those bound for college but not yet on campus might be most captured by Winkler's title. So also this project engages youth who are completing high school but are not yet off to college. Another connection between this project and Winkler's book relates to connecting with Christian parents of college bound youth. The book has a special chapter just for parents to help them and their child make the transition to college life. Likewise, the project has a parent connection recognizing that Christian parents want assistance with preparing self and child for the college joys and challenges.

However, Winkler's book and this project also have striking differences. Winkler's approach is very holistic. She gently weaves faith talk into many topics that give great detail about the practical adjustments to college life. It isn't until chapter six that she talks directly about nurturing faith. Winkler's book supplies a theologically sound approach to the practical aspects of preparing for college. But her book is not deeply theological or intended to thoroughly address the postmodern challenge to Christian thinking. This project on the other hand is deeply theological and is not (due to time constraints) focused on the personal adjustments that come with beginning the college experience. In this way the book and the project are strikingly different and almost opposite (but not opposed) in their approach. In fact, the strengths of the book and the project are actually complementary. For this reason, as a supplement to the theological focus of this project Winkler's book was given to each project participant as a practical guide book for preparing for college in a post-modern world.

How *Beyond Belief to Conviction* relates to this Project

Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler rehearse the impact of post-modernism on the youth of our churches using the same research of George Barna¹²⁰ that was cited above. Then they set out to engage and enlist the Christian church as activists on behalf of the spiritual welfare of Christian youth. The authors are convinced that “Today merely ‘believing’ isn’t enough.”¹²¹ They are calling on Christian adults to be part of instilling in youth a deep faith that is not mere head knowledge but deep seated conviction that will guide life in these turbulent times. “We are talking about a belief that goes so deep that it unlocks the secrets to one’s very own identity, purpose and destiny. It is a belief that can equip our children to become ‘twenty-first century gladiators’ who can enter the arena of an antagonistic culture and not crumble under its pressure.”¹²² To accomplish this task they propose a relational apologetic. “It will be a relational apologetic—rock-solid reasons to believe and a biblical blue print for living out those beliefs in relationship with others.”¹²³ This relational apologetic is based on three Christian realities: incarnation, revelation, and the resurrection.

With the use of vignettes involving high school and college students, youth workers and the student’s families the authors present an engaging model for how to impart this relational apologetic.

This project shares a recognition that the church must be active in helping youth think theologically and live as Christians in this post-modern world. The authors and this project also

¹²⁰ Barna, *Real Teens*.

¹²¹ McDowell and Hostetler, 21.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid., 33.

agree that this activity is an intervention of sorts. Without an intervention youth and adults will remain under the influence of relativity and pluralism and miss the calming certainty that God gives in Christ regarding one's identity, purpose and future. Both address youth preparing for college by addressing the theological issues and trying to help youth and adults think Christian about themselves and their world. In other words, both are committed to thinking theologically and believe that this is the missing ingredient to help youth survive and thrive in a culture of choice.

Conclusion

These three resources are unique in their approach to helping youth survive and thrive in a culture of choice. Each has a valuable contribution to make in this endeavor as described above. And each relates to this project. This project is deeply theological as it addresses the youth of today much like *The Survival Guide for Christians on Campus* and *Beyond Belief to Conviction*. This project is convinced that the church must be involved in this process which is also stressed by McDowell and acknowledged by Winkler in *College Bound*. This project recognizes the need for practical advice on the adjustment to college life as presented by Winkler. This project also is deeply committed to the concept of preparation. The church needs to prepare youth and adults for the college years as stressed by Winkler and McDowell. This project like Winkler's book aims at preparing youth and parents as they are approaching college at the end of high school. McDowell also describes preparing children as well as youth to think theologically. This is a concept not covered in this project but interesting to consider. It remains my hope and prayer that this project will be a blessing to those who participate in it and that it will have a meaningful contribution to the ongoing goal of helping youth survive and thrive in a culture of choice.

CHAPTER 3

THE PROJECT DEVELOPED

Design of the Study

Introduction

The goal of this project is to develop a component of youth ministry that will help prepare thinking Christians to survive and thrive in a culture of choice. This will involve helping college-bound youth to think as Christians about their culture and themselves. In the midst of challenges and temptations relating to how they think, believe and live in a non-Christian world, they will be given resources that may help them to remain strong in their Christian faith. In particular, it is hoped that they will be able to view and reflect on the world around them ultimately as Christians. The project is guided by the following four basic issues:

Understanding the Cultural Context

Addressing Christian youth in a pluralistic society is both a cultural and theological enterprise. According to sociologist Peter Berger, life in contemporary American society leads to relativism and pluralism. Our culture promotes individuality, independence and self-autonomy, and it demands a life of choices.¹ Berger calls this demand the “heretical imperative.” Choices today are not only consumerist choices concerning brand and price, but also apply to occupation, sexual orientation, and religious beliefs. We live in a society that intentionally and unintentionally promotes and encourages autonomy in nearly all matters. Life is all about choices. This leads youth today to believe that life, their life, is determined by their choices. In

¹Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1979), 28

other words, they are operating with the mistaken notion that they have control and determine how life will go.

Establishing the Nature of the Bible

The Bible is the reliable guide for life and the source of truth about the human condition and how things really are. The mistaken notion that the Bible is a collection of truths to which we must assent will be replaced with the teaching that the Bible, according to its true nature, is the master story of God and His people that gives the authoritative account of how things are. In this master story we learn that the world and all that is in it are the creations of one true God, and that all human creatures are accountable to Him (Acts 17).

Addressing the Problem

A serious problem emerges when life in the pluralistic society is contrasted with the God of the Bible. A child of God living in the story of the Bible comes to know that God is God and I am not. In other words, the child of God lives *in* the pluralistic society that promises freedom and control in with and under the life of choice but is not *of* that world. The child of God knows that God determines how life will go. Exposing the pluralistic society's misplaced self importance is a theological enterprise that involves telling the truth. This is most clearly demonstrated in the biblical teaching of election.

Encouraging Discipleship

Life is at its best when one experiences the freedom of being chosen by God (not choosing god) and living *under* Him in His kingdom. This is stated wonderfully in the meaning of the

Second Article, “that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness...”² In other words, the Christian disciple is living life in God’s world as God’s dear child (see introduction to Lord’s Prayer) trusting God for all that He does and provides. “All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.”³ (Explanation of the First Article)

The Retreat

Overview & Outline

The teaching sessions of the retreat are conducted in an inductive method. This teaching method keeps the youth engaged in the process of learning which can be experienced as a quest for truth. The leader’s role is to facilitate their quest and serve as a guide leading them into an ongoing discovery according to the truth of the Bible. The inductive teaching method also has the advantage of allowing insights to “sneak in the back door” of their minds as it were.

The four basic issues mentioned above serve as the outline of the retreat. Each of the issues is addressed by activities and sessions described below. This is not an exhaustive list of ways to address the four issues of this project. Other activities could have been conducted but within the time limitations of the retreat the following sessions were chosen.

² Martin Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 16

³ Ibid.

Part One: Understanding the Cultural Context

The world of choices and the unavoidable pervasiveness of choice in American life are addressed in the first session “Life in America” where youth are invited to describe the role and place of choices in their life.

Part Two: Establishing the Nature of the Bible

Youth may not feel comfortable claiming the Bible as a source of authority in this pluralistic society, even in terms of “spiritual” topics. Therefore the session “The Search for Knowledge and Truth” was designed. This session is influenced by Leslie Newbigin’s insights from *Proper Confidence* regarding the reality that ultimate truth is interpersonal not investigative (see also John 14:6).⁴ A second session, “The Greatest Story Ever Told: The Bible as VII Act Play,” was added to establish the proper nature of the Scriptures and to help the youth see themselves in the ongoing drama of God and His people.

Part Three: Addressing the Problem

The tension point in the retreat is designed to occur in the session “Choosing God.” An inductive study of the ideal God and the God of the Bible leads to a crisis when the youth discover that the one who chooses is either god or God. This session introduces the frightening biblical truth that humans will not and cannot choose the real God of the Bible and the comforting biblical truth that God chooses His children as described in John 15:6 and Ephesians 1.

⁴ Leslie Newbigin provides a clear and compelling rationale for embracing the truth of the Bible as real and valid in *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1995), 65-92.

Part Four: Encouraging Discipleship

The use of objects as teaching tools is fitting for this most practical aspect of the project. “Encouraging Discipleship” relates to enhancing one’s vital connection to the living God and His people the church. An object lesson using a vine and its branches (John 15) underscores the absolute necessity of each young disciple being connected to Christ and His church as they move out of their parental home. Though it does not use an object, the “Six Marks of Discipleship” give expression to choices that feed one’s faith and express faith in acts of love.⁵ A Tupperware® toy used by children to learn their shapes is used in the session “Discovering Your Divine Design.” Here the youth can discover how God made each person for unique service to others and to Him. The final indoor session, involves paper and pencil as each youth writes a “Note to Self.” This is designed to reconnect each youth to all the topics of the retreat that may help them survive and thrive in a culture of choice as they begin their new station in life. This private note to self encouraging or exhorting oneself to live as a child of God will be mailed back to him/her one month into the new fall term. The retreat concludes with an outdoor communion worship service where Christ’s body and blood are received in, with and under bread and wine as the greatest faith feeding objects known to the world. During the sermon a buzzer from the game “Taboo” is transformed into a Baloney Detector (a fictitious instrument that alerts one to lies, half-truths and the like). In an effort to connect with hearers on this practical topic many objects are used.

⁵ Michael W. Foss from Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Burnsville, MN describes “Six Marks of Discipleship” in his book, *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

Follow-up Meetings

Post-Retreat Parent Meeting

There are four main purposes of the parent meeting. First, it is necessary to review the four basic issues of the retreat with the parents. This will help them understand their child's retreat experience. This review is also essential since the strong teaching on "Choosing God" will not be familiar to most parents and could cause confusion in the home. Causing confusion is not the goal of this project. Rather, it is hoped that sharing these theological insights and demonstrating theological thinking with the parents may prompt further faith conversations between parents and youth.

Second, feedback is needed from parents. Parents can give helpful feedback based on their child's comments and attitudes regarding their retreat experience. Such feedback can help gauge the effectiveness of the retreat. Parents may also have insights and ideas for improvement after hearing about the retreat experience from their child.

Third, this is a time to consider how parents, pastors and church members can better care for post-high school youth. To encourage better care of post-high school youth these parents will be introduced to the two retreat resources given to each participant: *College Bound* by Kathleen Winkler and *By Faith Alone* a compilation of devotions by Martin Luther.⁶ Parents can use *College Bound* as an excuse to bring up key topics that they might otherwise feel they had no "excuse" to bring up with their child. The book can be a spring board for conversation and care.

⁶ Kathleen Winkler's *College Bound* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998) is an excellent faith-based practical reason that prepares readers for life changes and challenges to be anticipated in college. *By Faith Alone* (Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, 1998) is a faith nurturing devotion book based on the writings of Martin Luther with a full topical index.

The parents will also be polled to ascertain their concerns regarding post-high school youth and will be given the opportunity to brainstorm on ways pastor and people can team up to address these concerns.

Finally, because parents have tremendous influence in the life of their child, each will be asked to please encourage their teen to attend the Six-Month Reunion during Christmas break.

Six-Month Reunion

The timing of the reunion is strategic. Not only is the reunion a 6-month follow-up on the retreat, it is also the end of their first semester of college or the first semester of their senior year. The purpose of the Six-Month Reunion is four-fold: 1) to give youth an opportunity to reflect on and tell about their first semester experiences regarding thinking, believing and living in a non-Christian world; 2) to give me an opportunity to evaluate the four basic issues of the retreat as a useful guide for these youth in the past six months; 3) to seek their input on how the church can help youth survive and thrive as Christians in college and high school in light of their first semester experience; and 4) to encourage each youth to live as a disciple of Jesus.

Research Tools and Methodology

Standard library research practices and protocols were followed in the preparation of this project as well as collaboration with a current college student, a youth pastor and others.

This project utilizes a written evaluation of the retreat participants at the conclusion of the retreat. The Retreat Evaluation was intentionally written without reference to any of the topics presented during the retreat. This was done so as to better assess the impact of the retreat material on each youth. Since no mention of any topic was on the evaluation page every reference to any material or concepts of the retreat on their evaluations comes strictly from their own recall and remembrance.

The final evaluation method is the Six-Month Reunion where each youth will be engaged in conversation on topics related to surviving and thriving in a culture of choice. This is an oral evaluation so the youth can interact with each other and the presenter in “real time” on multiple topics of interest.

Implementation of the Project

Introduction

Eleven youth were invited to participate in a youth retreat to prepare them for college or the next steps of faith and life following high school. Seven boys and two girls attended this short retreat (31 hours) just a few days after graduation. All were recent graduates except my son and the son of our hosts who were now high school seniors.

These nine youth have many things in common. Each one comes from a family that has worshipped at Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Kokomo, IN for a minimum of nine years. Most of them grew up in this community. Eight of the nine participants grew up in a home where *both* parents regularly attended worship. In fact, the worshipping parents for all nine youth regularly attended a weekly Sunday morning adult Bible class. All nine youth were regular Sunday School attendees as children and in junior high. And all attended a three year confirmation program in grades six through eight.

There are also some unique characteristics among them. Three young men graduated from Redeemer Lutheran School in sixth grade and then attended one of the public school systems for junior high and high school. Two of these three young men were sons of the pastors, one graduate and one high school senior. The other six attended public school and were active in our Sunday School program. While in high school seven of the nine generally attended weekly worship while only four of the nine consistently attended youth Bible study. Both high school

seniors were in the college prep programs at their schools. Only one graduate was not preparing to attend college at graduation. This same graduate was not active in worship or Bible study in the year preceding the retreat and had one parent regularly in worship.

On the whole this is a thinking group of youth with a strong family connection to worship and the study of God's Word. They are familiar with biblical teaching and have parents that model a life of worship and study. Since no youth overnight retreat had been held for at least five years (their whole high school career) these youth were also bold to attend this event.

Part One: Understanding the Cultural Context

Life in America

The goal of this project is to help Christians survive and thrive in a culture of choice. This session identifies the world of choices and the unavoidable pervasiveness of choice in American life. The problem is that Christian students can unthinkingly succumb to what Peter Berger calls the "heretical imperative." In other words, they can easily accept the prevalent notion in our culture that life is all about individuality, independence, and self-autonomy. Helping youth to identify the pervasive impact of the culture of choice is the first step in preparing them to withstand the ways Christian faith is typically undermined in a pluralistic culture of choice.

Left unchecked (i.e., accepted unknowingly) this culture of choice may even undermine Christianity and promote an idolatry of choice as described later in Part Three. This opening session sets the stage for them to later see the theological impact the culture of choice has on the way they daily live, think and believe.

This session begins with a series of questions that lead the participants to describe and acknowledge the pervasiveness of choice in American life, in their life. Participants' responses are presented in italics.

What is the place and role of “choice” in our culture?

*You can choose everything
We can choose what we want
Choices are everywhere
Freedom of choice has to do with rebellion...with our nature
We have to make on the spot decisions and we need our faith
Freedom means...more responsibility
Birth control can mean freedom without responsibility (teacher)*

How does choice relate to being Christian in America?

How do you decide your choices?

*Ask yourself—What does God say?
Prayer
In the military my choices will be fewer*

The youth quickly identified with the theme of life in America as a life of many and multiple choices. As they described life in America there was no area left untouched by the need for choice and the importance of choice. Their answers were not probed for theological significance. The purpose of the session is to help youth describe and experience the pervasiveness of choice in American life, in their life.

Part Two: Establishing the Nature of the Bible

Introduction

A culture of choice relativizes the Christian faith. In other words, Christianity can be understood as merely one choice among many world religions. The following two sessions will reaffirm that the Christian faith drawn from the Bible is indeed the viable guide to the real world.

The first session addresses the age-old quest for “truth.” The quest for truth is considered in terms of the distinction between “investigative” knowledge and “interpersonal” knowledge and the insights of John 14:6. While secular colleges and high schools may excel in training their

students in the investigative search for truth and timeless principles they will not lead students to the ultimate truth, which is indeed personal...the person of Jesus Christ.

The second session refutes the notion that the Bible is merely a collection of timeless truths and principles. It also establishes the authoritative and true nature of the Bible as the story of God and His people. This is presented using an extended illustration depicting the Bible as a VII Act Play which also includes modern hearers.

The Search for Knowledge and Truth

This session introduces the distinction between two kinds of knowing: interpersonal knowing and investigative knowing. The two kinds of knowing are presented via illustration and then the youth are asked to reflect on which kind of knowing is more highly prized and why. The goal of this process is to lead the youth to affirm (perhaps unexpectedly) the validity and necessity of interpersonal knowledge as it relates to the quest for ultimate Truth (see John 14:6).

The session concludes by reaffirming the trustworthiness of the Bible without appealing to universal principles and timeless truths. In addition, it calls on teachers of the faith to boldly teach that all explanations of life in this world are to be evaluated according to the real story told in the Bible since it is the most trust worthy guide for exploring and understanding the world as it *really is*.

The session presentation follows.

The English language has the same word for two different kinds of knowing. The first kind of knowing to be addressed and described is what we usually focus on in the pursuit of knowledge and truth. It is “investigative knowing.”

Investigative knowledge is associated with the physical sciences. It is used when making observations. For instance, when I asked the retreat participants, “If you want to know more

about this table what would you do?” Their answer was a series of observations. They began describing the table. They surmised that it was a wooden table approximately 2 ½ feet tall and 8 feet long. It was “*not very sturdy*” and the list went on.

In other words, this kind of knowing often begins by asking questions based on our experience in the world. “In this enterprise we are in control of operations... The things we desire to understand are not active players in the game of learning; they are inert and must submit to our questioning. The resulting knowledge is our achievement and our possession.”⁷ This is investigative knowing.

There is another kind of knowing. This kind of knowing relates to how others come to know us. It is “interpersonal knowing.”

This kind of knowing is based on self-revelation and trust. It is much different than investigative knowing. It explains why acquaintances share superficial information and may even rely on investigative knowing techniques which allow one to make observations about a person—without having to take the other at their word. The retreat participants correctly identified that interpersonal knowing “*is risky*” and “*You have to be aware of the person’s motives.*” On the other hand, a lasting, trusting relationship must move beyond purely investigative knowing and include the validity of self-revelation accepted by faith. The truth is—self-revelation is accepted on faith.

Youth feel that investigative knowing is more trustworthy since it can be “proven” while interpersonal knowing is based on the trustworthiness of the person sharing information which seems to have more risk.

⁷Newbigin, 10

The stage is now set to consider the central issue regarding the search for knowledge and truth. This next step moves from discourse and general observation to the truth that can only be found in the Bible. Only in the Bible can one discover that the ultimate search for truth is not a search for timeless principles. Such a search would be misguided since ultimate Truth is not impersonal but personal. Jesus tells us “The truth will set you free” (John 8:32 NIV) and four verses later tells us that he is the truth when he says, “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”⁸ And the most noteworthy claim is Jesus’ words “I am...the truth.” (John 14:6 NIV) The Ultimate Truth is personal...because the Ultimate Truth is Jesus! However, at every secular college seeking truth will be reduced to the search for timeless principles. The investigative kind of knowing will take priority. But investigative knowing will never lead to the Ultimate Truth!

The Bible is not a source book for investigating God and life. In other words, the Bible is not a collection of timeless truths and universal principles. Nor is it a collection of myths and fables. Even though some cultures have used myths and fables to tell the story of life’s purpose. The Bible is history. It is a story with real people (genealogies) and real places (archeology). The Bible is the true story of human history. It is the history of God and people, and in this story, one comes to know God. “The business of the church is to tell and embody a story, the story of God’s mighty acts in creation and redemption and of God’s promises concerning what will be in the end.”⁹

⁸ All biblical quotations taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*[®]. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

It is important to unmask both the modern and post-modern perspectives regarding the Bible as a source for truth. The modern assumptions for the discovery of truth are biased against the validity and worthiness of a story for the discovery of truth. This is due to the modern assumption that truth is impersonal and thus will / must be found by investigative knowing, not by the interpersonal knowing of revelation and faith.

But since ultimate truth (i.e., the triune God) is personal, He will / must be found by interpersonal knowing...as revealed in the Bible and accepted by faith. Ultimate truth cannot be found by using one's reason and observation in the magisterial sense. Robert Kolb reminds us that our reason cannot get us to God. "We manage and manipulate the information we gain through our own experiments, our own logic, our own aesthetic sensitivities. Information about God must be learned through another means of learning. It must be heard from the voice of authority, the voice of God himself."¹⁰ And God reveals himself to us in the word made flesh through the word of God in the Bible. The Bible is the story of God and his people.

The late modern or postmodern person is quite comfortable with the validity of a story for finding purpose and meaning in life. However, there is no capacity for evaluating one story against another. Thus the story of God and His people in the Bible is not accepted as The Story...only a story. The postmodern view decries truth claims as a front for the use of coercive power. However, the story of God and people in the Bible, which culminates in the Christ of Calvary, is not a front for coercive power. Rather...in Christ, and in Christians who trust in and follow Christ, one finds loving suffering servants —not coercive power. The beauty of the

¹⁰Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 25.

Gospel is the disarming effect of the suffering Christ who is faithful to His Father and devoted to setting man free from life dictated by the bondage of the fallen will.

The Word of God, by the working of the Holy Spirit, creates faith and is the source of our greatest confidence. Thus the student's proper confidence in the midst of temptations to doubt the validity of their Christian faith as a trustworthy guide to the real world rests in the God who reveals Himself in the pages of the Bible.

The Christian, once enfolded into The Story of the Bible, comes to know that this story is true and liberating. Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31, 32 NIV). As Newbigin states, "The church's affirmation is that the story it tells, embodies, and enacts is the true story and that others are to be evaluated by reference to it."¹¹ In other words, all explanations of life in this world are to be evaluated according to the real story told in the Bible.

Leslie Newbigin states this clearly and boldly as he writes, "The Church's affirmation is that the story it tells is the true interpretation of all human and cosmic history and that to understand human history otherwise is to misunderstand it, therefore misunderstanding the human situation here and now."¹²

Teachers of the faith need to relate this bold truth to our youth. Then youth will know that the Bible is not one guide for life among many but is the most trustworthy guide for exploring and understanding the real world as it *really is*.

¹¹Newbigin, 76.

¹²Ibid., 77

The church proclaims the Biblical story and the Holy Spirit draws into the story those who believe. Outside of embracing the proclamation, there is no way to explain and convince hearers that the story is the most trustworthy. The church affirms the truth of its story “by celebrating it, interpreting it, and enacting it in the life of the contemporary world. It has no other way of affirming its truth.”¹³

Having no other way to affirm the truth of the Bible may at first seem a great weakness to the students. They may naturally respond along these lines: “Can’t we appeal to how wise it is, or how ‘reasonable’ its universal principles and timeless truths?” However, the students will soon see that if the biblical story must appeal to “reasonableness” (or any other source) to verify its truth then “reasonableness” is the ultimate authority, since it is what validates and authenticates the Biblical story. Leslie Newbegin summarized this observation when he wrote: “to authenticate...by reference to some allegedly more reliable truth claim...it has implicitly denied the truth by which it (i.e., the church) lives.”¹⁴

It is our intention and desire that this search for truth will lead youth to affirm or reaffirm their confidence in the God who reveals Himself to them in the pages of the Bible and by faith draws them to Himself. This alone relieves the doubts about the Bible’s status and true nature as the most trustworthy and viable guide for life in this world.

Greatest Story Ever Told: The Bible as VII Act Play

Because there is general confusion as to the true nature of the Bible we must begin by affirming that the Bible is the authoritative telling of how life is. It is also necessary to address

¹³ Ibid., 76.

¹⁴ Ibid.

misuses and misunderstandings regarding the Bible. For instance, the Bible is not properly understood as containing a collection of truths and principles that can be found underneath or hidden within its stories through a process of distillation. Nor is the Bible properly understood according to a therapeutic use, as if it was intended to make adherents feel good—whether or not the Bible contains or is truth. As Marva Dawn writes,

The Revelation is not a book of rules that gives us step-by-step procedures for life. There could never be enough rules to cover all the possibilities, and usually our response to rules and regulations is to resist them. Nor is the Bible a collection of timeless truths from which we draw out basic principles or goals toward which we aim.¹⁵

All of these approaches to the Bible miss the mark of the intended use of the Bible as the master story of God for all people. “Rather, to modify a basic schema from N.T. Wright, the Scriptures must be understood as a master story with multiple narratives that form us as we are immersed in them. We become part of this genuine story as we then live out of the character shaped by all of God’s Revelation.”¹⁶ The Bible is the authoritative master story of how life is. In this master story we learn that the world and all that is in it are creations of one true God, and that all human creatures are accountable to Him (Acts 17). Here is where a person comes to know where they truly stand vis-à-vis God.

In this session the youth will be introduced to the Bible as the story of God and His people which is the reliable guide for life and the source of truth about the human condition and how things really are. Borrowing from Marva Dawn’s expansion of an idea from N.T. Wright, we will present the Bible using a modern day illustration that teaches this important truth with

¹⁵ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999), 53.

¹⁶ Ibid.

insight and freshness. The story of God and His people will be presented as a VII Act Play, a lively and interactive presentation of world history that includes our present time.

Let there be no confusion about the nature of the Bible and one's acceptance of its authority. A person only comes to embrace the Bible as God's Word and the most reliable guide for life in this world by the working of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, one must tell the story of the Bible (both as law and as gospel) in a manner that engages the hearer as an intended participant, fully anticipating the Holy Spirit will be drawing those who hear into the saving story of God and His people the church. This is the only way the salvation story of God and his people becomes the hearers saving story too.

Our goal in this session is to help youth live biblically, that is to see their place in the divine story of salvation and to live as God's dearly loved child. The Bible then is not just "a story," one among many; or "their story," of saints long ago; but most importantly is "the story" true for all and "my story," the viable guide for *my* life in the *real* world. Only in the Bible does one see how life really is. In other words, without the insights of the Bible one is not able to understand the *real* world as it *really* is nor to know one's *real* identity and place in the world.

Now we are ready to describe the Bible as a VII Act Play based on the telling of Marva Dawn.¹⁷

Now let's imagine that a new play by William Shakespeare has just been found. It has never been heard of or produced. It is a VII Act Play, but...Act VI is missing. Now the question is, can this play be produced in a manner that reflects the author's intent? Consider how to produce the play in light of the fact that Act VI is missing. Possible responses could reflect those

¹⁷My expanded version of the VII Act Play and how it was used on the retreat is available in the

of the retreat participants: “*Read the first part to determine the characters.*” “*See how they develop.*” “*Read the last act to see how it ends.*” “*We’d just do the best we can and get the story to the right end.*”

It is important to realize the following insights when considering the VII Act Play. The first five acts and the last act exist. That means the beginning of the story, the introduction of the characters, the introduction of the plot, goals and some of the twists and turns and obstacles along the way are all known. By having Act VII, the conclusion is also confirmed. That means Act VI will involve informed improvisation. In other words, one can draw on what the author has presented in Acts I-V, and always have in mind the conclusion to which it points in Act VII.

To help the participants interact with this new conception of the Bible each participant is invited to draw a symbol to represent the action of God in each of the seven acts. During the retreat a large newsprint banner going around the walls of the room was made into a timeline showing all seven acts of the biblical drama and world history. The youth took turns being the artist drawing on the large timeline.

Act I	The Creation of the World. (Genesis 1:1, 26 & 28)
Act II	The Upward Fall (Genesis 3: 4 - 9) ¹⁸
Act III	God Chooses a People (Genesis 12-Malachi 4)
Act IV	A Savior Comes (Matthew-John)
Act V	The Early Church: God Chooses a People to be a Community in Christ (Acts-Jude)
Act VI	Life Today
Act VII	A Savior Comes Again (Revelation)

This illustration is intended to help the students see that they are a part of something that is bigger than themselves, that they are part of an over arching story, purpose and plan, a plan of

appendix. The Bible references are my addition to this illustration.

¹⁸ See chapter two explanation of Upward Fall based on Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 48-49.

God. In the story of the Bible “they can find forgiveness for their past, purpose for the present and hope for the future.”¹⁹ The story is so powerful because it is so true. It tells the truth and leads us to the Truth. In fact, without the insights of the Bible one is not able to understand the *real* world as it *really is*.

An insight I’ve added to the illustration is that God came into the world to set us free from our futile thinking affected by the “upward fall.” He came and still comes to set us free from our desire to take God’s place. In fact, the Bible becomes our story as the Holy Spirit calls us to faith and we realize the most amazing reality...**God has taken our place...**this is the glory of the cross.

God is still active in the story of salvation. “We have a great advantage over the Shakespearean actors, for as we improvise Act VI in keeping with the spirit of the rest of the drama we know that the Author is still alive!”²⁰ The Author will guide us as we live in “The Greatest Story Ever Told.”

In conclusion, consider just the opposite scenario. In other words, a new seven act play has been found but the only act that is preserved is Act VI.²¹ It is the only part of the play that has been found. Consider which of these two plays would be easiest to complete. Which one would modern participants have a better chance of completing as the author had intended? One might respond as the youth on the retreat: “*You’d never know if you got it right.*” “*It would be anybody’s guess.*” “*There would be no way to know why you were here or how everything*

¹⁹Dawn, 54.

²⁰ Marva J. Dawn, *Is It A Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church’s Children* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997), 44.

²¹ Having only Act VI and the link to evolution are my expansions to the VII Act Play idea.

began.” “*You wouldn’t even know how it would end.*” A sense of hopelessness and frustration are evident when considering life without any sense of what it is all about, and with only the information provided in Act VI.

Sometimes young Christians “take for granted” the teachings of the Bible and miss the ways the Bible safeguards us from other false teaching and living. Therefore it is important to rehearse with them the difference between the Bible’s view of the world’s beginning and the view put forward by the theory of evolution.

According to the story of evolution, there is no God and the world came about by chance, and life began by random acts. In other words, all of life and history is a story...without an author. This is a popular understanding today. No wonder many people talk about not knowing what their purpose is. And many young people are filled with despair and lack hope. They don’t know whom to trust. They are not sure why they are here. This is not surprising when someone takes his or her clues for existence from the authorless idea of evolution.

Sadly, some in this world are convinced all we have to work with is Act VI alone. There is no grand ending; this is all there is. In other words, what we can feel, see, sense, touch and understand today is all a person would have to rely on as they live in Act VI. They are going to have to write, think up or devise a beginning to the whole story and they’ll also have to come up with an ending. And, we know what often happens when we write a story with ourselves in the midst of it. We tend to write the story so that we are the heroes.

Without the real story of God’s activity in and for the world we are destined to create a story that minimizes or eliminates the true God and puts us in His place. This is true because we are bound to see life under the influence of the “upward fall” until God sets us free to be His

people. Only then will we embrace the truth that “The Greatest Story Ever Told” has only one hero: the one true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

Part Three: Addressing the Problem

A serious problem emerges when life in the pluralistic society is contrasted with the God of the Bible. A child of God living in the story of the Bible comes to know that God is God and I am not. In other words, the child of God lives *in* the pluralistic society that promises freedom and control in with and under the life of choice but is not *of* that world. The child of God knows that God determines how life will go. Exposing the pluralistic society’s misplaced self importance is a theological enterprise that involves telling the truth. This is most clearly demonstrated in the biblical teaching of election that follows.

Choosing God

Youth are motivated to discuss choosing the right religion. In our culture of choice they are not only aware of varying denominations but varying religions. Many people are in fact convinced that there can be no certainty regarding the “right” religion. For example, I was asked by students on the high school track team “How do you know if you have the right religion? They are all the same anyway aren’t they?” This is a key topic for Christian youth who may be wrestling with Christianity’s exclusive claim to truth in the face of increasing religious diversity.

The tension point in the retreat is designed to occur in this session. The crisis arises as youth discover the paradoxical truth that choosing one’s religion, though a popular idea even among some Christians, is tantamount to choosing idolatry. In America, a life full of choices is supposed to bring greater freedom. But in matters of faith, pertaining to coming to faith, we cannot and we will not choose the Triune God. We will choose a god that allows us to remain in control, not the God of the Bible who intends to kill us and make us alive again in Christ Jesus.

Therefore any god that we choose is not the real God of the Bible. This is why the Bible clearly states, “You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:16 NIV). The True God is naturally “un-choosable.” Instead, *He* is the one who chooses.

This session introduces two distinct truths: 1) the frightening biblical truth that humans will not and cannot choose the real God of the Bible; and 2) the comforting biblical truth that God chooses His children as described in John 15:16 and Ephesians 1. As the session unfolds, participants will discover that the topic “Choosing God” which is initially full of doubt and uncertainty ultimately provides the greatest rationale for defending and understanding Christianity’s exclusive claim to truth in these pluralistic times.

A description of the session “Choosing God” follows.

It is important to identify the plurality of religions and religious choices in America that teens and adults face today. This is easily done by inviting teens to make a list of religious choices. The following list (generated by retreat participants) is not exhaustive but is representative of the many choices facing teens:

<i>Mormon</i>	<i>agnostic</i>	<i>Wicca</i>
<i>Hindu</i>	<i>atheist</i>	<i>paganism</i>
<i>Jewish</i>	<i>Satanism</i>	

This list demonstrates that there are indeed many different religions and thus it would seem many different choices. However it is not sufficient to merely consider organized religions. The above list is too short to best describe the pluralism of the American scene. It is increasingly popular for teens and others to describe or create their own god.

The apparent choices for belief are as varied as those who address the question “who is god?”

In the midst of this plurality of religious choices Christian teens today are asked “How does one DECIDE which religion or which God is right / best?”

There is a lack of certainty and confidence among Christian teens when addressing this topic. When the retreat participants were asked to describe how they or anyone else can decide which religion or God is right or best their answers betrayed that lack of certainty: “*Each person has their own beliefs,*” one stated. Another replied, “*but they may say things that aren’t really the truth.*” Another answered: “*It’s just faith.*” Still another, “*It’s all about what works for me.*” Other replies included the impact of one’s upbringing citing “*tradition*” and “*parents*” as the source for a person’s decision regarding the right religion. Still another response was, “*You really can’t know which one is best or right.*”

There are many approaches today to choosing one’s religion. Robert Bellah reports a peculiar yet honest approach in his book, *Habits of the Heart*. He relays an interview with a young nurse, Sheila. Sheila has much to say about choosing her religion: “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilism. Just my own little voice.” “It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other.”²² Sheila’s brazenly self-absorbed approach may be shocking to Christian youth. Retreat participants reacted strongly: “*That’s ridiculous.*” “*She says she believes but it’s all about her!*” “*She just listens to her, to herself.*” “*Sinful.*” Sheila shows the potential absurdity that can arise in this quest to choose one’s religion.

²²Robert H. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* Updated edition with a new introduction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 221. He also indicates that Sheila has received a good deal of therapy.

The grand variety of apparent choices and the real possibility of self-serving motives make the quest to choose the right religion or god even more daunting. The story of Sheila is a good reminder that when someone says they do not have a “religion” just a “relationship” with God...more than likely they have put God in a ‘box’ so he can be managed. They are only after what they want out of life for themselves and are not truly interested in God and what He wants. Once again we are back to *motives* and defending our self-rule. This theme seems to keep resurfacing at every turn.

The stage is now set to consider the central issue in the quest to choose the right religion. The next step moves from general observation to the clarifying truth of the Bible. The key question is “What choices do dead people make?” This question is straightforward and obvious. It may even cause laughter as it did among retreat participants who then answered: “*None! Dead people can’t make choices. They are dead!*”

Yet unknown to the youth, this is the key answer to the question of choosing God. Scripture shows the wisdom of God and affirms their answer about dead people making choices: “we are *dead* in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:4 NIV).²³ Based on the sinful condition of mankind we are indeed dead in spiritual matters. We cannot choose God.

The following question then arises, “If we cannot choose God then how is the question of choosing God to be answered?” This can only be addressed by seeking God’s answer. Even a cursory reading of Ephesians 1:1-14 and raising the question “What does it say about choices?” delivers the answer. One can expect responses like the retreat participants who answered confidently:

²³ Emphasis mine

*It is God's work
He chose us before Act 1
We are chosen, in Christ
Chosen when we hear the word of Christ*

Now the careful wording of this session's title "Choosing God" comes more clearly into focus. As the session begins the typical American teen considers the title in light of one's understanding that the individual must somehow sort through the data since he or she is responsible for "choosing God." This however is a murky quest with much confusion and no solid answers as was demonstrated above. Then in light of Ephesians 1 and 2 teens are led to see this session title in a new and surprising way. I am a Christian because the triune God is a "choosing God"...who chose me! How incredible to know that you are in Christ only because God chose you. You did not do it. Nor did you prepare yourself or resist God less than others. God chose you. The turn to truth is powerful. So powerful that when the retreat participants were asked how it felt to be chosen by God they responded: "*Awesome*" "*Wow!*"

This raises a very important question: Why did God choose me? It is important to know the answer. On the retreat the students could not answer this question. It is important to clarify that there is nothing that makes us "choosable" to God. It is purely because of God's love and grace ("God's Riches At Christ's Expense"). According to the Bible, each child of God was chosen "in accordance with his pleasure and will" (Ephesians 1:4-5 NIV). The reason for one's being chosen resides not in self but in God. We have a choosing God.

Martin Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed begins with a clear affirmation of this glorious reality. "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe

in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel....”²⁴

We have a choosing God!

However, the desire to choose is so deep-seated in Americans that it can cause grave confusion and concern in spiritual matters. This is evident in at least two regards. First, it takes away one’s choice in the most important area of existence and this seems a grave injustice. It makes the biblical teaching seem wrong and undesirable. Strong reactions against this teaching can be expected. For instance one retreat participant confronted me “*Pastor, you’re wrong...you can choose God!*” Another responded, “*It denies anything I was ever taught.*” Second, the desire for choice is also embraced by some Christian groups who teach and practice decision theology. Such groups regularly ask people to choose God or make a decision for Christ. This initially caused confusion for one of the retreat participants.

But as was stated earlier we are naturally dead in spiritual matters when outside of Christ (Ephesians 2:4). And dead people don’t choose. While the Holy Spirit is bringing someone to faith they may see it as their own decision but in the most real sense, it can’t be, since we are naturally dead in spiritual matters when outside of Christ. This is clearly taught in question 157 in the explanation of *Luther’s Small Catechism*: “*Why do you need the Holy Spirit to begin and sustain this faith in you? By nature I am spiritually blind, dead, and an enemy of God, as Scriptures teach; therefore ‘I cannot by my own reason of strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.’*”²⁵

This is further clarified: “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16 NIV).

²⁴ Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism*, 17.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

No one has or can or will choose the Triune God...even if one could. Why? Because we are dead in sin...and motivated by the “upward fall”...we can’t choose the real God...only a god that serves our own purposes (i.e., our own ‘god project). This is why the Triune God calls each one to die to self. He will not protect anyone’s “god project” but calls each to die to it. Only as one dies to self can he or she be alive to God and His grace. This is why God must choose us...we would not choose this God, even if we could.

To help the youth understand that one can only see and embrace this reality once chosen by God, I showed the movie *The Matrix* the evening before this session. In the movie Orpheus promises Neo the truth. But Neo will not see the truth until he dies to his old way of life. Likewise, a person can’t know the freedom and wonder of the Biblical truth about being chosen by God until actually in that reality itself.

It is essential to clarify the distinction between choosing one’s god or one having a choosing God. Therefore the following clarifying question may be useful: “So if I choose...what does that make me?” Hopefully others will have the same response as I did on the retreat. Before finishing the question the answer was shouted across the room: “god!!” It became obvious to the youth that choosing one’s religion is indeed idolatry. Deciding which faith system, which god, which religion was the right fit for self meant that self was playing god. The one who chooses is god or God. If I choose then I am god. And if God chooses He is God. Another way to say it is, if a person insists on choosing god...it is their own personal version of Sheilatism.

Once convinced that God is not chosen but is a choosing God it is now time to introduce the next miracle of God. While it is true that no one can choose God, miracle of miracles God uses chosen ones to bring the spiritually dead to know life in Christ. God uses us to choose

them. This happens as the story of God from the Bible is spoken and heard. Chosen ones tell the story of God and his people to the spiritually dead...then in a very real way the story may become their story as God chooses them too.

Thus the very topic that seems to create so much uncertainty and confusion actually brings clarity and confidence. The idolatry of choice is plain to see. Only Christianity teaches and believes that God cannot be chosen but instead does the choosing. Christianity will forever be unique in this way. By God's grace the very topic that creates such doubt and uncertainty provides the greatest rationale for defending and understanding Christianity's exclusive claim to truth in these pluralistic times.

It is important for the youth to know there is only one source for confidence when it comes to the topic of choosing one's religion. The only source of true confidence is knowing that one has been chosen in Christ. Moreover, this means that we are in "The Greatest Story Ever Told." We get into the story by baptism, which we did not choose, just like we did not choose our parents. In baptism God kills the old Adam and makes us alive in Christ.

In "The Greatest Story Ever Told," we know where we came from and our inherent problem with the upward fall. In the story we know that it is necessary for each one to die to self and our personal "god projects" so we can be made alive in Christ. In the story, we also know God's salvation through Jesus, which makes us truly alive. Then and only then can we be free to live and love as He has loved us!

Marriage and Baptism

The session concludes with the topic of dying to self and living alive in Christ. Living life chosen by God and alive in Christ is the only way to be freed *from* one's insidious self love and thus freed *to* truly love another as Christ loved us. This truth may seem too theoretical to some,

so it is introduced in a discussion involving both Christian marriage and Holy Baptism. These practical topics add a sense of reality to the biblical topic of dying to self and living alive in Christ. Chances are that the youth will not have considered that death to self is a necessary prerequisite for the freedom to love another like Christ loved. I wanted the youth to see personal practical examples that illustrate the necessity of dying to self as a prerequisite for being truly free to love.²⁶

It is also possible that youth will not have previously comprehended the power of baptism to form us for selfless living. The application section on Christian Marriage and Baptism is a fitting conclusion for a session dedicated to unmasking the hidden and yet pervasive lie that self-centered choices set one free.

Part Four: Encouraging Discipleship

The child of God lives *in* the pluralistic society that promises freedom and control in with and under the life of choice...but is not *of* that world. In fact, life is at its best when one experiences the freedom of being chosen by God (not choosing god) and living *under* Him in His kingdom. This is stated wonderfully in the meaning of the Second Article, “that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness....”²⁷ In other words, the Christian disciple is living life in God’s world as God’s dear child (see introduction to Lord’s Prayer) trusting God for all that He does and provides.

²⁶ For the extended treatment of this session on marriage and baptism see the appendix.

²⁷ Luther, *Luther’s Small Catechism*, 16.

“Encouraging Discipleship” is a very practical topic that ultimately relates to enhancing one’s vital connection to the living God and His people the church. The use of objects as teaching tools is fitting for this practical aspect of the project. Most of the following sessions use an object to bring clarity to this topic. An object lesson using a vine and its branches (John 15) underscores the absolute necessity of each young disciple being connected to Christ and His church as they move out of their parental home. Though it does not use an object, the “Six Marks of Discipleship” give expression to choices that feed one’s faith and express faith in acts of love.²⁸ A Tupperware® toy used by children to learn their shapes is used in the session “Discovering Your Divine Design.” Here the youth can discover how God made each person for unique service to others and to Him. The final indoor session, involves paper and pencil as each youth writes a “Note to Self.” This is designed to reconnect each youth to all the topics of the retreat that may help them survive and thrive in a culture of choice as they begin their new station in life. The retreat concludes with an outdoor communion worship service where Christ’s body and blood are received in, with and under bread and wine as the greatest faith feeding objects known to the world. During the sermon a buzzer from the game “Taboo” is transformed into a Baloney Detector (a fictitious instrument that alerts one to lies, half-truths and the like). In an effort to connect with hearers on this practical topic many objects are used.

Vine and the Branches

This session introduces youth to discipleship. Discipleship involves choices that effect one’s vital connection to the living God and His people the church. There is both a personal and

²⁸Michael W. Foss, *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 81-110.

communal aspect to discipleship. Discipleship is about being connected. Both the community and the individual make choices that can weaken or strengthen the connection to God and each other. In our culture of choice it is tempting to stop here and miss the other choices that affect our faith and life. In other words, one must not belittle or ignore the role of God and His choices in the ongoing life of discipleship. John 15 clearly places the Father in the midst of our discipleship as the master gardener who prunes where He sees fit...for our good. In other words, God blesses our spiritually-wise faith-feeding choices, and God is also able to work good from our dangerous choices, and the difficulties of life. This session uses an object lesson to address the personal, communal and divine choices that can enhance the connection of each disciple to the living God and His people the church.

The objects used in this session are 1) a healthy vine with branches; and 2) a branch three weeks removed from the same vine. These objects are used to bring alive the biblical image of “the vine and the branches” in John 15. Lord willing, it will highlight the need for each disciple to be connected to Christ and His church so faith can flourish while in college or living away from the parental home.

A description of the session “Vine and The Branches” follows.

It is important to review what is needed to sustain the health and vitality of the living vine with the branches. One can expect answers similar to those supplied by retreat participants:

<i>Water</i>	<i>Sunlight</i>
<i>Soil</i>	<i>Nutrients</i>

The youth may expect the presenter to make the logical connection to what is needed to sustain the health and vitality of their relationship/connection to Christ and His church. This will be addressed in detail during the session “The Six Marks of Discipleship” but not at this time. Instead a potentially odd question is raised: “What if a branch decides it doesn’t want to be part

of the vine? What if it says I've had enough I want to go out on my own and make a go of it?"

Possible responses include: "*It will die.*" "*Can't survive.*" "*That's stupid!*"

No branch will willingly separate itself from the vine. To do so would mean death. But we are tempted in ways the branches are not. We are tempted to remove ourselves from the Vine...from the living Triune God. Consider how long it will take the branch that is cut off of the vine to die. The branch severed three weeks ago does not look healthy...but it's not exactly "dead" by appearance. This causes one to consider how long it would take for one's faith to wither-up. Would a person be able to tell or would it happen so slowly it could nearly go unnoticed to oneself? Satan's trick is that such a death is gradual and slow...a nearly unnoticeable drying up of one's faith.

It is clearly evident that the individual and the community of believers have choices that will effect their connection to God and to each other. However, one must look to the Bible to learn about God who intervenes in one's life. A close look at John 15:1-18 introduces the important role of God as the master gardener who intervenes in the life of every disciple. Jesus teaches that His Father is active in two ways: "He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful" (John 15:2 NIV). Dead wood is ultimately removed from the Vine and burned while the healthy branches are pruned so they can bear more fruit.

One does not ask to be pruned or to be spared. It is the work of the Master Gardener. He prunes as He sees fit. Our comfort is that He promises to work all things for good for His beloved children (Romans 8:28)...even pruning. Pruning may start out hard and in fact may look bad. But God's pruning in a disciple's life will wind up being something through which He graciously works for the good of that disciple and perhaps for the good of others, too. Pruning,

“hard things,” can come in many forms... as retreat participants identified: *loss of job, cancer in the family, trials that come, sickness, when God doesn't seem obviously in charge.*

Jesus says that “pruning” is intended to make us more fruitful. It is God’s way of strengthening our connection to Him and to His body the church. One of the youth noted, *God can do it when we are active in church. Not just when we are unfaithful.* Another added, *sometimes our choices are the things that lead to God doing pruning in our life.*

Pruning and life’s trials and challenges can either strengthen faith or weaken faith. The key is having God’s perspective...not just considering what I want or what I think...but trusting God no matter what.

Marks of Discipleship

Certain practices will “enhance” or “strengthen” one’s connection to the Vine. The retreat participants easily mentioned *prayer, going to church, and reading the Bible.* The “Six Marks of Discipleship” give expression to choices that feed one’s faith and express faith in acts of love.²⁹

Lutherans are familiar with the six chief parts of the catechism that summarize the teaching of the entire Bible into six memorable topics. In this session “Six Marks of Discipleship” are introduced using the acronym “PoWeR SuRGe”:

<u>P</u>RAY	daily
<u>W</u>ORSHIP	weekly (retreats)
<u>R</u>EAD BIBLE	daily
<u>S</u>ERVE	others
<u>R</u>ELATIONSHIPS	with Christians to strengthen faith
<u>G</u>IVE	time, talent, treasure

²⁹ Ibid., 81-110.

The key Bible verse for “PoWeR SuRGe” is “Faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6 NIV).³⁰ The “Marks of Discipleship” related to PoWeR emphasize “faith,” that is our connection to Christ through prayer, worship and reading the Bible. As these are practiced...faith is strengthened...as they are ignored...faith is weakened. The “Marks of Discipleship” related to SuRGe emphasize putting one’s faith into action, which our bible verse calls “love”: service to others, relating to other Christians, and giving generously. These are intended to flow out of the disciple because of his or her connection to the Vine.

These are the “Six Marks of Discipleship.” Youth are invited to discuss each one and to consider how God might be calling them to add a new faith habit to their life of discipleship. If they feel comfortable, invite them to mention which ones they consider a “strength” and which ones they see as areas for “growth.” This reflection could also be completed privately.

Discovering Your Divine Design

This session is a simple introduction to the concept of vocation. While many may be searching for money or prestige as the “payoff” for their college education, the child of God seeks to use their Divine Design to serve. This is my opportunity to affirm that 1) each one of the participants is a unique and wonderful creation of God; 2) God will guide them as they look for the way they can make a difference in this world; and 3) God has indeed designed them to thrive in this world as they trust in Him.

A Tupperware[®] toy used by children to learn their shapes is used in this session to illustrate that each participant has a special “SHAPE” which makes him/her a great fit for

³⁰ Emphasis mine.

important and unique avenues of service to others. SHAPE is an acronym that describes five key components of one's Divine Design that was developed by Rick Warren:³¹

Spiritual Gifts
Hear (or passion)
Abilities (talent and interests)
Personality
Experiences in life

The days after high school are filled with joys and disappointments as one comes to discover their strengths and weaknesses and finds the right "fit" for their talents and interests. Sometimes one can even think that their skills and abilities are of less value than those of others. But such is not the case. Vocational choices are so numerous that picking a major or a career may seem overwhelming at first. But each participant can find comfort in knowing and appreciating one's "unique" SHAPE which enhances his/her ability to see how God made him/her for service to others and to Him!

"Note to Self"

The final indoor session, "Note to Self," is designed to lead youth to actively review and reflect on all the information covered in the retreat. It is hoped that each youth will identify useful information that may help them survive and thrive in a culture of choice as they begin their new station in life. This private "Note to Self" encouraging or exhorting oneself to live as a child of God will be mailed back to him/her one month into the new fall term.

The "Note to Self" will not be opened or read by anyone except the original author. The instructions are: "As a child of God what do think you will need to hear, think about, and

³¹ Richard Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 369-375.

remember so you can survive and thrive as you begin this fall? This is personal; it is your words to you. I will mail it to you in the middle of September. Take a few moments, think, and pray about what to write.” This is the time for each youth to draw personal application for their upcoming fall experience.

Closing Outdoor Communion Worship

The purpose of the closing worship service is to feed faith with word and sacrament. It is time to practice all three faith feeding Marks of Discipleship: prayer, worship and reading the Bible. This is the culminating practicum or the hands on lab experience of the retreat.

An object lesson concludes the teaching portion of the retreat. The object is the buzzer from the party game “Taboo.” The buzzer makes a very loud and obnoxious sound when depressed. In the game “Taboo,” each time a participant says a “forbidden” word a person on the opposing team sounds the buzzer as a warning...in an effort to keep them from using improper words and clues in this guessing game. For this illustration the buzzer is re-named a: Baloney Detector. When lies and half-truths and the like are heard the buzzer is sounded as a warning. (This is the equivalent of a well trained conscience.)

A Baloney Detector is a very useful tool in this world of choices. Often times a person is confused and unable to tell what is real and right. A well trained conscience is a guide that sorts out the errors and lies so the child of God can choose wisely.

But what happens when the battery in one’s Baloney Detector gets low? He or she won’t be able to tell if they are thinking, believing and doing the things of God or the things of the world. So...how does one keep one’s battery recharged?

One’s battery is re-charged by prayer, worship and reading the Bible. When each one is off to college or away from the parental home...will the Baloney Detector still work? Or will

the battery wear out? God has given each participant a gift. He gives Himself and the wisdom of His Word to guide each one through the sometimes overwhelming choices in this life. Staying connected to Him, His Word and His Church will keep one's battery charged and give the benefit of a working Baloney Detector. Today the Lord's supper is God re-charging the battery...so each one can quickly and accurately detect the baloney that is around...and even in oneself.

Prayer time is participatory. Popcorn style prayer allows youth to freely join in. There were prayers of thanksgiving for the break in the weather, safety and the retreat. Others asked God's help that all stay connected to the Vine and be serious about faith.

We closed with a presentation of two books for each youth. A daily devotion book based on the writings of Martin Luther, *By Faith Alone*, and *College Bound* by Kathleen Winkler, intended for youth and parents preparing for college. Each book had a personalized inscription from the three pastors at Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer encouraging faithful living in the years to come.

Follow-up Meetings

Introduction

The follow-up meetings include both a parent meeting and a six-month participant reunion. Each is part of the retreat process to be discussed in chapter three. However each is primarily related to the evaluation of the retreat and the project. Therefore, the details and findings of the two follow-up meetings will be presented in chapter four. An overview for each is provided here in chapter three.

Post-Retreat Parent Meeting

Overview

There are four main purposes of the parent meeting. First, it is necessary to review the four basic issues of the retreat with the parents. It is hoped that sharing these theological insights and demonstrating theological thinking with the parents may prompt further faith conversations between parents and youth.

Second, I am interested in seeking feedback from parents based on their child's comments and attitudes regarding their retreat experience. Parents can provide retreat feedback that will help gauge the effectiveness of the retreat. They may also have insights and ideas for improvement after hearing about the retreat experience from their child.

Third, this is a time to consider how parents, pastors and church members can better care for post-high school youth. The parents will also be polled to ascertain their concerns regarding post-high school youth and will be given the opportunity to brainstorm on ways pastor and people can team up to address these concerns.

Finally, because parents have tremendous influence in the life of their child, each will be asked to please encourage their teen to attend the Six-Month Reunion during Christmas break.

Eleven days after the retreat a Post-Retreat Parent Meeting was held and attended by seven of the nine participating families. The four purposes of the meeting listed above in order of importance were discussed and will be covered in detail in chapter four.

Six-Month Reunion

Overview

The timing of the reunion is strategic. Not only is the reunion a 6-month follow-up on the retreat, it is also the end of their first semester of college or the first semester of their senior year.

The purpose of the Six-Month Reunion is four-fold: 1) to give youth an opportunity to reflect on and tell about their first semester experiences regarding thinking, believing and living in a non-Christian world; 2) to give me an opportunity to evaluate the four basic issues of the retreat as a useful guide for these youth in the past six months; 3) to seek their input on how the church can help youth survive and thrive as Christians in college and high school in light of their first semester experience; and 4) to encourage each youth to live as a disciple of Jesus.

The evaluation phase took place six months after the retreat during Christmas vacation.

The four purposes were originally intended to be addressed as individual private interviews. As the retreat was unfolding, it became clear that the students were not comfortable with such an arrangement. Therefore the individual interview was replaced with one gathering for all nine students that we called the "Six-Month Reunion." However, this also was modified. Due to the apprehension of the high school seniors and the busy schedules of the college freshmen, the evaluation took place in three small groups. As it turned out, it was a change for the better. The three groups in the order that they met were: the two high school students; the three college males that went away to secular institutions; and a diverse group including a technical school student living at home, a young man attending a Christian university and a young lady attending a secular college. Unfortunately one student missed both college meetings. In other words, eight of the nine participated in the reunions.

The format for each of the Six-Month Reunions was much different than the retreat. The retreat was primarily leader driven, with the leader guiding the youth in discovery and passing on information to the students. At the Reunions the leader asked questions and the students passed on information to the leader. My "ice breaker" questions helped the students relax and talk freely. My typical questions were fill in the blank questions like "I really _____ my

roommate.” Or “The biggest disappointment/relief about this fall is/has been _____.” Or
“My favorite part of being out of High School is_____.”

Each of the three reunions was conducted the Lutheran way...with food—pizza and pop!
The Sitting Room provided a nice adult like atmosphere. Meeting in small groups put the
students at ease. Each of the reunion groups met for nearly two hours.

The findings of this six-month evaluation are covered below in chapter four.

CHAPTER 4

THE PROJECT EVALUATED

Introduction

The evaluation of this project is the topic for this chapter. It is important to revisit the four problems first identified in chapter one. The evaluation must consider the retreats effectiveness at addressing each of the four problems that youth face in our pluralist society as stated in chapter one. Those four problems are:

1. youth may doubt their Christian faith is no longer a viable guide to the *real* world they experience;
2. the challenge of choosing one's religion;
3. the lack of a rationale for defending/understanding Christianity's exclusive claim to truth in the face of increasing religious diversity; and
4. the unthinking acceptance of the pervasive pluralistic worldview that promotes individuality, independence and self-autonomy at every turn.

The main objective of this project is “to develop a retreat that will begin to prepare college-bound youth to think as a Christian about their culture and themselves.” Accomplishing this objective must include addressing each of the four problems above. Therefore this evaluation cannot stray from an intentional look at the main objective of the project and the four supporting criteria developed to help assess the effectiveness of the retreat. The four criteria presented in chapter one are re-introduced below.

If this project is to reach its objective and have a positive impact on youth it is important that they are able to evaluate themselves and their world in light of the Christian faith. Otherwise they may indeed doubt their Christian faith is a viable guide to the *real* world they

experience (see problem one above). It is essential that they are able to recognize the influence of pluralism on the behavior, ideas and beliefs of self and others or they will unthinkingly accept the pervasive pluralistic worldview that promotes individuality, independence and self-autonomy at every turn (see problem four above).

Therefore the first criterion to assess the helpfulness of this retreat is

1. that college-bound youth see (characterize and evaluate) the behavior, ideas, and beliefs of this pluralistic world and oneself in light of the Christian faith lived under God.
(Evaluating Self and World in light of the Christian Faith)

It is also important that youth will be able to defend and understand Christianity's exclusive claim to truth in the face of increasing religious diversity (see problem three above) and be able to address the challenge of choosing one's religion (see problem two above). To accomplish this it will be helpful for youth to see their story and God's story intersecting and to embrace the truth and influence of the Bible.

Therefore the second criterion to assess the helpfulness of this retreat is

2. that college-bound youth will be able to recognize temptations to doubt the validity of their Christian faith and be equipped to either consider, begin, or continue embracing the validity of the Christian faith based on the true nature and authority of the Bible.
(Embracing Christianity as Truth)

Life in North America is understood as a life of choices. Under the influence of the pluralistic worldview youth (and adults) unthinkingly accept that life is primarily about individuality, independence, and self-autonomy (see problem 4 above). To combat this pervasive worldly influence it is important for each youth to discover his or her true identity.

That is, each youth is chosen by God as his dear child and set free to live life in community as part of the metanarrative of God's people in the Bible.

Therefore the third criterion to assess the helpfulness of this retreat is

3. that college-bound youth see themselves as baptized children of God (disciples) living out their Christian faith in connection to God's people in the continuing story of salvation which gives them the certainty of forgiveness for their past, purpose for their present and hope for their future (discipleship). (Living the Christian Life as part of the Ongoing Salvation Story)

Christian parents of youth embarking on life after high school will benefit from a helpful and active partnership with the church. Sometimes this is not sought by parents or offered by the church. This project will seek to inform parents of the need for their child to grow in theological thinking. Retreat participation is one way to address all four problems listed above. The parental component of this project will also help parents grow in their theological thinking.

Therefore the fourth criterion to assess the helpfulness of this retreat is

4. that parents of youth embarking on life after high school will participate in the parental component of the project and appreciate the efforts of their church to help their children think critically and theologically so they are more likely to remain faithful after high school. (Parental Support)

These four criteria serve as the basis for presenting the findings of this project. Findings relating to procedural matters will also be presented. After presentation of all the findings this chapter takes up the topic of evaluation and analysis. A careful analysis of these findings will lead to further implications for this project and conclusions regarding this project's helpfulness

in reaching the objective “to develop a retreat that will begin to prepare college-bound youth to think as a Christian about their culture and themselves.”

Project Findings

Introduction

We will consider the findings of this project in light of each of the four criteria. Each criterion will be treated separately. Then the findings relating to procedural matters will be considered. The findings of this study are drawn from four sources of information: 1) the comments of participants during the retreat; 2) the initial follow-up questionnaire at the conclusion of the retreat; 3) the post-retreat parent meeting; and 4) the six-month reunion with students conducted in three different small group meetings.

The six-month retreat reunion with face to face interviews is the most significant source of information for the purposes of evaluation. Unlike the retreat itself the reunion was not about the leader dispensing information but more about the participants telling how life is as a college freshman or high school senior. This information was gathered after the retreat and in the midst of the challenges the retreat was intended to address. Therefore it will be given first priority in the presentation of findings relating to criteria one through three. Likewise, when presenting the findings for criterion four (i.e., Parental Support) the parent meeting information has a similarly high status and priority.

The findings that follow were originally spoken or written by either the participants or parents. The presentation of project findings begins with criterion one. The findings are identified in a numerical sequence that continues unbroken from finding one regarding criterion one through finding twenty-four regarding procedural matters. This numbering system will assist with later references to the findings in the analysis section.

Project Findings according to Criterion One

Criterion One:

that college-bound youth see (characterize and evaluate) the behavior, ideas and beliefs of this pluralistic world and oneself in light of the Christian faith lived under God.

(Evaluating Self and World in light of the Christian Faith)

Introduction

Criterion one was established to assess the helpfulness of this project in reaching its ultimate objective “to develop a retreat that will begin to prepare college-bound youth to think as a Christian about their culture and themselves.” According to criterion one youth will be able to think Christian by evaluating their culture and themselves. It is important to evaluate behavior, ideas and beliefs in light of the Christian faith, not just according to current pluralist notions based on radical self-autonomy. This project is all about thinking Christian and living life under God, not playing god and living life to satisfy self.

The findings from the Six-Month Reunion will illustrate retreat participants’ critical and theological thinking regarding pluralism with special emphasis on its effects on others. The findings from the Retreat and the Follow-up Questionnaire describe pluralism’s impact on the participants themselves.

Findings from the Six-Month Reunion

1. *Relativism is so ingrained in the life of a student in high school or college that it is not discussed or debated...it is accepted and lived.*

This became clear as students answered the following question about relativism: “Did anyone talk about relativism or pluralism?” The high school students mentioned class mates who believe “it’s all the same God, just different ways of getting to God.” According to the college students no mention was made regarding either relativism or pluralism in the classroom or the dorm room. However, one college male opined, “Maybe the fact that no one is talking

about it is even more significant.” His observation was affirmed by the others. Relativism and pluralism are not talked about openly...they are lived and accepted.

2. *Evolution was rejected by high school and college students and one college professor as a godless model for understanding the beginnings of life and how to do live today.*

When I asked about evolution the high school students each mentioned a recent youth group Bible study on evolution that positively impacted their ability to reflect on the claims of evolution and to write about them for class assignments. One wrote a paper stating that “Schools teaching evolution are brainwashing kids starting in third grade. Teaching that we come from a puddle of goo does not support the parents’ views and confuses the kids. It assumes God didn’t create.” The other student added “Evolution should only be taught as a ‘theory’ with both sides presented—creation too!” They both used arguments from the video series shown at church to counteract the evolution evidence.

One college student studied evolution during an astronomy class. He indicated that he had to study it and give the expected answers on the topic but he “didn’t believe it.” Another college freshman mentioned taking a biology class at a Big Ten school where the professor talked about his own beliefs which the student described as basically Christian and then went on to teach classic evolution. In the college setting both students and a professor dealt with evolution but did not embrace it as true.

3. *Students noticed that faith based topics were more readily addressed in high school classrooms compared to college classrooms due to formatting issues.*

The college students observed the difference the discussion and lecture formats had on the topics that were talked about in each setting. “Class during high school was all about conversation and discussion. So if a student brought up God or religion then we all talked about

it.” “But” another stated, “in college it is lecture. Teachers teach. There’s no discussion.” This observation will prove instrumental in the analysis section to follow.

4. The common locus for decision making among peers was immediate gratification.

One student indicated that it was common for some acquaintances to seek relieve from life’s stress through drugs, alcohol, or picking on others. “Kids say, ‘had a bad day, lets go smoke some weed.’” Personal decision making is usually about “Money, or personal gain...whatever will be fun. Not thinking about what will help or hurt others around them.” Another voiced the danger of decisions based on immediate gratification saying, “Bad choices are based on considering only immediate consequences. Good choices are based on looking further down the road—long term consequences.” Eliminating the need to study for a test is another way to express the desire for immediate gratification. In both high schools widespread cheating scams that involved copying or stealing the answer keys to teachers’ tests involved 20 or more students.

5. Students had to face the reality of personal limitations in spite of the cultural mantra that a person can achieve whatever they put their mind to.

When one group of freshmen was asked what topics need to be covered with those heading off to college the topic of expectations and limitations was immediately raised. One student had learned and wanted others to be warned that “You can’t do anything or everything you set your mind to.” Another concurred that “the idea that you can achieve anything you set your mind to” is now harder to accept as real.

This also led to a discussion about self reliance versus trusting in God.

Clearly the retreat participants were able to verbalize the impact of self-autonomous and destructive life choices around them in high school and college, in the classroom or the dorm

room setting. But the final examples also demonstrate how difficult it is to see the effects on oneself.

Findings from Retreat Comments and Follow-up Questionnaire

6. *Without biblical instruction youth argue against and reject election because it curtails their ability to choose God.*

The youth debated and even argued against election during the retreat session “Choosing God.” They were not about to surrender their part and place in the choosing of God and the Christian faith. “Pastor, you’re wrong...you can choose God!” Another responded, “It denies anything I was ever taught.” Only after careful and detailed Bible study would they accept that they could not and would not choose the God of the Bible. Ultimately the jarring truth of Ephesians 2 helped them see that dead people cannot make choices: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,...But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (Ephesians 2:1, 4a NIV).¹ They came to understand that their desire to participate in and secure their own salvation was just another example of the “upward fall” in action.

By the end of the retreat, on the follow-up questionnaire, they clearly ascribed their salvation to the work of God alone. When responding to the question “What did you learn about yourself?” Three either mentioned being chosen by God or that they did not choose God. Two others included this same information while answering other questions. Five of the nine changed their beliefs about their ability to choose the living God. Another participant did not mention it

¹ All biblical quotations taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*[®]. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

only because he had previously come to understand this great truth during another presentation of this material. By the end of the retreat they were better able to understand their own struggle to not be overcome by the stronghold of the self-autonomous way of life in North America.

7. *Youth are so effected by self-autonomy that they envision staying connected to God without the help of the Christian Community in worship.*

A striking example of the pervasiveness of self-autonomy comes from the follow-up questionnaire regarding their answers to the question “What do you think will be the greatest challenge for you next year in college or in the work force?” It is telling that most of the youth describe their challenge in terms of staying strong in the faith by remaining connected to God.

Six out of the eight written responses described their greatest challenge in the coming year in terms of staying connected to God: “*Making God the primary influence in my life.*” “*Stay connected to God...not falling.*” “*Staying strong in my beliefs and falling into temptation.*” “*My fear of being open, I need to be more open to others about myself and my faith.*” “*My challenge will be to keep the faith.*” “*Trying to keep God in it all.*”

When asked “What can you do now to prepare for that challenge?” all nine youth wrote an answer. Six of the youth mentioned prayer (one of these also included reading the Bible with prayer). A seventh youth did not mention prayer but wrote “Start good habits such as continuously read in the Bible.” In other words, seven of the youth listed either prayer, reading the bible or both as the best way for them to prepare for their upcoming challenge in college or the work force. This was the focus of the teaching on “PoWeR SuRGe”: Pray daily; Worship weekly; Read the Bible daily; Serve others; Relate with other Christians and Give a tithe and beyond.

These seven all picked marks of discipleship related to PoWeR which emphasizes one’s connection to Christ: prayer, worship and bible reading. As these are practiced...faith is

strengthened...as they are ignored...faith is weakened. Their answers seem to indicate that they are seeking a strong faith now and in the future.

However, it is interesting to note that not one of them mentioned worship. Each picked a mark of discipleship that can be practiced privately and often is practiced privately. Could it be that they are planning to face their challenges with God's help but not the help of the Christian community? Even while they face the struggle to be connected to God and not embrace the cultural influence toward self-autonomy they express their connection to God using self-autonomous examples. Even at the close of the retreat they remain somewhat unaware of the pervasive and destructive nature of the American quest for self-autonomy and its effect on their own beliefs, behavior and thinking.

Project Findings according to Criterion Two

Criterion Two:

that college-bound youth will be able to recognize temptations to doubt the validity of their Christian faith and be equipped to either consider, begin, or continue embracing the validity of the Christian faith based on the true nature and authority of the Bible.

(Embracing Christianity as Truth)

Introduction

Criterion two addresses the need to recognize the temptations to doubt or deny Christianity when confronted with other organized belief systems and the prevalent pluralist view of life lived for self, not under God. The key to resisting such temptations and to embracing the truth of Christianity is based on one's understanding of the true nature and authority of the Bible. Otherwise any persuasive argument or fad will overwhelm the young Christian. According to criterion two it is essential for the Church to teach youth to trust God and His word in the Bible.

The Bible tells of God and His relationship with His chosen people and tells how life is. The following examples show how participants recognized “false” attempts to describe how life is. Such attempts do not fit with Christianity and the Bible from which it comes.

Findings from the Six-Month Reunion

8. Students were alert to misuses of the Bible and false assumptions regarding humanity.

The question “What did you notice about the assumptions people make about man’s abilities, choices, and character?” lead to the following two observations.

One senior mentioned reading an essay in class (an honors class for college credit) that clearly addressed this topic. The student stated “The author said because man disobeyed God a wonderful new world came into existence. In other words, ‘man’s development’ was due to his disobedience. The author quoted the Bible to support his ideas. But when I used the Bible to refute his misquotes and half-truths my teacher marked me down. If he could use the Bible why couldn’t I? I got a B- and my teacher says she is a Christian.”

A freshman responded to the same question by indicating that the topic was not addressed in class as such. “But the general idea is that there is nothing man can’t do. Man can do what ever he wants. But there was no talk about God doing anything.”

His observation noted that there are significant unspoken assumptions about man and God that are operating in the classroom and in our culture.

Findings from Retreat Comments and Follow-up Questionnaire

9. Students embraced the biblical truth about God being a choosing God.

Perhaps one of the greatest evidences of the temptation to doubt Christianity was described as finding number one regarding the Retreat and the Follow-up Questionnaire above in the conclusion to criterion one. The biblical teaching about a choosing God sure seems out of place

and even nonsensical in a culture of choice. The youth fought this idea until they examined the Bible carefully on the topic. Upon close review of the Bible the participants started seeing their own inability to choose the real God of the Bible who kills and makes alive again. Eventually the students came to see that being a choosing God makes Him a God of grace who is loved and trusted by those who are chosen.

10. Youth do not have a strong sense of the overall story of the Bible and their own place in that story as their own metanarrative.

This is evidenced by the fact that on the written evaluation of the retreat only one participant gave special note to the helpfulness of the VII Act Play as a way to understand God and his people in the past and today. He appreciated “The 7 Act analogy and how it fits our life.” But when the high school students were asked about the VII Act Play during the reunion one commented, “More fun than useful.”

Project Findings according to Criterion Three

Criterion Three:

that college-bound youth see themselves as baptized children of God (disciples) living out their Christian faith in connection to God’s people (the church) in the continuing story of salvation which gives them the certainty of forgiveness for their past, purpose for their present and hope for their future (discipleship).
(Living the Christian Life as part of the Ongoing Salvation Story)

Introduction

Criterion three addresses the topics of identity and community in relation to thinking Christian about culture and self. Youth today are under the influence of the pluralist worldview which means they will unthinkingly accept that life is primarily about individuality, independence, and self-autonomy. To combat this pervasive worldly influence it is important for each youth to discover his or her true identity. In criterion three youth are reminded that each of

them is chosen by God as his dear child in baptism and then set free to live life in community as part of the metanarrative of God's people in the Bible.

Findings from the Six-Month Reunion

11. During college the youth experienced something new to them...loneliness.

The topic of loneliness was raised when the youth were asked "What topics would help high school seniors be best prepared for college?" Regarding loneliness one freshman stated, "I never felt it in high school but it's real in college." Another added, "You don't feel wanted or loved." Another added, "There is lots more time to kill. In college we are in class 15 hours of the week. In high school we were in class 15 hours in just two days." When asked "How did knowing Jesus help you this fall?" one participant mentioned that you always know you are "loved by God." This was also mentioned by another young man who said this was how he dealt with his loneliness, "I know I am loved by God. College can be very lonely."

12. Even in these pluralist times of individuality and independence the youth clearly have a need for community.

This need for community is related to the sense of loneliness mentioned above. The need for community was largely met with friends. Two mentioned fraternities, most mentioned the importance of having good friends to hang around with over the weekend. Many mentioned the importance of their new Christian friends. According to the freshmen, the selection of friends is a key aspect of first semester college life. One participant said, "The most important choice at college is what friends you pick." Another young man talked about the prevalence of drugs and how hard it was to pick friends who didn't want drugs. He said, "Only one friend I knew was a Christian." Another added, "Pick friends that share the same view of acceptable weekend choices." Those in the group each had different criteria for good friends. One young man

decided he would not drink in college, so he found a group of friends with the same views, and then didn't have to wrestle each weekend about going to the drinking party or not.

13. While youth are predisposed to consider their spirituality in self-autonomous terms they still desire and seek spiritual community.

Each rated their worship pattern compared to the previous year. Four noted a decrease in their corporate worship, three saw the same pattern as the year before, one actually increased their worship participation. All youth mentioned the need to remain connected to God. Earlier, on their retreat follow-up questionnaire, each noted that this would be accomplished by prayer and bible reading during college or senior year of high school. Not one of them mentioned staying connected to God via worship. All took an individualist approach to keeping strong in their faith, as described above under criterion one. Yet as the year unfolded their behavior was more Christian than their thinking on this topic had previously indicated. They did connect to God in corporate worship.

14. Each of the students felt they were learning to trust God more which helped keep their faith as strong as or stronger than it was before entering the fall term.

The students were asked, "Compare your faith this fall to your faith life this summer. After this fall is it stronger, weaker or the same?" One of the high school seniors replied "I think my faith is definitely stronger after this fall. I've been learning to trust God more in things—not just doing what I think, but praying about it. I was a captain this fall and the coaches and players came to me when there was a problem. I prayed about what to do, especially when I talked with coaches about problems players had with them." The other mentioned the ebb and flow of his faith life—"with the retreat and then the servant event the fall started real strong...then ebbed. I have a strong belief that I know God is helping me in everything I do, I know He is there, but not, like a little kid who just blindly accepts things, I know it."

Each of the college students also felt their faith was either the same or stronger because it was tested and they were learning to trust God more. “It is the same, not growing but not decreased. I still go to church every week and other activities.” Another stated, “My faith is stronger now on my own. I can’t rely on parents—I have to go back to God.” Another replied, “My faith is tested and still there, even stronger.” One did note that his faith was “down a little bit” due to a lack of faith building activities.

Findings from Retreat Comments and Follow-up Questionnaire

15. Baptism was not specifically mentioned yet the value of a Christian spouse was.

Even though the topic of baptism is central to this retreat and to life as a Christian, baptism itself was not specifically raised by the youth as they completed their retreat follow-up questionnaire or during the Six-Month Reunion. However, during the session on “Choosing God,” the youth were introduced to God’s work of choosing us through baptism. So they may have indirectly had baptism in mind when the youth mentioned that they were chosen by God on the follow-up questionnaire.

However, one student did mention the importance of Christian marriage on the follow-up questionnaire and at the reunion. Since Christian marriage was treated as an example of baptismal living on the retreat this is an indirect reference to baptism. A Christian raised in a Christian home has been learning from Christ and from one’s family to live with the community in mind in a selfless manner. A non-Christian, on the other hand, may be completely influenced by the self-autonomous, self-absorbed understanding of life. The value of a Christian spouse was seen for the first-time as someone who has been doing life selflessly under the influence of God’s selfless love which is excellent preparation for a true marriage where two become one.

Project Findings according to Criterion Four

Criterion Four:

that parents of youth embarking on life after high school will participate in the parental component of the project and appreciate the efforts of their church to help their children think critically and theologically so they are more likely to remain faithful after high school.
(Parental Support)

Introduction

Criterion four addresses the need to include parents in helping youth think Christian as they prepare for life after high school. If parents are not supportive of the retreat, then they are not likely to encourage their children to attend. The involvement of parents is also an indication that they are interested in their children remaining faithful after high school. According to criterion four, it is essential for the church to include the parents in helping youth take the next steps of faith and life.

Findings according to the Post-Retreat Parent Meeting

16. Parents appreciated their child being invited to the retreat.

Parents for seven of the nine youth attended the parent meeting twelve days after the retreat. They all expressed their appreciation to me and the church for including their child in the retreat.

17. Parents expressed concerns regarding their post-high school youth.

Parental concerns related to social, academic, and spiritual aspects of college life. Their comments included concerns about the kinds of friends they would make, finding the right major and being serious about their studies, as well as keeping their faith.

18. Parents expressed ways to keep recent graduates connected to the church.

Each wanted to see the church build on this caring concern and stay connected to each graduate of the class of 2003. In an effort to keep the youth connected to their church two

parents decided to start a prayer partners ministry for all the graduating class of 2003, including those unable to attend the retreat, and those not planning to attend college. They suggested having parents from the graduating class sponsor the prayer partner ministry for their kids. Then it doesn't have to be a "college" thing but for every graduate whether working or attending college. It could continue as long as the parents desire but should be organized for at least the first year after graduation. Parents also wanted their children to be connected to the church via the monthly newsletter and the quarterly devotion booklet circulated to members' homes: *Portals of Prayer*. They suggested collecting each graduates email and making it available to members who may want to send a periodic note of encouragement.

19. The parents shared feedback on their child's comments and experience at the retreat.

Each one heard a lot about the tubing and all suspected that the youth would not have come if not for the "fun" attraction of the lake activities. One parent recounted their child's comment that there was "lots of Bible study, Mom." To which Mom asked, "Would you do it again?" The reply was, "Oh, yeah!" Others also expressed their child's willingness to do it again. There were no concerns expressed by the parents about the content or any other aspect of the retreat.

20. Parents had different levels of awareness regarding the two books given out at the retreat.

Some had already begun reading and discussing *College Bound* with their child in an effort to be better prepared for their child's departure for college and to keep them connected to Christ and His church. Some were not aware that the resource had been distributed at the retreat. And some mentioned seeing their child reading it. Parents came to discover that this book is basically an encyclopedia or almanac full of info for the first year students and their parents.

Most were not aware that the devotion book *By Faith Alone* had been given to each youth on the retreat. However, one parent mentioned their daughter brought the daily reading from the

devotion book to their attention because it related to a conversation they were having earlier in the day. The timing of their daughter's sharing was somewhat surprising. She awakened her parents in the middle of the night to tell them what she had just discovered in the devotion reading for that day.

21. Parents wanted to see the retreat be an annual event and suggested an improvement.

The parents suggested this retreat would be a good annual event for high school graduates. After the post-retreat information meeting, one couple suggested that a college freshman attend the next retreat. They suggested that this Christian freshman could then describe college life, the choices the youth will face in the coming months and how to prepare for such challenges.

Project Findings relating to Procedural Matters

Introduction

It is important to consider the findings related to the overall experience of the retreat that address other areas of interest and concern beyond the four criteria stated above. Such topics of interest and concern will be treated below.

Findings from the Six-Month Reunion

22. All participants suggested new topics to be covered in the retreat.

The freshmen gave clear feedback on what topics to cover with high school seniors heading off to college. They wanted a better understanding of why Lutherans believe what they believe; more information about marriage and serious relationships; and felt someone needs to tell them that "you can do anything to set your mind to" is not really true. All agreed that how to choose friends and deal with loneliness are absolutely essential too.

The high school students suggested the following ideas, "Help students find a local Lutheran Church" and "Help them find a way to make time for God."

23. College freshmen and high school seniors expressed interest in a two retreat format for future groups.

The Senior Retreat would cover most of the material from the June 2003 retreat. This material helps students become theological observers of their culture and themselves while preparing for the challenges and rewards of being a senior. They supported my suggestion to add a second retreat that would prepare the youth for the challenges of the college experience in both the academic (i.e., classroom) and the social (i.e., dorm room) realms.

Findings from the Retreat Follow-up Questionnaire

24. The youth shared ideas on the organization of the retreat and how to make it better next time including more time and relating more to college life.

Five of the nine participants indicated the need for more time on the retreat. Some wanted more free time, others wanted more study time and most wanted more of both. They wrote, “Longer stay” “More tubing time and more time” “Staying longer maybe two nights” Another added, “I wish we could have had more open discussion time, so that I could learn about what others thought.” Later she also commented, that “the openness of the group” could have been improved and suggested “more activities that tie into the discussion.”

Another suggested that participants be invited to submit their own questions in advance of the retreat based on the retreat topic. This would give good insight into the needs of the youth and could inform or supplement the topics for that retreat.

Two students indicated the retreat didn’t specifically prepare them for college but prepared them for life.

Analysis of Project Findings

Now it is time to engage in a careful analysis of these findings. This analysis may lead to further implications for this project and conclusions regarding this project’s helpfulness in

reaching the objective “to develop a retreat that will begin to prepare college-bound youth to think as a Christian about their culture and themselves.”

An analysis of the first series of findings lead me to see that the participants are clearly impacted by the pluralist way of life. For example, finding one identifies that relativism is accepted and lived out not examined and guarded against. There are also significant unspoken pagan assumptions regarding man and God that operate in classrooms and conversations with peers according to finding eight. The default position for thinking about remaining close to God after high school was conceived in individualistic ways that ignored corporate worship in finding seven. The strength of the self-autonomous way of doing life was revealed in finding six when youth initially fought against the notion of a choosing God. If one lives an unexamined life, the natural tendency will be to make decisions that center on immediate gratification as demonstrated in finding four. And because we are supposed to be self-autonomous individuals, we should be able to do what we want and achieve what ever goals we can conceive. But finding five reveals the pain of that lie.

Each of these findings relates to an unspoken assumption about life lived for self that does not prepare youth to live life as God designed it under him and in community with others. Therefore the church and its leaders must unmask these hidden assumptions and talk about the alternate way of understanding life lived under God and in community.

Is it a surprise that youth living in a pluralist age rampant with individualism do not see themselves as part of a greater metanarrative, especially the overarching story of God and his people as described in the Bible? No, it is not surprising but it is debilitating. Finding ten identifies participants’ inability to understand faith and life in view of such an overarching story. This is an honest conclusion especially when one is unable to embrace and celebrate that God is

a choosing God as described in finding nine. The sense of seeing oneself as part of the story of God comes from knowing God as a choosing God and seeing oneself and other Christians as this generation of “chosen ones.” We are chosen by God today just like those who were chosen by God in previous generations as described in the Old and New Testaments. Perhaps this also explains why participants in finding fifteen did not mention baptism, the rite of God’s choosing which places Christians in the community and in the story of God with their new identity as His children.

Midway through the findings the topic of loneliness comes into play. This topic was not addressed on the retreat but was identified during the Six-Month Reunion and discussed above under finding eleven. It was heartening to hear two young men describe how they coped with loneliness by reminding themselves whose they are. While the youth did not mention baptism they did hearken back to the strong comforting reality that they are “loved by God.” This is baptism talk and new identity talk. This loneliness also led them to seek community. Finding twelve highlights their observation to choose friends wisely as they are building a new network of care and community away from home. Even in this individualistic culture participants discovered their need for friendship with others and for worship with others (see finding thirteen). The Christian community has much to offer youth at this stage in life and would be wise to actively build links to those living away from home.

Parents of the participating youth were vocal with their concerns for those heading away from home according to finding seventeen. They want their children to remain connected to the church and for the church to remain connected to their children. And according to finding eighteen they are willing to get involved to see that this happens.

Both parents and participants offered suggestions on how to improve the retreat.

According to finding twenty one the parents would like to see a more hands on connection to the aspect of preparing for college. They suggest inviting a current freshman to meet with those preparing to be freshmen. This current freshman could then describe the challenges and joys of campus life and how to prepare for them. The participants wondered if the retreat actually was preparation for college according to finding twenty four. They sensed that it was more about living Christian but not living Christian as a college student. With this in mind the notion of a second retreat to address the needs and ideas more specific to preparing for the college experienced was shared. According to finding twenty three this was readily embraced. The college freshmen share from their own experience a list of topics that the next group of freshmen should be prepared for and the high school seniors shared what they expected would be needed for their coming year in finding twenty two.

The final analysis of these findings addresses the observation regarding high school classroom discussion and college classroom lecture as related in finding three. The youth are more likely in our community to have faith related conversation in the high school classroom than in the college classroom. It would seem that providing the retreat for high school seniors would allow them to better contribute to and be prepared to stand firm during high school classroom discussions regarding God, faith, and life. The two high school students may have felt out of place at the retreat because they were not leaving high school and heading to college life. But they seemed to be uniquely positioned to gain the insights of the retreat regarding the culture of choice and a God who chooses and the marks of discipleship while still in the faith friendly environment of family and church. They had the ongoing support of home and congregation

feeding a more mature faith with weekly worship, Bible study, daily devotions, and Christian conversation.

Concluding Observations

This observation about the timeliness of the retreat for those entering their senior year of high school was the beginning of my seeing an inherent weakness in this project. I was hoping to have a significant impact on these nine youth, but it was a retreat with only six hours of teaching time. My hopes were unrealistic. The time together was too short.

Considering the impact of the retreat on the high school seniors and the college freshmen led me to another conclusion. These young men and young women are largely formed in their thinking and believing by the time they near the end of high school or the beginning of college. While this was the only opportunity I had to share this information with this group of teens it clearly is not the best time to have a significant and lasting impact on them. In other words, why wait till this late in their lives to engage them in more deliberate theological thinking about themselves and their world?

After careful analysis it appears that this retreat was too little too late. This also explains why the youth could not accurately evaluate the impact of pluralism on their own spiritual life as detailed in the findings regarding criterion one. This project also did not take seriously the role of the home in the faith formation of each youth. This retreat assumed that a trusted and trained theologian could have significant impact on youth in a six-hour time of intense teaching and reflection. But it did not account for the most significant influence on their faith and life...their parents and home life. Those with a strong Christian home life where parents integrated faith and life into their own daily activities and the daily activities of the family were more likely to be faithful in high school and college. If the home is the most influential arena for faith formation

that lasts a lifetime, then a project that wants to help youth think Christian must ultimately be including parents. This project did not account for this. There was only a 20 minute overview of the theological content of the retreat with the parents in the post-retreat parent meeting. The parents were very supportive of this project and its objective, but there appeared to be no intentional ongoing effort in the home to prepare their child for the challenges of faith and life in college. I am not sure that they are taking seriously the risks and rewards of the next steps in life for their teens.

Even in the face of the critical analysis stated above, yes, I believe that the project met its main objective “to develop a retreat that will begin to prepare college-bound youth to think as a Christian about their culture and themselves.” It did begin to prepare them. But wouldn’t it be best to begin earlier and to intentionally include the parents and the home in this theological enterprise? Therefore, as the project has progressed I believe there are more effective ways to reach this objective. These will be shared in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Contributions to Ministry

Introduction

It is always hoped that one's studies and experiences can one day bring a benefit to others in some way. So it is with this project. It is my hope that the teachings of the original retreat can be a blessing for others in their ministry. The first three contributions to ministry that are listed below come directly from the original retreat. I am equally excited to share new insights and applications to ministry as this project has been updated and refined. The fourth contribution to ministry listed below contains some of the additional benefits that are arising from the next generation of this project.

Going Against the Current in the Local Youth Ministry Scene

As a father who has sent two sons off to college, I have been reflecting on what each youth needs in the high school years to survive as a Christian in this anti-Christian culture. The stories my sons tell me about life at college make me wonder if we as parents are taking seriously the few years we have to influence our sons and daughters to think Christian and live holy in a pagan world.

To complicate matters, some youth groups in our area and throughout North America are focusing on entertainment and games. I am periodically asked why we don't have a live rock band or lots of video games for kids to play in our youth room. The thriving youth ministries of neighboring churches emphasize these things. Yet there is little or no time devoted to the Bible and its message. That is the equivalent of playing with youth in the kiddie pool instead of

teaching them to swim...as if that would be adequate preparation for swimming the rough seas of life.

I regularly ask high school parents, “How is your child’s faith being fed and strengthened so they will be ready for the increasing challenges and temptations that will naturally confront them when they leave your home?” In other words, what are churches and homes doing to see that youth will be able to swim strong in the rough seas of life? Will our youth be able to think and live as Christians in an increasingly unchristian culture?

We cannot let our sons and daughters leave high school (or enter high school) without good “swimming lessons” for the rough seas of life. This project, “Helping Thinking Christians Survive and Thrive in a Culture of Choice,” is a valuable component of youth ministry that takes seriously the need to teach youth in this culture to swim against the prevailing current...a swim that is more challenging than swimming the English Channel. Because this project takes seriously the need to teach our youth and their parents to think theologically (and get out of the kiddie pool), it can make a valuable contribution to ministry in North America!

Establishing the Nature of the Bible

The Bible is the authoritative guide for life and the source of truth about the human condition and how things really are. However, youth today may not feel comfortable claiming the Bible as a source of authority in this pluralistic society, even in terms of “spiritual” topics. This project makes a contribution to ministry by addressing this concern and connecting youth to the reality that ultimate truth is interpersonal and not merely investigative (see chapter three above). This project also addresses two prominent mistaken notions 1) that the Bible is primarily a collection of truths and principles that can be found underneath or hidden within its stories through a process of distillation and 2) that the Bible is properly understood according to a

therapeutic use, as if it was intended to make adherents feel good—whether or not the Bible contains or is truth. These mistaken notions are replaced with the teaching that the Bible, according to its true nature, is the master story of God and His people that gives the authoritative account of how things are. In this master story we learn that the world and all that is in it are the creations of one true God, and that all human creatures are accountable to Him (Acts 17). Here is where a person comes to know where they truly stand vis-à-vis God.

It is a great contribution to ministry to help youth live biblically, that is, to see their place in the divine story of salvation and to live as God's dearly loved child. The Bible then is not just "a story," one among many; or "their story," of saints long ago; but most importantly is "the story" true for all and "my story," the viable guide for *my* life in the *real* world. Only in the Bible does one see how life really is. In other words, without the insights of the Bible one is not able to understand the *real* world as it *really is* nor to know one's *real* identity and place in the world. For this reason, the extended illustration of the Bible as a VII Act Play will be a great contribution to ministry to youth and adults alike. The ongoing expansion of this topic has also resulted in a helpful teaching resource "A Guide to Interpreting the Bible For 8th Graders and their Parents" (See appendix) This short and interactive foray into the nature of the Bible and how to interpret it is a useful tool for other parents, pastors, confirmation teachers, day school and Sunday school teachers too!

"Choosing God" in Biblical Terms

The study of election certainly seems out of place in our culture of choice. And for this reason it is usually avoided. However, the study of election in chapter two and its application to the life of retreat participants in chapter three demonstrate that one's election is the antidote to the typical Christian's unthinking embrace of choice regarding the choosing of one's own

religion or choosing the right god. This is a topic that impacts all who live in this culture of choice—not just youth. It is common to hear people of all ages talk about choosing god. And the fact that there are so many choices creates a real and haunting uncertainty about the validity of Christianity’s exclusive claim to be the one true faith.

But one’s election can lead to an amazing certainty. The title of this session can take on fresh and exciting meaning when a person understands that “Choosing God” has two possible meanings. Under the influence of our culture of choice the title will lead one to consider their own choices regarding choosing the right god. But this is not Christian thinking. Outside of Christ one will not will to choose the real God of the Bible who desires to kill and make alive. Therefore one will only choose a weaker substitute to be god...which Christians call an idol. Thus it becomes clear that “Choosing God” is not a description of what any human can or will do, rather it is a description of what God does.

The title of this section “Choosing God” states the truth that God is the one who chooses us to believe. “You did not choose me, but I chose you...” (John 15:16a NIV).¹ Christianity is constituted by God doing the choosing. God elects whom He desires. God does this choosing through word and sacrament. Therefore if one is in Christ Jesus it is because God has chosen him/her to believe. This “Choosing God” sets Christianity apart from all other religions. In fact, the attempt to select one’s own religion or to choose the right god...is an act of idolatry. Another way to say it is, the one who chooses is either God or trying to be god. To be in Christ

¹ All biblical quotations taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*[®]. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

means that God has chosen you. This seals Christianity's exclusive claim to be the one true faith. Only Christianity maintains that God does the choosing not the individual!

These insights are a great contribution to ministry in North America. Youth and adults can find great comfort in their own election and can identify the idolatrous nature of attempting to choose their own religion or god. May God lead our beloved church to readily teach election so as to combat the idolatry of choice and give God all the glory for the miracle of salvation!

Contributions Due to Project Delays

Unanticipated delays in completing this project have also brought unexpected blessings. After completing the retreat in the parish I served for nearly ten years I was unable to write for over a year due to moving to a new parish and serving as a senior pastor for the first time. Yet during that time, in a new ministry setting, our team was led to consider the impact and importance of "Family Friendly" models for ministry.² Discovering the "Home-Centered Congregation-Supported" model was a godsend for our congregation and for this project.

After conducting the retreat I came to see that focusing on youth without engaging and teaching the parents was ineffective and short-sighted for the long run. In my original setting the retreat for recent high school graduates and those beginning their senior year was the only way to engage them with this material before they left home. But I am now convinced that it is essential to engage both youth and parents in this theological enterprise.

² I was introduced to the "Family Friendly" model for ministry through reading Ben Freudenberg and Rick Lawrence's *Family Friendly Church* (Loveland, CO: Vital Ministry, 1998) and David W. Anderson and Paul Hill's *Frogs without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

The “Family Friendly Church” model for ministry led to the discovery that thinking theologically must include the home and not just the youth. As a result of these findings I am currently integrating the “Family Friendly” philosophy into a new confirmation curriculum for 6th, 7th and 8th grade that helps youth and parents think theologically in this culture of choice. The next generation of this project is described in detail below. (See “Recommendations”)

Contributions to Personal and Professional Growth

Introduction

I’m quite certain that I am not fully aware of all the many ways this project has caused me to grow personally and professionally. Those that I am aware of I will freely and gladly introduce now and expand on below. First, through this project I have come to a fuller appreciation that God is God and He will accomplish His will as He sees fit. One striking example of this happened in a member’s living room. Second, I have been stretched theologically by the topic of election and have gained confidence to challenge the comfort zone of those who casually and seriously believe they can choose the living God. Third, an unexpected blessing has been the direct link of this project to the faith life of all three of my children (even though their ages cover a span of eleven years). Finally, this project has helped me to think theologically and to see that this is the gift I desire to give to youth and parents alike. I find this so rewarding because thinking theologically not only teaches the truths of the faith but also gives Christians the framework to understand how life is in an otherwise seemingly fragmented and unexplainable world.

The “Choosing God” Chooses in the Living Room

Through this project I have come to a fuller appreciation that God is God and He will accomplish His will as He sees fit. One striking example of this happened in a member’s living

room. In July 2003, one month after conducting the retreat, I received a request to make a house call to speak to a spiritually confused 15 year old boy. The boy, whom I had never met, was visiting from out of town. The father wanted me to straighten him out and tell the boy the truth about God.

The 15 year old (I'll call him John to protect his identity), sat across the living room from me. While exchanging greetings and introductions the father candidly interrupted the conversation..."He believes strange things. Pastor, tell him about God! " Every pastor's nightmare...unrealistic expectations of dramatic change because the pastor is here to "fix things."

John quoted from Nietzsche and other philosophers. As an agnostic he was sure there was not enough evidence to know if there was a god or not. He blamed all the world's problems on religion and those who practice it. While I cannot recall all of the conversation I do remember telling him that it was rather unfortunate for him that while he was trying to be on the cutting edge of philosophy and intellectual pursuits he was actually just going with the flow around him. He was actually living out the reality of the "upward fall" which I described from Genesis 3.

We then engaged in a conversation about evolution. I asked him who was boss over John and the world...in other words, according to evolution who was in charge. John acknowledged he had never thought of evolution that way. He stated that according to evolution which he embraced wholeheartedly—he was apparently free to be his own god.

I then told him that I wished one day he would be able to be truly free to live counter-culturally and go against the flow of the world and its philosophies. But this would only happen once God killed him and put to death his notions about god and gods. God is not in the "make

over” business. To make us His own he must put us to death so He can make us alive in Christ Jesus.

The next part of the conversation I remember well: “This Jesus that you think you know. Have you ever read His words? Then why do you believe what others are saying about Him? I suggest you read the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Mark. Then you will encounter Jesus. Jesus who is not like any of the gods and religions you are talking about. Jesus is not a power monger bent on controlling people. Jesus is a servant and a rescuer. You will meet Jesus who died a damnable death so you would not have to. You will meet Jesus who gives new life and truly makes you free. Free to care about others, this world and even God Himself. Until then you are bound to go with the flow and you will never be truly free.”

It was the liveliest exchange on religion and philosophy I’ve ever had with any teen or young adult. We parted ways after I gave him my email address and invited him to email me with his hardest questions on God and religion or about his Bible reading if he decided to investigate Jesus.

I had never spoken so bluntly in a witness situation. I had never told anyone that I was praying for God to set them free by putting them to death. But the topics of this project gave me confidence to speak candidly and hopefully to this 15 year old. God, through this project, emboldened me with the confidence to share as indicated above. When I left that house, however, I wondered if I had said too much and overwhelmed John and his father.

Two weeks later I received an email full of questions and excitement. John was now home with his mother. The email relayed that in that living room God was choosing John to be His own and to live under Him. John is now active in an LCMS church and is preparing to be an

LCMS pastor. His story, as he wrote it, is included with this project. (See “God Chooses in the Living Room” in the appendix.)

At the same time this amazing act of God was unfolding in the life of John I was experiencing the heartache of family members whose hearts were closed to God. Seeing God at work with John strengthened my faith and gave me hope that God still intervenes in this world, breaking in on hard hearts when and where He chooses. Even against all odds in an ill-conceived “fix it” visit in the living room, God is God. This amazing act of God in John’s life and mine has served as a reminder that God still intervenes in this world today. And it continues to bolster my faith. It is retold regularly when discussing God’s activity in the world today and how God alone is the one who chooses us to believe. This experience has bolstered my confidence to proclaim the gospel to those whose hearts seem hard beyond belief, knowing that God can and may be using that moment like he did in that living room years ago.

Choosing God

I have been stretched by the topic of election and gained confidence to challenge the comfort zone of those who casually and seriously believe they can choose the living God. One of the most common questions about “religion” and “God” is: “How do you know if you have the right religion? Aren’t they all basically the same any way?” In our culture of choice Christianity’s exclusive claim to truth can be seen as just another choice among many options.

Having completed this project I am now equipped to address this topic with confidence and enthusiasm. I regularly challenge the comfort zone of those who are unthinkingly accepting the cultural claim that one indeed chooses the living God. Exposing such idolatry is best explained as stated earlier in Chapter Three: “The crisis arises as youth discover the paradoxical truth that choosing one’s religion, though a popular idea even among some Christians, is

tantamount to choosing idolatry. In America, a life full of choices is supposed to bring greater freedom. But in matters of faith, pertaining to coming to faith, we cannot and we will not choose the Triune God. We will choose a god that allows us to remain in control, not the God of the Bible who intends to kill us and make us alive again in Christ Jesus. Therefore any god that *we* choose is not the real God of the Bible. This is why the Bible clearly states, ‘You did not choose me but I chose you’ (John 15:16 NIV). The True God is naturally ‘un-choosable.’ Instead, *He* is the one who chooses.”

The biblical teaching of election clearly exposes the pluralistic society’s misplaced self importance. Election tells the truth about man and lets God be God. The biblical teaching of election can be heard and experienced in two very different and distinct ways: 1) As law it is the frightening biblical truth that humans will not and cannot choose the real God of the Bible; and 2) As gospel it is the comforting biblical truth that God chooses His children as described in John 15:16 and Ephesians 1. I now have greater confidence and skill in applying the teaching of election as either law or gospel.

While election is the hammer blow that crushes the hard heart it is also the sweet promise of God’s unending grace to those who are in Christ Jesus. Working on this project has led me to regularly teach Christians that they are in Christ only because they have been chosen by God. The most striking setting for this straight forward teaching is the adult new member class. The grip of radical individualism leads adults currently in Christ to argue like the youth on retreat in 2003 that they do indeed choose God. This always calls for a review of 1) the “upward fall” which reveals the old nature’s desire to take God’s place; and 2) our natural condition as spiritually dead (see Ephesians 2:4). An explanation regarding the reality that dead people cannot choose God and that left to our own devices we would choose a god we can manage, not

one who wants to kill and make alive leads to a spirited exchange and the wonder of God's gracious work in our lives. This always leads Christian hearers to be overwhelmed by God's pure grace. Growing in my knowledge and understanding of election and God's gracious choosing of me I now feel that I have been given the key to unlock one of the greatest topics of our age: choosing God.

Family Connection

An unexpected blessing has been the direct link of this project to the faith life of all three of my children (even though their ages cover a span of eleven years). I began this project in 2003 with my two sons in mind, while serving as associate pastor of Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Kokomo, IN. One was a freshman in college and the other was a senior in high school. Their spiritual well-being and that of their friends was a motivating factor in conceiving this project and conducting the retreat. One served as a consultant on the project and the other participated in it. However, upon completion of the retreat it became clear that while this information was timely for the original recipients, it would be best communicated earlier in the Christian education program of the church.

From that time on I have been considering how to reformulate a confirmation curriculum to help thinking Christians survive and thrive in a culture of choice. In 2006 I now have my daughter and her friends in mind as I am implementing the confirmation version of this project while serving as senior pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Jenison, MI. The delay in bringing this project to completion has allowed new insights to enhance this project and now my daughter will be a participant as a sixth grade confirmation student. What a blessing!

Thinking Theologically

This project has helped me to think theologically and to see that this is the gift I desire to give to youth and parents alike. I find this so rewarding because thinking theologically gives Christians the framework to understand how life is. We live in a fragmented world where life may seem to have no logic or order. Theological thinking not only teaches the truths of the faith, but also gives Christians a framework (i.e., logic and order) to understand how life is.³ It is now my passion to help Christians of all ages think theologically.

Thinking theologically begins with rightly establishing the nature of the Bible and teaching how it is to be read and understood. Establishing the nature of the Bible is essential to this project and is also a central focus as I teach youth and adults in various settings. I have created a handy teaching resource on this topic called, “A Guide to Interpreting the Bible for 8th Graders and their Parents” and it is included in the appendix.⁴ This resource introduces the nature of God, the nature of man and the story of salvation. It explains how life is to be lived today under God supported by the means of grace and the Christian community. It also describes the Christ-centered and cross-centered approach to Bible interpretation. It has been so exciting to discover that teaching others how to read the Bible is the key to unlock Christian thinking and living!

The emphasis on theological thinking has not only transformed my teaching but my preaching as well. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. David Schmitt and his article “The Tapestry

³ David Schmitt, “*The Tapestry of Preaching*” (In *Reaching Out to People*. Symposium Papers Number 9. St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Publications, 1999), 9. I am summarizing and restating his assessment regarding the importance of theological confession.

⁴ This is slightly modified from the final assignment for DM-911. I am grateful for the insights and passion Dr. Timothy Saleska shared on this topic.

of Preaching.”⁵ In this article, preachers are encouraged and instructed on how to include theological thinking as a regular feature of the Sunday sermon. To better engage my 8th grade hearers I modified the titles of his four strands for use as a teaching tool on how to listen to a sermon. This is included as page two of the “8th Grade Worship Summary” now being introduced at Holy Cross. This tool helps sermon listeners to listen for four interwoven themes or strands: 1) interpreting the Bible text, 2) thinking theologically, 3) embracing both law and gospel, and 4) living as Christians. (See “8th Grade Worship Summary” in the appendix.)

It is such a blessing to help others make sense of this world as they think theologically and come to see that the God of the Bible provides a framework to understand how life is!

Recommendations

Introduction

Helping youth “to think as a Christian about their culture and themselves” is essential for ministry in any North American setting that includes youth and families. I am more committed to achieving this goal than when the retreat was originally conceived and conducted in 2003. I also remain convinced that the church must have a grand role in this undertaking.

The teachings of the original retreat can still be a blessing for others in their ministry. However, significant modifications are warranted based on the two overwhelming findings presented in chapter four. First, theological thinking needs to be systematically introduced much earlier than the senior year of high school. Second, involving youth and parents together is essential since the home has the most influence in forming faith that links faith and life into active discipleship for a lifetime. Therefore the new focus of this goal must be an active and

⁵David Schmitt, “*The Tapestry of Preaching*.”

dynamic partnership between home and congregation that trains and equips each parent and youth to think as a Christian about their culture and themselves beginning long before high school.

I am excited to share new insights and applications to ministry as this project has been updated and refined in light of the two findings outlined above. For my ministry setting I am proposing a new three year confirmation program that will enhance the likelihood of both youth and their parents thinking theologically. It will be briefly noted below and presented in some detail in the appendix (See “Confirmation Recommendations” in the appendix.) I am also proposing a more intentional high school experience that will help students and parents as they try to understand the role of a Christian in the world. The final section of this chapter is my overall summary of the recommendations for this project.

New Three Year Confirmation Program

Lutheran parents in my current ministry setting are familiar with the need for a three year confirmation process. This expected time of intentional Christian education during middle school is the ideal time for sharing information that will enhance the likelihood of both youth and their parents thinking theologically.

This new three year confirmation curriculum is designed to equip students and their parents to interpret the Bible as Lutheran Christians using the “VII Act Play” (6th grade), the catechism (7th grade) and other essential features of Christ-centered and cross-centered Bible interpretation (8th grade). Each of these key components is covered successively in a three-year cycle. A thorough outline for each grade and the rationale for parent involvement are available in the appendix as “Confirmation Recommendations.”

In this curriculum the “Six Marks of Discipleship” (which were introduced to retreat participants in chapter three of this project) are introduced in deliberate and significant pairings to middle school students and their parents. The sixth graders and their parents focus on Bible reading and prayer, reading from a list of key stories in both testaments. Both of these “Marks of Discipleship” are easily practiced at home and become the foundation of home-based devotional worship as a family. The seventh graders add the last of the faith feeding marks, worship, and the first of the marks that put faith into loving action, Christian service. Both of these “Marks of Discipleship” expand the influence of the home to those outside: to worship with others and to serve others. The eighth graders and their parents focus on being community and giving. The use of Adult Mentors and Youth Mentors is intended to help these eighth graders and their parents make the transition from the world of the child to the world of the young adult. This is an intentional effort to help them transition into high school and remain active in our Christian community via worship and high school youth group. Both of these “Marks of Discipleship” focus outward on one’s care for others as a means of exercising faith and growing in one’s capacity to love.

High School Emphasis

Introduction

In an effort to help youth and their parents live under God and think Christian about their culture and themselves it will also be important to provide them with more information and training in the high school years. High school is a time in life when youth and their parents are trying to understand the role of a Christian in the world as both an individual and as a community.

The Christian in the World

To enhance their understanding and encourage their godly participation in their world and local community the high school years are the ideal time to teach about the Two Kingdoms, the Three Kinds of Righteousness, and the Four “Response-abilities” (Robert Kolb’s term for Luther’s table of “duties”) of home, occupation, society and congregation.⁶ These teachings provide a trusted guide or framework for understanding the Christian’s role in the world as an individual and in community as the Church. These three foundational teachings further assist youth and their parents to understand how life is. And they help Christians live life faithfully “under God” as His baptized child.

The Power of Peers

The role of friendships and peer influence in the high school and college settings also needs attention. The comments of the youth retreat participants were clear that unless a person is going into the sciences (hard or soft) the classroom will not be the most expected place for faith to be challenged. Faith is much more likely to be challenged in the dorm room and in peer relationships via lifestyle choices (unchristian behavior) and via conversations about life and religion.

With this in mind I will heed the recommendation of the parents at the post-retreat parent meeting and see that a recent college freshman who is able to model the Christian life in college

⁶ An excellent resource for teaching about the “two kingdoms” is Robert Kolb, *Teaching God’s Children His Teaching: A Guide for the Study of Luther’s Catechism* (Hutchinson, MN: Crown Publishing, 1992), 8-1 and 8-2. I am indebted to Joel Biermann for the notion of “three kinds of righteousness,” especially as it is presented in David Peter, “A Framework for the Practice of Evangelism and Outreach,” *Concordia Journal* 30 (2004): 207-210. I am again indebted to Robert Kolb for the notion of “four response-abilities,” which he also presents in *Teaching God’s Children His Teaching*, 8-3.

is invited to interact with the youth as they prepare for the college experience. It is hoped that such real-life examples of challenges to faith and ways to live out faith will help parents and youth be better prepared to think and live Christian during college.

Summary of Recommendations

The above recommendations regarding the new three year confirmation curriculum and the new high school emphasis are proposed as resources that will help youth and their parents interpret democratic politics, the marketplace, psychology, postmodernism, popular media, and all of life through the “lens” of the Bible and the Christian faith. The goal is that they will be able to view and reflect on the world around them ultimately as Christians, that is, in terms of Christian theology. Then youth will be better prepared for the unique challenges and opportunities for Christian living and Christian witness in the middle school, high school and college experience.

The church needs to give youth and parents resources and training to think theologically. The church needs to guide its youth to learn to examine critically the society in which they live, in order that they are prepared for the challenges that the middle school, high school and college environments will pose for them. This cannot be added to the life of a young woman or young man at the end of high school in a six hour retreat. By then they are largely formed and influenced by their homes and their churches through countless experiences. Therefore before high school (during middle school confirmation), during high school and at the close of high school the church must teach parents and youth to think theologically with the ultimate goal of preparing youth for the pending challenges of college life or living away from their parental home so they continue to live faithfully “under God.”

All of these recommendations address the criticism of the youth who enjoyed the retreat but did not think it prepared them for college. Some questioned if the retreat was about college or more about life in general. On the Retreat Evaluation one stated, “I didn’t really think about the topics in terms of college life, rather life in general.” In response to the question “How well did the retreat help you prepare for college?” Another wrote, “not as really college, but more of prepare for life.” In other words, participants felt the retreat successfully addressed the topics of thinking and living Christian, but did not feel there was a strong connection to the upcoming college experience. Their assessment was very accurate. The material I was sharing with them was foundational to life...not material that should be held back or saved out until they were ready to graduate from high school.

Therefore the above recommendations are intended to enhance the ability of youth and their parents to think as a Christian long before the college experience arrives. Then parents and youth leaders will be able to encourage youth to “practice” thinking theologically instead of trying to introduce the topic during high school. Youth can then “make new connections” between their faith and their daily life as they continue to think critically and theologically about their culture and themselves before, during and after high school.

The key is to capture the hearts of the parents in the sixth grade with the knowledge that they now have only six short years to prepare their child to live as an adult Christian under God in a pagan world.

APPENDIX ONE

EXPANDED TELLING OF THE VII ACT PLAY

Using a large newsprint banner going around the walls of the room, the students were able to make a timeline showing all seven acts of the biblical drama and world history. The youth took turns being the artist drawing a symbol to represent the action of God in each of the seven acts.

Act I is the creation of the world. We look to Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Genesis, chapter 1, verse 31 tells us that at the end of the six days of creation, God looked around and He saw that everything was “very good.” There was sweet harmony in all relationships. Man also understood his role as steward and servant. Man is steward of all the resources of the earth and servant of God. Ask students to read and review Genesis 1:26 and 28.

Then God said, ‘let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, over all the creatures that move along the ground.’

God blessed them and said to them, ‘be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.

Now ask the students to formulate the “job description” of man based on these two verses. Ultimately lead them to the Biblical concept of being stewards of all the earth. Identify this as man’s domain: 1) the stewardship of earth, 2) servants of God. Now invite the students to consider God’s “job description.” How does it relate to man’s job description? “God is Creator and owner of all, Lord of heaven and earth.” You have now identified two distinct, yet compatible job descriptions that reflect the wisdom of the Creator. All will go well if man

accepts the job given him by God. Now invite the students to draw a picture that represents Act I. The student artists might draw a picture of the earth and the first man Adam.

Act II is based on Genesis 3:4-9. Lead the students to see Adam and Eve's desire to have God's job: to be like God. Note their refusal to be servants, or stewards, and their intent to be lords and owners. They are abandoning their God-given job in an attempt for a job "upgrade." But the job upgrade is one for which they are neither qualified nor created. A helpful way to describe this travesty is the concept of the "upward fall". It is an idea borrowed from Gerhard Forde:

It (i.e., the fall) is an upward rebellion, an invasion of the realm of things 'above' the usurping of divine prerogative...an 'upward fall'.

Just as God rules in the realm of things above in perfect peace and harmony, so also humans are to 'image God' and take care of things below. Rebellion means refusal, to image God. It is rather the attempt to be God.¹

The "upward fall" remains an apt description of the human disposition even today. Left on our own, we continue to desire God's position and are not satisfied to be His servants and stewards of the earth and all creatures. Scripture is clear, "the sinful mind is hostile to God" (Romans 8:7). This means we are not honest, open-minded explorers in the quest for truth, which is ultimately the quest to know God. As Lesslie Newbigin states, "We are not honest inquirers seeking the truth. We are alienated from truth and enemies of it. We are by nature idolaters, constructing images of truth shaped by our own desires."²

¹Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 48-49.

²Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: William B. EerdmansPub. Co., 1995), 69.

Adam and Eve are beguiled by a serpent—a serpent that convinces them that if they eat this fruit they will become like God. This is the “upward fall”—the problem that humanity faces from this point forward to the end of the story. They are always wanting to have God’s place, not being satisfied to be stewards of the earth and the things below, but wanting to have God’s place above. This is the problem of humanity, hereafter described in shorthand as “the upward fall.”

But, as in many other great, engaging stories, in the midst of this darkest hour of “The Story of the Bible,” there is a glimmer of hope; there is a promise. In Genesis 3:15, God promises that, someday, one born of a woman will come and crush the head of the serpent. From now until He comes, every Jewish girl will wonder if she is the one who will bear the promised one, the one who will come to save God’s people as “the snake crusher.” It is important to note this grand promise and to highlight the fact that God gave the promise after he went and found Adam and Eve hiding in the Garden of Eden. God is still in the business of seeking His people, calling them to Himself. Ask each student artist to draw Act II. They may draw an apple and the words “upward fall.” Be sure they also include “The promise of a Savior.”

In Act III we see God interacting with the people of Israel, having chosen them to be His own people. This is a God who makes covenants (holy promises) and is always faithful to His people. He sets them free from slavery in Egypt, disciplines them with 40 years in the wilderness, yet feeds them miraculously along the journey. In the midst of Act III, the people are trusting God for life and salvation. They are also waiting. They are waiting for this promised one—the one that will come and deliver them. They are waiting for the one who will defeat the serpent and set them free from the effects of sin, death and the devil. Ask the students to update

their timeline by drawing Act III. Some artists may draw two stone tablets remembering God's covenant faithfulness and manna in the wilderness remembering His constant care.

Act IV begins with a young girl standing in front of an angel. "Do not be afraid," the angel says, "you have found favor with God."(Luke 1:30) The angel goes on to describe how she will give birth to a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be Emmanuel—"God with us"—and He will save His people from their sins. The girl asks: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34) The angel tells her that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her and the one conceived will be the Son of God as well as Son of Man.

This is the "Greatest Story Ever Told." Some parts of it defy reason, but reasonableness isn't the determining factor. The revelation of God supersedes the reasonableness of our understanding.

This Jesus born of Mary, born of a virgin will live in complete obedience to His Father in Heaven and live in perfect love with His neighbor. There will come a time when His complete obedience in that vertical relationship will combine with His unending love for neighbor on the horizontal plane. These two will intersect at Calvary and this is where the story becomes our story. The sinless Son of God is on that cross, because my sin, and the sin of my students, sent Him there. But be sure to tell the students that it is not sin that holds Him there. It is *His love* for *them* and for all people that keeps Him on the cross. It is *His obedience* to *His Father* that keeps Him on the cross. He takes the sinners' place and suffers the punishment of their sin. Now ask the students to draw this Act. They may draw a manger or pictures of His miracles, but be sure they include Jesus' cross on Calvary and an empty tomb.

Act V is the early church when the Holy Spirit sent the Gospel around the world through the faithful ministry of Jesus' disciples. The early church will learn to live without Jesus in their

midst, at least not being able to see Jesus face to face. He really will be in their midst, just as He is in ours. He comes in the Holy Sacraments. Jesus comes to be with and in His disciples as they partake of the Sacrament of the Altar. The bread and wine truly are His body and blood. He is in their midst when they hear the Scriptures. He said “where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them” (Matthew 18:20). In the early church, babies, children, and adults become God’s children through the Holy Sacrament of Baptism. God makes eternal promises in baptism. God promises to be their God, and he sets them free to become what they already are. In baptism they are once again set free to be 1) stewards of the earth and 2) servants of God. The drawings for Act V can include an altar with Holy Communion, water for Holy Baptism, a Bible, and the whole world.

Act VI is about life today. It includes school and church, friends and family. The act puts these questions to us: “Is this moment in life all there is to life? Is there anything to be gained from the past or the future? What does it mean to be part of God’s people? What meaning can we gain from Acts I-V as we live out Act VI? How do we live in Act VI knowing what we do about Act VII?”

Act VI is where we live today. We live in Act VI knowing the rest of the story. We know what has already taken place and what is yet to come, and how these events influence life today. We know we have come into this world by the plan of God our creator (Act I). We know that all people still inherently want to be god. The “upward fall” still influences the way all people think and act and believe today (Act II). We know that God calls people into community with Him and that He is faithful. He will judge and show mercy according to His will (Act III). We know that He kept His promise to send a Savior. God has demonstrated His love for us and for all people around the world by sending His Son to Calvary and raising Him on the third day

(Act IV). We know that when Jesus ascended into heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit and left the sacraments and His holy word to create and sustain sons and daughters of God (Act V). We know that he calls His children today to run the race of faith so we will one day receive the crown of life and live forever in the presence of God, the angels and all the saints (Act VII).

Act VII will begin with Christ returning as the Scriptures say. The trumpets will blast and Jesus will welcome all believers into Heaven. He will also consign all those outside the Christian faith, all those who denied the story, to hell. We will join the saints and angels in Heaven around the throne of God. He will wipe every tear from our eyes. We will be home with God and the church triumphant. Home with those who lived in the story, and, like us, were transformed by the story. Home with those who with proper confidence embraced the God who loved them and lived each day on earth by faith. Invite the students to draw symbols for Act VI which may include their home and family, school, church and all the means of grace. Also have them draw pictures for Act VII. Encourage them to depict both a heavenly scene and a hellish scene.

APPENDIX TWO

EXPANDED TEACHING ON MARRIAGE AND BAPTISM

To illustrate the importance of living life alive in Christ, freed from my selfish desires, I addressed the topic of marriage and then baptism. I wanted the youth to see personal practical examples that illustrate the necessity of dying to self as a prerequisite for being truly free to love. I did this by asking questions and discussing their answers. The questions included:

When considering a spouse...

Does he/she know how to love? To be selfless?

What are his/her motives??

Is it All about self...or is he/she free to love others?

Is he/she free to love others....knowing God loves him/her?

What do you know about marriage?

Hard work

Not supported by our ME-first culture

Did you know your whole life growing up in a Christian home you've been trained to be a marriage partner?

When you confess to a family member that you were wrong you are preparing to do the same in relationship with your future spouse.

You want someone who knows about living free...free in Christ to freely love.

Imagine how hard it would be to love someone that does not know the freeing truth of Jesus...that dying to self is the beginning of really living and loving...who thinks it really is all about me??

God wants to kill you

"It doesn't sound too inviting to me!"

...So He can make you alive in Jesus, alive to real life and real love.

That's what Baptism is all about...drowning the old self

Raised up alive to serve God and love others
Reborn to be dead to sin and alive to God

If I say "I was married" what do you assume about me??

Not married now
Divorced

Right, so a married person usually says...I am married" indicating that the relationship continues and remains valuable and active.

How do you indicate you are baptized??

It's pretty normal to say...

"I was baptized"...but that sounds like some thing that is over.
It is more accurate for a Christian to say... "I am baptized". Why, because this is an active growing vital relationship.

The discussion of marriage and baptism was well received and added a sense of practicality to the biblical topic of dying to self and living alive in Christ.

APPENDIX THREE

The Search for Knowledge and Truth

1.

Where are YOU?

2. Two kinds of “knowing”

a.

b.

3. Key Question: Is Ultimate Truth _____ or _____?

4. Lets take a closer look at the Explorers searching for truth

a. The Assumption of Modernity

b. Another Option: The _____
Gen. 1:26 & 28
Gen. 3:4-9

c. Note impact of each option on the quest for truth

5. Let's take a closer look at The Bible as the source for Truth

The Bible is primarily...

6. A collection of eternal truths.
7. A story of God and people.

a. According to Modern Assumptions

“The Bible is not a valid source for truth because...

b. According to Post-Modern Assumptions

“The Bible is not a valid source for truth because...

Truth claims are a front for _____ power

c. The Bible is Story and History...not Myth

d. How does the Church (i.e., all believers) affirm the truth of its story?

e. The Greatest Story Ever Told (see handout)

f. Those who are part of this Greatest Story have

_____ for their past

_____ for their present

_____ for their future

6. Conclusion

“So the revelation of God given us in him (Jesus) is not a matter of coercive demonstration but of grace, of a love that forgives and invites. That reality of grace governs both the confidence we have in speaking of God and the manner in which we must commend the gospel to others.”

Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, p. 78

APPENDIX FOUR

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR SIX-MONTH REUNION

What others said/did/believe

What was said about the choices you and others have in life?

What did you notice about the assumptions people make about man’s abilities, choices, character?

Did anyone mention... Religion... God ...The Bible ...at school this fall?

	<u>How was it mentioned?</u> (context, valued?)	<u>By Whom?</u> (student / teacher	<u>Where?</u> (classroom, with others)
Religion			
God			
Bible			
?			

What would you say most students “believe” about God?

Did anyone (teachers or students) talk about a purpose/goal for life?

Did anyone talk about knowing or not knowing the truth or ultimate truth?

Did most students you met/talked with believe in Jesus as their Savior and Master?

How was evolution mentioned? (In the classroom or in other conversations)

Did anyone talk about the idea that claims to know the truth are really a front for power/ control/ manipulation?

Did anyone say the Bible is not the only important religious book? What other books did they mention?

Did anyone raise the topic of “choosing” one’s faith/religion?

Did anyone talk about relativism or pluralism?

Evaluating Others

Based on your conversations and observations this fall...how do people outside of high school find help and hope for doing life?

Did you meet anyone who said they were a Christian but what they said they believed made you wonder? (examples)

Did you meet anyone who said they were a Christian but their behavior made you wonder? (examples)

Source of Challenges: Classroom or Student life

Did you sense any challenges or conflicts in the classroom or outside of class regarding what you have been taught at home and at church (prior to fall 2003)?

**Would you say the greatest challenges to your life as a disciple this fall came in the
classroom or outside of class?**

Choices in College

Did the number of choices in your life go up or down this fall?

What kinds of choices are available in college?

What serves as a common guide/rationale for choices others make?

Are college choices more likely to support following gods or following God?

What serves as a guide/rationale for your choices?

Retreat Updates

How did your retreat experience help you this fall?

**Based on your fall experiences: what would be good to include for the next senior retreat?
What topics would help High School Seniors be best prepared for fall?**

Was your "Note to Self" returned to you this fall helpful? How? Why?

Did you read/look through *College Bound*? Did your parent(s)?

**Did you read a daily devotion or the bible this fall? What resources do you like?
What did you think of *By Faith Alone* by Martin Luther?**

Evaluating Self

What things that you have been taught (prior to this fall) seem harder to accept now?

How did knowing Jesus (i.e., being a Christian) help you this fall?

How did knowing Jesus (i.e., being a Christian) make this fall hard for you?

Compare your faith this fall to your faith life this summer. After this fall is it stronger...weaker...same?

This fall my devotion and prayer time went up / down / stayed same

This fall my worship attendance went up / down / stayed same

This fall my Bible reading went up / down / stayed same

APPENDIX FIVE

A GUIDE TO INTERPRETING THE BIBLE FOR EIGHTH GRADERS AND THEIR PARENTS

The joy of understanding Scripture and thinking theologically should not be denied the youth of our church. It is my goal to prepare an introductory guide to interpreting Scripture that will contribute to a lifetime of rewarding Bible reading. How this is done could be debated. The following will illustrate my plan.

If one were to explain basketball to the non-initiated he wouldn't start by talking about the way uniform shorts have changed in length over the years, nor would he first explain the referee's penalty signals. First, one would tell the object of the game in a brief overview. Then important details would be explained as they relate to the object of the game. In other words, one would tell about ways to score and the need to play defense, before talking about proper substitution rotations. So it is with preparing young Christians to understand and interpret the Bible. They need a brief overview of the Bible—not which books are historical and which are poetry—but the purpose and object of the Bible. Then and only then do they have a framework for understanding and applying the meaning of individual passages throughout the sixty-six books of the Bible.

With this in mind, this guide will contain two distinct but inter-related sections. The first section will equip students to understand the purpose of the Bible while giving an overview of its story. The second section will explain important details about properly understanding and applying the meaning of Bible passages...in light of the overview of the Bible given earlier.

Many may be surprised to learn that the Bible is ultimately not concerned with the primacy of the Bible. Nor is it a book of timeless truths or a rulebook for understanding life at its best. The Bible is the story of God and His relationship with His people. To properly interpret the meaning of the Bible one must know and be caught up in this story. Thus, when telling the story of the Bible, even in our initial overview, it is essential to tell it in a way that the hearer discovers the story of God and His people is not just about “those guys” (long ago) but also involves and includes “me” and “us” today.

This guide will begin by clarifying the general confusion related to the true nature of the Bible. “Establishing the Nature of the Bible” will affirm that the Bible is the authoritative telling of how life is. This prepares the student for an overall understanding of the Bible’s purpose drawing on an extended metaphor called the “Greatest Story Ever Told.” This two-part overview of the Bible will be the first step toward thinking theologically. It will also help students understand the story of the Bible as the meta-narrative that gives them “forgiveness for their past, purpose for their present, and hope for their future.”¹ In the second section a series of insights and guidelines for interpreting the Bible will further enhance their theological skills. Thus they will be spared the shallow allegorical reading of the Bible that seems to come naturally to those without theological training.

¹ Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: William B. EerdmansPub. Co., 1999), 54.

Establishing the Nature of the Bible

The Bible is not a collection of myths and fables. Though some cultures have used myths and fables to tell the story of life's purpose. Nor is the Bible a collection of timeless truths and universal principles. The Bible is a story with real people (genealogies) and real places (archeology). It is history. The Bible is the true story of human history. It is the history of God and people, and in this story, one comes to know God. "The business of the church is to tell and embody a story, the story of God's mighty acts in creation and redemption and of God's promises concerning what will be in the end."²

The Word of God creates faith and is the source of our greatest confidence. Thus the students' proper confidence in the midst of temptations to doubt the validity of their Christian faith as a trustworthy guide to the real world rests in the God who reveals Himself in the pages of the Bible. The Christian, once enfolded into the story of the Bible, comes to know that this story is true and liberating. Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31, 32) As Leslie Newbigin states, "The church's affirmation is that the story it tells, embodies, and enacts is the true story and that others are to be evaluated by reference to it."³ In other words, all explanations of life in this world are to be evaluated according to the *real story* told in the Bible. Congregations need to relate this bold truth to our youth. May they hear and believe. Then youth will know that the

² Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: William B. EerdmansPub. Co., 1995), 76.

Bible is not one guide for life among many but is the most trustworthy guide for exploring and understanding the real world as it *really is*. “The church’s affirmation is that the story it tells is the true interpretation of all human and cosmic history and that to understand history otherwise is to misunderstand it, therefore misunderstanding the human situation here and now.”⁴

The church proclaims the Biblical story and the Holy Spirit draws into the story those who believe. Outside of embracing the proclamation, there is no way to explain and convince hearers that this story is the most trustworthy. The church affirms the truth of its story “by celebrating it, interpreting it, and enacting it in the life of the contemporary world. It has no other way of affirming its truth.”⁵ Having no other way to affirm the truth of the Bible may at first seem a great weakness to the students. They may naturally respond along these lines: “Can’t we appeal to how wise it is, or how ‘reasonable’ its universal principles and timeless truths?” However, the students will come to see that if the biblical story must appeal to “reasonableness” (or any other source) to verify its truth then “reasonableness” is the ultimate authority, since it is what validates and authenticates the Biblical story. Leslie Newbigin summarized this observation when he wrote: “to authenticate...by reference to some allegedly more reliable truth claim...it has implicitly denied the truth by which it (i.e., the church) lives.”⁶

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁵ Ibid., 76.

⁶ Ibid.

The faith that embraces the Bible as God's Word and the most reliable guide for life in this world comes about solely by the working of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, we must tell the story of the Bible (both as law and as gospel) in a manner that engages the hearer as an intended participant, as if the Holy Spirit would be drawing them into the saving story of God and His people the church. In this kind of telling we avoid the problem of misusing the bible by merely explaining the story. Mere explanation leaves room for the hearer to wrongly assume that he or she can be an objective observer of its truth...as if it was unintended for them. In theological language, this telling must be proclamation not explanation. Proclamation tells the story of God and His people in a manner that includes the hearer as an intended participant. Proclamation is what God the Holy Spirit uses to both harden hearts and to create faith. It is in proclamation that the salvation story of God and his people becomes the hearers saving story too by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Other problems relating to the modern use of the Bible that will be addressed in this section include the pervasive but false notion that the Bible is 1) an answer book full of rules to be followed, or 2) a set of truths to which we must assent. Marva Dawn writes,

The Revelation is not a book of rules that gives us step-by-step procedures for life. There could never be enough rules to cover all the possibilities, and usually our response to rules and regulations is to resist them. Nor is the Bible a collection of timeless truths from which we draw out basic principles or goals toward which we aim.⁷

⁷ Dawn, *Royal Waste*, 53.

Both of these attempts to construe the proper use of the Bible are misleading explanations. They miss the mark and the intended use of the Bible as the master story of God for all people.

Rather, to modify a basic schema from N.T. Wright, the Scriptures must be understood as a master story with multiple narratives that form us as we are immersed in them. We become part of this genuine story as we then live out of the character shaped by all of God's Revelation.⁸

In other words, to help youth live biblically is to help them see their place in the divine story of salvation. The Bible then is not just "a story", one among many; or "their story" of long ago; but most importantly is *both* "the story" true for all *and* "my story," the viable guide for *my* life in the *real* world.

Greatest Story Ever Told

The goal of this section is to creatively engage the youth in the Bible's story, which is the master story for all. This section will prepare students to embrace the Bible as a viable guide for exploring and understanding the real world as it *really is* and for finding their real identity as a part of this master story. Marva Dawn, borrowing and expanding on N.T. Wright, uses a modern day illustration that teaches this important truth with insight and freshness.⁹ The lively and interactive presentation of world history as a seven-act play shows that without the insights of the Bible one is not able to understand the *real* world as it *really is* nor to know one's *real*

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 53-54.

identity and place in the world. I have taken the liberties of adding biblical references and expanding the original concept in many ways. An expanded telling of the illustration follows.

Let us imagine that a new play by William Shakespeare has just been found. It has never been heard of or produced. It is a seven-act play, but Act VI is missing. The question is, “Can this play be produced in a manner that reflects the author’s intent?” The students are invited to consider how they would produce the play even though they know Act VI is missing. Leaders should be prepared to help students if they need assistance. Keep in mind that they do have the first five chapters and they do have the last chapter. This means they have the beginning of the story, the introduction of the characters and they have been introduced to the plot, the goals and some of the twists and turns and obstacles along the way. By having Act VII, they also have the conclusion. They know how the story is going to end. That means Act VI will involve *informed improvisation*. It is *informed* because they can draw on what the author has presented in Acts I-V, and they will know already the conclusion to which it points in Act VII.

The purpose of this illustration is to help the students see they are part of something bigger than themselves, that they are part of an overarching story, purpose and plan—God’s plan. Only in the midst of this story can the *real* world be understood as it *really is*.

The story is best told when it can be visualized and drawn. I suggest using a large newsprint banner going along the walls of the room as a timeline showing all seven acts of the biblical drama and world history. It would also be helpful to have each youth draw their own timeline complete with artwork representing the action of God and his people in each of the seven acts.

Act I is the creation of the world. Invite the students to look up Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Genesis 1:31 tells us that at the end of the six days of creation, God looked around and He saw that everything was “very good.” There was sweet harmony in all relationships. At this point, man also understood his role as steward and servant. Man is steward of all the resources of the earth and servant of God. To show this, ask students to read and review Genesis 1:26 and 28 (NIV).

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Next ask the students to formulate the “job description” of man based on these two verses. Ultimately lead them to the Biblical concept of being stewards of all the earth. Identify these as man’s domain: 1) the stewardship of earth, 2) servants of God. After doing this, invite the students to consider God’s “job description.” How does it relate to man’s job description? Help them see that God is Creator and owner of all, Lord of heaven and earth. You have discovered the two distinct, yet compatible job descriptions that reflect the wisdom of the Creator. All will go well if man accepts the job given him by God. Now invite the students to draw a picture that represents Act I. The student artists might draw a picture of the earth and the first man Adam.

Act II: Have the students read Genesis 3:4-9 and ask them to discuss what happened in these verses and to describe the actions of Adam and Eve. Lead the students to see Adam and Eve’s desire to have God’s job; that is, to be like God. Note their refusal to be servants or

stewards, and their intent to be lords and owners. They are abandoning their God-given job in an attempt for a job “upgrade.” But they are neither qualified nor created for the job upgrade. A helpful way to describe this travesty is Gerhard Forde’s concept of the “upward fall”:

It (i.e., the fall) is an upward rebellion, an invasion of the realm of things “above” the usurping of divine prerogative...an “upward fall.”

Just as God rules in the realm of things above in perfect peace and harmony, so also humans are to “image God” and take care of things below. Rebellion means refusal, to image God. It is rather the attempt to be God.¹⁰

The “upward fall” remains an apt description of the human disposition even today. Left on our own, we continue to desire God’s position and are not satisfied to be His servants and stewards of the earth and all creatures. Scripture is clear: “the sinful mind is hostile to God” (Romans 8:7 NIV). This means we are not honest, open-minded explorers in the quest for truth, which is ultimately the quest to know God. As Leslie Newbigin puts it, “We are not honest inquirers seeking the truth. We are alienated from truth and enemies of it. We are by nature idolaters, constructing images of truth shaped by our own desires.”¹¹

Adam and Eve were beguiled by a serpent who convinces them that if they eat this fruit they will become like God. This is the “upward fall”—the problem that humanity faces from this point forward to the end of the story. Sinners are sinners in that they always wanting to have God’s place, not being satisfied to be stewards of the earth, and the things below, but wanting to have God’s place above.

¹⁰ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 48-49.

But, as in many other great, engaging stories, in the midst of this darkest hour of “The Story of the Bible,” there is a glimmer of hope; there is a promise. In Genesis 3:15, God promises that someday one born of a woman will come and crush the head of the serpent. From now until He comes, every Jewish girl will wonder if she is the one who will bear the promised one, the one who will come to save God’s people as “the snake crusher.” It is important to note this grand promise and to highlight the fact that God gave the promise after he went and found Adam and Eve hiding in the Garden of Eden. God is still in the business of seeking His people, calling them to Himself. Ask each student artist to draw Act II. They may draw an apple and the words “upward fall” and be sure they also include “the promise of a Savior.”

In Act III we see God interacting with the people of Israel, having chosen them to be His own people. This is a God who makes covenants (holy promises), and is always faithful to His people. He sets them free from slavery in Egypt, disciplines them with 40 years in the wilderness, and yet feeds them miraculously along the journey. In the midst of Act III the people are trusting God for life and salvation. They are also waiting. They are waiting for this promised one—the one who will come and deliver them. He will defeat the serpent and set them free from the effects of sin and death and the devil. Ask the students to update their timeline by drawing Act III. Some artists, for instance, may draw two stone tablets to remember God’s covenant faithfulness and manna in the wilderness to remember His constant care.

¹¹ Newbigin, 69.

Act IV begins with a young girl standing in front of an angel. “Do not be afraid,” the angel says, “you have found favor with God”(Luke 1:30 NIV). The angel goes on to describe how she will give birth to a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be Emanuel—”God with us”—and He will save His people from their sins. But the girl asks: “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34 NIV) The angel explains that the Holy Spirit will overshadow her, and so the one conceived will be the Son of God as well as Son of Man. Some parts of “The Greatest Story Ever Told” defy reason. But reasonableness is not the determining factor. The revelation of God supersedes our understanding and rational expectations.

This Jesus born of Mary, born of a virgin, will live in complete obedience to His Father in Heaven and live in perfect love with His neighbor. There will come a time when His complete obedience in that vertical relationship will combine with His unending love for neighbor on the horizontal plane. These two will intersect at Calvary and this is where the story becomes our story. The sinless Son of God is on that cross because my sin and the sin of my students sent Him there. Be sure, however, to tell the students that it is not sin that holds Him there. It is *His love for them* and for all people that keeps Him on the cross. It is *His obedience to His Father* that keeps Him on the cross. He takes the sinners place and suffers the punishment of their sin. Finally, ask the students to draw this Act. They may draw a manger or pictures of His miracles, but be sure they include Jesus’ cross on Calvary and an empty tomb.

Act V is the early church when the Holy Spirit sent the Gospel around the world through the faithful ministry of Jesus’ disciples. The early church will learn to live without Jesus in their midst, at least not being able to see Jesus face to face. Nevertheless, he really will be in their

midst. Jesus comes to be with and in His disciples as they partake of the Sacrament of the Altar. The bread and wine truly are His body and blood. He is in their midst when they hear the Word of God. He said, “Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them” (Matthew 18:20). In the early church babies, children, and adults become God’s children through the Holy Sacrament of Baptism. God makes eternal promises in baptism. God promises to be their God, and sets them free to become what they already are. In baptism they are once again set free to be 1) stewards of the earth and 2) servants of God. The drawings for Act V can include an altar with Holy Communion, water for Holy Baptism, a Bible, and the whole world.

Act VI is about life today. It includes school and church, friends and family. The question is...is this moment in life all there is to life? Is there anything to be gained from the past or the future? What does it mean to be part of God’s people? What meaning can we gain from Acts I-V as we live out Act VI? How do we live in Act VI knowing what we do about Act VII?

Act VI is where we live today. And we live in Act VI knowing the rest of the story. We know what has already taken place and what is yet to come...and how these events influence life today. We know we have come into this world by the plan of God our creator (Act I). We know that all people still inherently want to be god. And we know the “upward fall” still influences the way all people think and act and believe today (Act II). We know that God calls people into community with Him and that He is faithful. He will judge and show mercy according to His will (Act III). We know that He kept His promise to send a Savior. And we know God has demonstrated His love for us and for all people around the world by sending His Son to Calvary and raising Him on the third day (Act IV). We know that when Jesus ascended into heaven, He

sent the Holy Spirit and left the sacraments and His holy word to create and sustain sons and daughters of God (Act V). We know that he calls His children today to run the race of faith so we will one day receive the crown of life and live forever in the presence of God, the angels and all the saints (Act VII).

Yes, we also know that one day Act VII will begin. It will begin with Christ returning as the Scriptures say. The trumpets will blast and Jesus will welcome all believers into Heaven. He will also consign all those outside the faith, all those who denied the story, to hell. We will join the saints and angels in Heaven around the throne of God. He will wipe every tear from our eyes. We will be home with God and the church triumphant. We will be home with those who lived in the story, and, like us, were transformed by the story. We will be home with those who with proper confidence embraced the God who loved them and lived each day on earth by faith. Invite the students to draw symbols for Act VI that may include their home and family, school, church and all the means of grace. Also have them draw pictures for Act VII. Encourage them to depict both a heavenly scene and a hellish scene.

In summary, help your students to see themselves in the midst of this story. “The Greatest Story Ever Told” is a place where “they can find forgiveness for their past, purpose for their present and hope for their future.”¹² The story is so powerful because it is so true. It tells the truth and leads us to the Truth. In fact, without the insights of the Bible one is not able to understand the *real* world as it *really is*. Remind your students that they know the God who

¹² Dawn, *Royal Waste*, 54.

came into the world to set us free from our futile thinking, *to set us free from our desire to take God's place*. The “Greatest Story Ever Told” becomes our story as the Holy Spirit calls us to faith and we realize the most amazing reality: That God has taken *our* place.

At this point, it is also important to remind the students, “We have a great advantage over the Shakespearean actors, for as we improvise Act VI in keeping with the spirit of the rest of the drama we know that the Author is still alive!”¹³ The Author will guide us as we live in this “Greatest Story Ever Told.”

To begin in improvising Act VI, have your students consider just the opposite scenario. In other words, a new seven-act play has been found but the only act that is preserved is Act VI. It is the only part of the play that has been found. Ask the students to consider: 1) which one of the two plays they would rather complete; and 2) which one of the two plays would they feel they would have a better chance of completing as the author had intended? Be prepared to share the following insights: If you had only one act, you could never have any idea whether you got it right. Reconstruction of the other six acts would be anybody's guess. There would be no way to know why you were here or how everything began. You wouldn't even know how it would end. Help students identify with how hopeless and frustrating it would be to do life without any sense of what it was all about, as if all we had to figure out life was the equivalent of Act VI.

¹³ Marva J. Dawn, *Is It A Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children* (Grand Rapids: William B. EerdmansPub. Co., 1997), 44.

Sometimes young Christians “take for granted” the teachings of the Bible and miss the ways the Bible safeguards us from other false teaching. Therefore it is important to rehearse with them the difference between the Bible’s view of the world’s beginning and the one put forward by the theory of evolution. According to the story of evolution, there is no God and the world came about by chance, and life began by random acts. In other words, all of life and history is a story without an author. This is a popular understanding today. No wonder many people talk about not knowing what their purpose is. And many young people are filled with despair and lack hope. They don’t know whom to trust. They are not sure why they are here. This is not surprising when someone takes his or her clues for existence from the authorless idea of evolution.

Sadly, some in this world are convinced all we have to work with is Act VI alone. There is no grand ending; this is all there is. In other words, what we can feel, see, sense, touch and understand today is all a person would have to rely on as they live in Act VI. They are going to have to write, think up or devise a beginning to the whole story and they’ll also have to come up with an ending. But we know what often happens when we write a story with ourselves in the midst of it. We tend to write the story so that we are the heroes. But the story of life doesn’t have you, or any of us as the hero. “The Greatest Story Ever Told” has only one hero: the one true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Without the real story of the world’s beginning (that sets us free from the upward fall) we are destined to create a story that minimizes or eliminates the true God and puts us in His place.

A Warning

In view of my emphasis on the Bible as “story” and the importance of finding oneself in Act VI of “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” A warning, however, must be shared with the students. They must be cautioned against reading the Bible in an allegorical manner. We are naturally inclined put ourselves into the story when reading Bible narratives, as if that story is directly applicable to us and our lives. This kind of Bible reading will undo all the theological training we have attempted in the previous pages. “When we apply a narrative such as Scriptural narratives, we should not seek to ‘put ourselves into the story.’”¹⁴

This is not to say that Bible stories have no meaning for the modern reader. This does not mean that we should disregard all the miracle stories in the Bible. “Rather, we should attempt to see how we participate in the same underlying reality and attempt to determine what the story tells us about that reality, and, therefore about us, our situation, and our destiny.”¹⁵ In other words, we must not be lazy and jump to an allegorical interpretation. We must continue to develop and grow by thinking theologically. Take, for instance, when Jesus healed the man with the shriveled hand in Matthew 12:9-14. The person who “puts oneself into the story” comes to the conclusion that Jesus will also heal me if I have hand problems (perhaps if I have enough faith). This is the “lazy” allegorical interpretation. Now consider the same story and go the extra step to think about it theologically. Consider how you as a modern reader of this Biblical

¹⁴ James W. Voelz, *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 335.

narrative participate in the same underlying reality and attempt to determine what the story tells us about that reality, and, therefore about us, our situation, and our destiny.

James Voelz shares the following theological interpretation to that same Bible story:

Better is to see that the reign and rule of God (i.e., the kingdom of God) invaded human history in a decisive way in Jesus' ministry and that it has invaded our own personal history, as well. The man who was healed experienced a specific 'incarnation,' as it were, of the renewal of creation promised at the end of time, and—to apply this healing to ourselves—so might we, if God wills it, in exactly the same way, for we, too, have been overcome/grasped, even as was he, by an invasion of the Age to Come. But, the Age to Come need not be so implemented or manifested in our lives, even as the apostle James was not rescued by God from the murderous hand of Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1). Yet, surely we will be healed...on the last Great Day...for we possess the Holy Spirit, who is the down payment (Eph.1:14) and the firstfruits (Rom.8:23) of our full inheritance of the Age to Come.¹⁶

Notice how the theological interpretation of the Bible story took into account the problem of sin and brokenness that marks our life after the upward fall, and the life of the man with the shriveled hand (Act II). Healing can come to us today (Act VI), if God wills it—as an expression of Jesus' present rule and reign (Act IV-Act VII). But some will not experience this during the earthly walk of faith (Act VI). However, in Act VII, in the Age to Come, all believers will experience the full and complete healing that is ours as those who experience all the blessings of the Coming Age.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 333.

Christ-Centered and Cross-Centered Bible Reading

There is another pattern that Christians see as they read the scriptures and interpret life and history. Along with the overall history of salvation recounted above, “Christian readers of the Bible find in the pattern of Jesus’ life a pattern that recurs again and again elsewhere in the Bible, in extrabiblical history, and in their own lives.”¹⁷ The technical theological term for this repeating pattern is “typology.” Jesus’ life is marked by the following pattern: obedience, then death and ultimately a resurrection rescue of all people. The Old Testament bears this pattern in many places:

In Joseph, who in obedience to his father went off to seek his brothers, was nearly killed by them, but in the end saved them from death in time of famine; in Ruth, who traveled, afraid but trusting into a foreign land, claimed it as her own, and came to be ancestress of its greatest king; in the Hebrew people, fallen into slavery, into exile, but with its relation to God never sundered, always called again to the Promised Land, to be a light to the nations—one sees a familiar pattern, the pattern of Christ as if Christ provided the key to all of scripture.¹⁸

Young Christians need to see both the overarching story of God’s salvation history that puts each Christian into the midst of a grand metanarrative and the recurring pattern of Christ’s life which reaffirms “the astonishing importance of each individual life in faith.”¹⁹ In both of these biblical patterns Christ is at the center. So it should be since Christ provides the key to all of scripture. This is what Jesus clearly stated to the Pharisees, “You diligently study the

¹⁷ William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 127.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 128.

Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:3-40 NIV). The key to understanding the Bible is Jesus! The proper understanding of the Bible must include reading the Bible as if it all testifies about Christ and puts Christ in the center of life and salvation.

“It bears frequent repeating: ‘The Bible is not about the Bible.’ In the final analysis Holy Scripture, like the Holy Spirit, ‘does not bear witness to itself.’ Scripture exists to point to Jesus Christ and to encourage discipleship to him.”²⁰ Frederick Bruner reminds us that it is the Holy Spirit who is to lead the church into all truth (John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26-27; 16:5-15) and then adds this delightful twist—”the Holy Spirit is a hopeless Christocentric. Christocentricity is the hallmark of the Holy Spirit, and so also of faithful biblical exposition, saving church proclamation, and world mission.”²¹

The Christ-centered approach to the understanding of the Bible is a distinctive Lutheran feature, a “hallmark” as stated above. But this feature is not enough. The Christ-centered approach is further clarified when it is properly related to the crucified and risen Christ. In other words, we also employ a *cruciform* (cross-centered) reading of the Bible.

In the Gospel of Matthew we see how Peter who is Christ-centered completely misses the mark because he refuses to be cross-centered. Peter rebukes Jesus who tells of his suffering and

²⁰ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary; Volume 1: The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* (Grand Rapids: William B. EerdmansPub. Co., 2004), 19.

²¹ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary; Volume 2: The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28* (Grand Rapids: William B. EerdmansPub. Co., 2004), xx.

cross yet to come in Matthew 16:21-28. “Peter’s life eloquently teaches that it is entirely possible to be Christ-centered and yet not cross-centered, and so everything is skewed.”²² The scriptures clearly tell of God’s cross-centered ways:

“Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24 NIV).

God’s ways are not our ways. He sends us out as His children to be suffering servants but our natural inclination is toward triumph and greatness. Because the culture of our day prizes success and this so easily infiltrates our thinking and our churches we must constantly be on guard against our desire to make following Jesus a “cross-less” adventure. Frederick Bruner clarifies God’s cross-centered approach:

“We preach a crucified Christ (*from* a crucified Bible, *as* a crucified church, *through* crucified Christians); these cruciform facts are foolishness to those who prize the rational, and they are weak to those who prize the supernatural—but to those who believe the crucified Christ, to them a crucified canon, church, and Christians all seem part of the wisdom and power of God who revealed himself in Jesus. God brings resurrections out of crucifixions.”²³

These insights provide a much needed foundation for students. Now they can read the Bible with a sense of its overall story and how it relates to them (the Bible as a seven act play) and the wonder of the repeating story of Christ that is found in the Old Testament and in all of life (typology). They are equipped to interpret the Bible knowing that the key to its

²² Ibid., 147.

²³ Bruner, *Christbook*, 18.

understanding is Christ. They have the added insight that this Christ-centered approach must also be cross-centered as we learned from Peter in Matthew 16. However it is still unwise to send eighth grade confirmation students into the Bible without further preparation.

Special Bible Reading Tools

Eighth grade confirmation students need still more guidance to accurately interpret individual passages of the Bible. To pass on the faith and to aid in the accurate and meaningful understanding of the Bible, the church has another set of Bible reading tools for these students. The catechism and the creeds of the church are essential Bible reading tools. They help each Bible reader sort out the meaning of the Bible and its application for daily living.

Voelz describes the catechism and the creeds of the church as a road map. “Instead of mapping out the geographical features of the Holy Land, however, they map out the doctrinal content of the Scriptures.”²⁴ The creeds of the church and the catechism are not substitutes for Bible reading. They are guides to help students read the Bible with greater understanding. They do not replace Bible reading but increase the probability of reading it as a Christ-centered and cross-centered story. They even give students a way to organize and understand the seemingly contradictory messages of the Bible.

There is another analogy to help students understand the important role of the catechism and creeds of the church for Bible reading—a jigsaw puzzle.

²⁴ Voelz, 350.

Like a jigsaw puzzle, the Scriptures contain many concepts...that need to be pieced together until they form a coherent picture with all the pieces accounted for. The Confessions (as well as the creeds, of course) assist in assembling the individual pieces in the same way that the picture on the cover of the puzzle box provides an aid in the assembly of the many puzzle pieces. They do so by providing an overview or “snapshot” of the entire picture in which it is possible to discern the central features of the puzzle as well as the relationship of the various pieces to one another, especially to the central features. Moreover, like a photograph taken with a low-aperture setting, the center is clearly focused, other areas are less clearly so. It shows which pieces are placed into the center and those that go around it and on the periphery.²⁵

The jigsaw analogy focuses on the “center” of the picture. In other words, knowing the catechism increases the probability of reading the Bible as a Christ-centered and cross-centered story. The catechism and creeds of the church pull together all the pieces of the Bible and create a clearer picture of the Bible’s purpose and meaning. They also give students a way to organize and understand the seemingly contradictory messages of the Bible. They help the student see that some “pieces” of the Bible are not the central focus and will indeed distort proper Bible reading if they are treated as the center of the Bible. I am so excited to share these “fresh” approaches to the usefulness of the catechism as a Bible reading tool with my eighth grade confirmation students. I am hopeful that once they see the catechism as an aid for lifelong Bible reading, learning the catechism will take on greater importance and significance in their lives.

²⁵ Ibid., 351.

Conclusion

This is merely an *introductory* guide to interpreting Scripture. So much more needs to be said. It is hoped, however, that these pages will provide an intentional and useful guide for introducing eighth grade confirmation students to the joy of understanding the Bible and thinking theologically. It is the beginning of my new eighth grade confirmation curriculum. What follows will be a study of Matthew's gospel that links the catechism to the biblical stories. I am indebted to Frederick Dale Bruner's two commentaries on Matthew: *The Christbook, Matthew 1-12* and *The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28*. Bruner has accomplished what I have been dreaming about for many years...linking the textual study of Matthew with the doctrinal content of the catechism. In this way the doctrine of the church comes alive in the stories from Matthew. As Bruner writes, "The propositional theology of the Epistles is illustrated by the pictorial theology of the Gospels."²⁶ Each chapter of Matthew will be treated textually and doctrinally. My working title for this project is: "The Gospel of Matthew: A Catechism Picture Book."

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9-18-06

²⁶ Bruner, *Christbook*, 24.

APPENDIX SIX

A SERMON ON GENESIS 3:1-15

Genesis 3:1-15 is one of the great portions of scripture that opens the hearer to understand the “family” resemblance shared not by a few in a particular blood line or a particular household...but...a family resemblance shared by all, absolutely everyone. In fact, the way we interpret scripture today has everything to do with these key verses. Without divine intervention we are destined to repeat the way Eve and then Adam treated God’s word.

Chapter 1 clearly establishes God as the creator and owner of all things and clearly describes humanity’s place as God’s servant and the steward of all the earth (Gen. 1:26). As the crowning glory of God’s creation, Adam and Eve are given all they need for life, are set in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it, and are only barred from the tree in the middle of the garden—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

“You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.” (Gen 2:16b-17)

Life doesn’t get any better than this!

Or does it?

In our text we find a serpent (Satan in the form of a snake) tempting Eve. The serpent wants Eve, and anybody now listening, to doubt the intentions, promises and clear words of God.

Listen to the slithery snake spreading suspicions about God:

“You will not surely die, the serpent said to the woman. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Gen. 3:4-5)

It's pretty much a no-brainer, isn't it? I mean, who would you listen to?

Think about it - Who created Eve? Who gave her all she needs? Who gave her the world's first (and only) perfect husband? Who made everything in her life "good"? (Gen. 1:31) Yes, all of this and more is hers from God. The God who loves her.

Then she considers what the serpent has given her—nothing!

Eve's decision is a no-brainer. The "do nothing" serpent is calling the holy, loving, creator God a liar. He is telling Eve that God is holding out on her, that life really is better when you don't trust and believe God. So what happens next should be pretty obvious. She will just tell the serpent to keep his lies to himself! Right?

Let's go back to the beginning. When it comes to good and evil, what does Eve know? Remember Gen. 1:31: "God saw all that he had made and it was very good!" All she knows is good. Imagine it. Everything she sees, hears, and feels...it's all good. The Garden of Eden TV news was "good news only." But, at that moment Eve first wanted what she didn't have - and what she didn't need. She wanted "to be like God." Not in the godly way of imitating Jesus as God's dear child. But like the teenager who wants to be boss, wants to be in control—she wanted to take God's job—and have it for herself. "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and *also desirable for gaining wisdom*, she took some and ate it" (Gen 3:6 NIV)

I'm a very blessed Dad. When I come home my daughter comes running up to me, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy," gives me a big hug and fusses over our reunion as if I'd been gone for days...and not just since breakfast. I have to believe that Adam and Eve had that kind of

relationship with the creator God. We aren't given all the details but the Bible is clear that God would walk with Adam and Eve in the garden. It must have been even sweeter than my nightly reunion.

That is...until *that* day. Instead of running to meet him crying aloud, "Abba, Father...Abba, Father"—they ran away. They hid. You see in that moment, when Eve ate and then Adam, paradise was lost. According to them the loving creator God was now to be feared and hated. They did not trust and obey... they sinned and ran away. Their eyes were opened and now they also knew evil—felt it, thought it, and what God promised → came true. That day—the day they ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—*they died!* Oh, how God's heart must have been broken. Even more heartache than a parent who watches the foolish and dangerous rebellion of a child.

And what happens next tells us everything we need to know about the God of the Bible. God does not give up on Eve and Adam. They must hide, for fear. But God seeks them out. With a Father's love he does not abandon them but calls out to the man, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3). With a Father's love he gives Eve, then Adam, the punishment for their sin and then...he gives the promise of new life, of a savior who will reverse the curse of eternal death initiated that fatal day in the garden. You heard it read already, but unless someone explains it—you probably missed the promise. Listen again...

¹⁴ So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, 'Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.

¹⁵ And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.'"

Did you hear it? One born of a woman will crush the serpent's head. From that moment on every Jewish girl would wonder if she were the one, the one to bear "snake crusher" into the world. The promised one who will defeat the serpent, and set them free from the effects of sin and death and the devil. From its very start one can only know the true meaning of the Bible if one knows the "snake crusher." (And now you know why the serpent's head was crushed at the start of Mel Gibson's portrayal of the Passion.)

The Promised Savior has come. The serpent was crushed not in Bethlehem's manger but on Calvary's cross. Adam and all God's Old Testament people looked ahead and clung to the promise of the coming snake crusher. Today you and I look back to the cross and see the promise of Genesis 3:15 fulfilled. The seed of a woman came to crush the serpent's hellish hold on all humanity. The promised one came as a surprise to his virgin mother Mary. The promised one was not only Mary's Son...but surprise, surprise...the promised one is God's son too.

To know the "snake crusher" as Lord and Savior is the beginning of a new freedom freedom from the curse of Eve and Adam. Like Eve and Adam, against all evidence to the contrary, we all believe that life will be better if we were in control of life. So you naturally want God's job, to be like Him, to take his place and have his authority and power. It's the family resemblance. It's the curse that clouds your eyes and confuses your thinking so that you want what does not belong to you but what you are convinced is best for you. We know it as the "fall into sin" but perhaps it is even better described as some have called it..."the upward fall." Since our problem is not so much that we have become more base and banal desiring what is *below* us but that we want what is *above* us. We want God's place and power!

To know the “snake crusher” as Lord and Savior is the beginning of a new freedom—freedom from the upward fall. This is freedom from selfishness and self importance so you are truly free to love God with your whole heart and to love your neighbor as your self.

This only happens as the God of the Bible leads you to the cross and works the blessings of death and resurrection—the death of your old selfish ways and the resurrection of a new creation → you as a child of God—with new desires, dreams and ambitions that reflect your newfound freedom as the beloved child of the Father, guided by the Holy Spirit, adopted into the family of God by the death and resurrection of Jesus your brother.

Now you know the rest of the story of Genesis 3:1-15. But there is one more surprise to be revealed. God promised the coming of the snake crusher to Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden after their fall into sin, their “upward fall.” *That* day God already planned to send his Son Jesus born of a woman, true man and true God, to undo the curse of sin. In other words, Jesus came to set us free from our futile thinking that life is at its best when we take God’s place. As the Holy Spirit calls you to faith you realize your new life with God and your freedom comes only because of the most amazing reality...God has taken your place!

Hear it clearly my friend...only by Jesus taking your place are you freed from the curse of wanting to take God’s place.

Yes, Eve and Adam died *that* day in the garden, but they believed their life-giving Savior was coming...and he did. The biggest surprise to them and all who hear these words with faith in their heart is the way he rescued them and you. Jesus took your place on a death dealing cross

so you can be raised to new life and experience His resurrection to new life today...and forever.

Amen and Amen!

By Rev. Scott G. Sommerfeld
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9-18-06

APPENDIX SEVEN

GOD CHOOSES IN THE LIVING ROOM

By "John"
8-11-03

Until the age of thirteen, I was a non-practicing Catholic like most of my family—until I came to question every little aspect of the church and its dogma. As I proceeded in questioning everything I soon decided I neither cared about nor wanted to learn about God. I became an agnostic or one “without knowledge.” My official position was that of—I don’t know whether there is a God or not. That changed on July 21st, 2003. It was early afternoon at my father’s house in Kokomo, Indiana, where I was staying the month. My father told me that the pastor comes every so often to give my grandfather communion and even just to talk to him because he was unable to leave the house anymore. Around two o’ clock, Pastor Sommerfeld came to the house. My grandfather was in his customary favorite spot on the porch. After a while, the Pastor came into the house. I was introduced to him. Then, we all sat down and talked about various things. I was never too fond of pleasantries so I endured talking to a complete stranger. It was not the Pastor himself, it was just I have always been slightly anti-social. Well, we talked about this and that until finally my father, in his candid manner, brought up the real subject at hand. Religion. So it was then that I told the pastor that I was an agnostic. He asked me to explain my beliefs. The room literally grew dark. A strange shadowy darkness that did not leave until our conversation was over. It was a strange feeling of isolation and focusing in one. I tried to explain my belief, so finding that it was so little. **As our discussion continued, I soon**

found how strange my “beliefs” were. Many of my comments were along the lines of, “wars, hate, pain, etc., all over religion” and “all religions are the same.” The Pastor, however, was full of knowledge. Talking about how Christianity is different from every other religion because of Jesus. In my foolish ways, I had tried to lump all religions into one. The Pastor would explain things into such depth I was speechless. When he asked a question of me like, “What do you expect to happen after you die?” I had nothing to say simply because all my beliefs—everything I had once thought was disproven and examined by one man. Explaining Christianity in such a different light was exciting and dumbfounding. I had believed that Christ was just another messiah figure, nothing but the frail human mind trying to reach God by creating someone that actually could communicate with God. I soon found how wrong that was. Jesus was not a human becoming more, but rather God descending to us. It was God, in his unconditional love for us, giving his only son to save all of us. The Pastor explained in such a riveting way, I could have sat there all day. But, two hours later the Pastor had to leave. He said a prayer and left. My mind raced with ideas. So, that night I went to a bookstore and bought a Bible. **I flipped it opened and it turned to Psalm 91. I was so touched by it that I cannot describe it.** The pastor suggested I read the book of Mark and John. So, I did. I soon found Jesus to be both a kind and tortured soul. He who was sinless, took our sins so that we may live eternally. My father got me a copy of Luther’s small and large catechism. Then a few days later when I returned home, the Pastor had visited and had left a book for me. It was such a thoughtful gesture. I read the book and found it very interesting. I was soon, and still am consumed with an undying passion to learn and study more about God and the more I learn, the

close I come to him. For the first time in my life, I am reading, understanding and applying the Bible to everyday life, all this thanks to one man, who with the help of God changed my life forever.

APPENDIX EIGHT

8th GRADE WORSHIP SUMMARY

Do your own work. For help, call on your parents. However, getting the help of another confirmation student, as in sharing answers, is against the spirit of this exercise.

Name: _____

Grade: _____

Date of Worship: _____

Day in the Church Year: _____

OUR WORSHIP

Theme of the Day: Each worship service has a special theme. In your own words, write one or two sentences describing today's theme.

The Bible Readings: Give the Bible reference for each reading. Then write a one sentence summary for each reading. Now tell which one(s) relate to the theme of the day.

Description

_____ = Old Testament

_____ = Epistle

_____ = Gospel

The Songs: What was your favorite song today? How does this song connect to the theme of the day?

The Prayers: List one person or need that we prayed for in worship that you want to remember in your own prayers during the week.

MY RESPONSE

List one thing the sermon/worship experience encouraged YOU to do:

What did YOU pray for today?

"I rejoiced when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'"
Psalms 122:1

THE SERMON...Going Deeper

Title & Text: _____

Biblical Text

The Bible is intended to give a clearer understanding of God's activity in the world... and the way life is. To find the intended life application for us today... it is necessary to consider how the Bible's message first relates to the original recipients.

Describe the intended meaning of the Bible text as described in this sermon.

What links/insights to the original context were shared?

How were God's actions in our world mentioned in this sermon?

Theological Thinking

We live in a fragmented world where life may seem to have no logic or order.

Theological thinking not only teaches the truths of the faith (sin, grace, 10 Commandments, etc.), but also gives Christians a framework (i.e., logic and order) to understand how life is.

What Christian truths/Catechism topics were mentioned in today's sermon?

How will this sermon help you understand and live in this world?

Gospel Proclamation

God, through the sermon, continues to intervene into the world He has created, reaching out to us and working His salvation in our midst. He does this by convicting us of our sins, leading us to confession and repentance (law) and graciously giving us new life, hope and forgiveness through the grace of the crucified and raised Christ (gospel).

How did this sermon convict you of your sin?

How did this sermon help you experience God's gracious help for you in Christ?

Christian Living

It is important for Christians to recognize that God is continually at work in and through His people everywhere in the world. Average daily life experiences for 8th graders and others can be seen as holy...when we start to recognize how God uses us in the world for His service and witness.

Did this sermon give an accurate depiction of life in this world? Explain.

Did this sermon tell how God does His work in this world through your daily activities? Explain.

APPENDIX NINE

CONFIRMATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

Lutheran parents in my current ministry setting are familiar with the need for a three year confirmation process. This expected time of intentional Christian education during middle school is the ideal time for sharing information that will enhance the likelihood of both youth and their parents thinking theologically.

Preaching as Preparation for Confirmation

The pastor also bears a significant responsibility in equipping his flock to think theologically. The pastor models theological thinking according to his use of the Bible and the sacraments in worship. The way the Bible is used by the pastor in preaching and teaching during Sunday worship is influential for the formation of the theological thinking of both youth and parents alike. With this in mind, this pastor will actively train youth and parents in the fine art of listening to a sermon in an effort to assist them in understanding the Bible text, thinking theologically, embracing gospel proclamation, and living as Christians in the world. (See page two of “8th Grade Worship Summary” in the appendix.)

Parental Involvement

In my present setting some parents (20%) do attend confirmation weekly with their child. Even still, a more reliable way to link parents to this key learning will be needed. My first attempt to accomplish this parental link will be twofold. First, each child will be required to have

a parent join them in class for five or six sessions (nearly once each month we meet). Since we provide a family style meal before confirmation class and other sessions are available for all grades and ages of children— parents will not need to worry about fixing food or finding a babysitter. Second, we will introduce two annual two-hour “parent only” gatherings for each grade that include parenting tips, a preview of the upcoming material to be covered in class, and a fellowship opportunity to meet other parents and strengthen their ties to the community of faith at Holy Cross.

Student Preparation

It is to be expected that students will come to confirmation with varied levels of life experience and exposure to thinking Christian. Some homes will have taken seriously the baptism promises to bring their child up

“in the true knowledge and worship of God and be taught the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer; and that, as he/she grows in years to place in his/her hands the Holy Scriptures, bring him/her to the services of God’s house, and provide for his/her further instruction in the Christian faith, that he/she come to the Sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood and thus, abiding in his/her baptismal grace and in communion with the Church, he/she may grow up to lead a godly life to the praise and honor of Jesus Christ.”²⁷

Others will not. It is hoped that this commitment to ongoing discipleship following baptism will be further encouraged at Holy Cross with our recent introduction of the Discipleship Marathon.

²⁷ *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 200.

The Discipleship Marathon provides an intentional re-connection to each baptized child and their parents at key developmental milestones from baptism to confirmation and beyond. These include the “Getting Ready for Baptism” class that prepares for baptism and introduces parents to the Discipleship Marathon and a group of parents at the same life stage; “Starting Sunday School Blessing” for 2 year olds and their parents; “First Grade Bible” where parents mark key verses in a new Bible that they present to their child during worship in fulfillment of the baptismal promise to “place in his/her hands the Holy Scriptures”; “First Communion” for fifth graders and their parents as the students are prepared for communion at the critical time of experiencing greater life challenges in middle school and the rigors of sixth grade confirmation; and finally each year while in the confirmation program parents and students come forward at the beginning of the year for the “Confirmation Dedication” asking God’s blessings on this intentional period of instruction and modeling for the Christian life.

The Discipleship Marathon lifts high the parental role and responsibility to instill home life with a living faith based on their promises to God at their child’s baptism. Of course these promises are enabled by the promises God made to them and their child in their own baptism. Parents in each life stage are linked to one another as a source of support and encouragement and are provided with home-based resources as well via the Discipleship Marathon.

It is not enough to focus on the responsibilities of parents and pastor alone. One must also focus on the responsibilities of each student. Each student is also responsible for their ongoing growth in the godly life of faith and love inspired and enabled by their baptism. They are to

dedicate them selves to living under God through vigorous study and holy living in both home and church as a vital member of “a caring community in Christ.”

Before sharing an outline of this new confirmation curriculum we must revisit the “Six Marks of Discipleship” originally shared at the retreat in 2003.

The “Six Marks of Discipleship”

The “Six Marks of Discipleship” were introduced at the retreat to encourage high school students to grow in faith and to act on that faith by loving others. Students were also alerted to coming temptations as they prepare to leave their parental home. My recommendation is to introduce the “Six Marks of Discipleship” much earlier in the Christian education process. I also believe that this needs to be linked to parents and the home. As stated above, it is the home that has the responsibility and the most influence in forming faith that links faith and life into active discipleship for a lifetime. Therefore the new focus of the “Six Marks of Discipleship” must be an active and dynamic partnership between home and congregation that trains and equips each parent to practice these faith feeding and love dispensing Marks of Discipleship. Then the youth will be reinforced daily by the example of the home. In my ministry setting the “Six Marks of Discipleship” can also be linked to the confirmation experience.

An Outline of the New Three Year Confirmation Curriculum for Youth and Parents:

Sixth Grade Confirmation: Growing in God’s Word

Introduce them to the Story of the Bible and the themes of Sin, Judgment and Grace. It is best to begin this process by using key Bible stories that guide Christians into the truth that Scripture interprets Scripture. Students and their parents will be introduced to Bible stories that

interpret God's work in human history for the sake of salvation. Such stories would include Psalm 136 (God is creator and redeemer); Nehemiah 9 and 10 (Detailed description of God the creator who is repeatedly merciful and gracious to his unfaithful stiff-necked people); Deuteronomy 30-32 (Moses' final sermon recounting God's faithfulness in the face of His wayward children); Acts 6:8-8:3 (Stephen full of the Holy Spirit recounts the story of God's salvation and the stiff-necked people who killed the Righteous One); and Acts 17:16-34 (Paul preaches about the living God who is creator and the one who calls all people to repentance before the Resurrected One comes to judge the world).

After telling the story of salvation via these key Bible stories it is time to introduce the VII Act Play that helps students and parents better understand the Bible and see the connection between the Bible and life today.

Other teaching materials that introduce the Bible's key themes of Sin, Judgment, and Grace and trace them through both testaments are key slides in the Crossways International curriculum.

Focus on the following Marks of Discipleship:

Bible Reading. Assign Bible stories to be read at home as a family that will help them find and affirm the themes of Sin, Judgment and Grace in the Old Testament and the New Testament. In this way God's people learn to talk about God and faith using central stories of the faith that give an overview of God at work. These stories give us the language of faith. It is best to begin this process by using key Bible stories that guide Christians into the truth that Scripture interprets

Scripture. Therefore the key stories identified above will be the natural starting place for such family Bible reading.

Prayer. Practice the 4 Parts of Prayer (Praise-Repent-Ask-Yield) in private prayers at home, family devotions and in small group prayer time at confirmation. Learn Martin Luther's Evening Prayer. Teach the Evening Prayer first since most kids pray at night before they go to bed and because we can say it together at the close of class as a large group or in their small group. Students will report weekly on the Bible stories they read and the topics of their prayer time using a PoWeR Page designed for this purpose. (See "PoWeR Page" in the appendix.)

Seventh Grade Confirmation: Growing as Christian Servants

Introduce the Catechism as the treasure map that helps readers understand the Bible and do life as a Christian. This can be "set-up" by conducting a scavenger hunt using a detailed map of the church and its grounds that ultimately leads to "hidden treasure." Since the Bible is so expansive (two testaments spanning thousands of years) the church in her wisdom has provided a map to guide Bible students to find the six treasures it contains. Without this map it is hard to find and be sure of the Bible's treasures. With this map the reader is better equipped to read all of the Bible with greater understanding.

Introduce the students to thinking Christian by leading them to the six revealed treasures of the Bible. In other words, teach the basics of Christian doctrine as taught in Luther's Small Catechism.

Focus on the following Marks of Discipleship:

Worship. Introduce the students and parents to the movements and purposes of worship. Link the six parts of the catechism to the weekly order of worship. Students will report weekly on their Sunday worship experience using a Worship Summary page designed for this purpose. (See “Worship Summary” in the appendix) A parent group will need to be trained to weekly evaluate these summaries.

Service. Christian servants are concerned with “being” Christian and “doing” Service. Both of these are derived from one’s identity as a baptized child of God. The youth will do service projects as a class (using their small groups to keep it manageable in size) and family service projects will be assigned. This will introduce them to the significance of Christian Service which sets one free from love of self and sets one free to care about others. Students will report monthly on their service hours using a Faith In Action reporting page. (See “FIA Page “ in the appendix)

Eighth Grade Confirmation: Growing as Community in Christ

The goal of this year is to help youth and their parents gain greater skills in interpreting the Bible. Special attention will be given to reading the Bible in a Christ-centered and Cross-centered manner. The VII Act Play will be reintroduced with special attention to God’s design that humanity live under Him, the Upward Fall, the Choosing God, and being a Community in Christ. Learning to properly interpret the Bible equips youth and their parents to think as a Christian about their culture and themselves. (See “ A Guide to Interpreting the Bible for 8th Graders and their Parents” in the appendix.)

The Gospel of Matthew will be the primary biblical text for practicing biblical interpretation. The study of Matthew will link together what they have learned in the previous two years from their overview of the Bible and the Catechism. A model for this type of instruction is found in the commentaries by Frederick Dale Bruner who uses catechetical themes to order and explain each chapter of Matthew's gospel and its presentation of the life and teachings of Jesus.²⁸ His approach is very Christological and a great resource for my new 8th grade confirmation curriculum that is based on students uncovering catechetical themes as they are studying the biblical text.

Focus on the following Marks of Discipleship:

Being Community. Assign each youth to an Adult Mentor and to a Youth Mentor to help them transition out of the world of the child and into the world of the young adult where they will need to manage more freedom with more responsibility. Students will report monthly on their insights learned and shared with their mentors on a Mentor Moments page to be designed for this purpose.

Weekly worship keeps one connected to the community of Christ that will support them for a lifetime of Christian living. Therefore Students will continue reporting weekly on their

²⁸ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary; Volume 1: The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2004) and *Matthew: A Commentary; Volume 2: The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2004).

Sunday worship experience using a new and enhanced 8th Grade Worship Summary that gives further teaching on how to listen to a sermon. The pastor will actively train youth and parents in the fine art of listening to a sermon in an effort to assist them in understanding the Bible text, thinking theologically, embracing gospel proclamation, and living as Christians in the world. (See page two of “8th Grade Worship Summary” in the appendix.)

Giving. Teach parents and youth how to manage their money and to use it for God’s purposes. Give students offering envelopes and encourage proportionate weekly giving. Monitor the number of envelopes used weekly and the weekly total given as a class for periodic feedback to spur them on toward growth in the grace of giving.

Conclusion

This new three year confirmation curriculum is designed to equip students and their parents to interpret the Bible as Lutheran Christians using the VII Act Play (sixth grade), the catechism (seventh grade) and other essential features of Christ-centered and cross-centered Bible interpretation (eighth grade). Each of these key components is covered successively in a three year cycle.

In this curriculum the “Six Marks of Discipleship” are introduced in deliberate and significant pairings. The sixth graders and their parents focus on Bible reading and prayer, reading from a list of key stories in both testaments. Both of these Marks of Discipleship are easily practiced at home and become the foundation of home-based devotional worship as a family. The seventh graders add the last of the faith feeding marks, worship, and the first of the marks that put faith into loving action, Christian service. Both of these Marks of Discipleship

expand the influence of the home to those outside: to worship with others and to serve others. The eighth graders and their parents focus on being community and giving. The use of Adult Mentors and Youth Mentors is intended to help these eighth graders and their parents make the transition from the world of the child to the world of the young adult. This is an intentional effort to help them transition into high school and remain active in our Christian community via worship and high school youth group. Both of these Marks of Discipleship focus outward on one's care for others as a means of exercising faith and growing in one's capacity to love.

Name _____

Date _____

PoWeR Page

(Key Reading)

1. While you are reading this key portion of the Bible it is important to make notes on how God is involved and then answer all of the following that apply. Sometimes all will apply, sometimes only one or two.

Describe how **God** intervenes in the world...

- a) to tell how life is
- b) to judge
- c) to show mercy

2. While you are reading this key portion of the Bible it is important to make notes on how people believe, think and act and then answer all of the following that apply. Sometimes both will apply, sometimes only one.

Describe how **people** live in the world...

- a) as sinners who disobey God and disregard others
- b) as saints who trust God and care for others

3. How does this key portion of the Bible relate to **you**? Also, describe what you learned or something you have a comment or question about.

4. It is good to begin and end Bible reading time with prayer. Begin by asking God to help you understand and apply His word. At the end write your other **prayer topics** for this week.

Who:

What:

PoWer Page Reading List

Act I

Genesis 1&2

Act II

Genesis 3

Act III

Genesis 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22

Exodus 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

Jeremiah 31 32 33

Act IV

Matthew 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Matthew 26 27 28

Luke 24

Act V

Matthew 10:18

John 14 15 16

Acts 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

Act VI

Matthew 28:16-20

John 15

Ephesians 1 2

Act VII

Matthew 24 & 25

1 Corinthians 15

John 14:1-6

Revelation 20 21 22

**Faith In Action
Form**

Name _____

Name of Service Project _____

Date Completed _____ Number of Hours _____

Summary of Activity: _____

Service Project Leader Comments: _____

Your Signature

Service Project Leader Signature

Please turn completed forms into your FIA Monitor.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Culture

Althen, Gary. *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1988.

This guide book for visiting foreigners reveals cultural norms and expectations that Americans accept unthinkingly. A useful resource for understanding American culture especially for the American reader who may not see the prevailing plausibility structures that support ones own behavior. It provides insights into the North American culture highlighting individualism which is even instilled in our children.

Anderson, Walter Truett. *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990.

An extensive overview of post-modernism. The postmodern necessity of choice in constructing ones own reality is the crux of the new polarity between fundamentalists with an overarching theme for understanding life that limits choices and relativists with no limits on any choices.

Bellah, Robert H., et al. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Updated Edition with a New Introduction. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

The author interprets the state of American culture in terms of the quest for individualism not a desire for equality. He describes this as radical individualism. One example of this is recounted in an interview with a woman who describes her religion in terms of herself, calling it "Sheilaism."

Berger, Peter L. *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1979.

One will find the sociological perspective describing the transition from pre-modern to modern times. The author introduces the concept of plausibility structures. This is the notion that personal decisions are influenced by the surrounding culture which makes some actions or beliefs seem more plausible. Berger asserts that modern life demands more and more choices and thus becomes more and more subjective. In terms of religion there is no longer a possibility for choices but a necessity to choose, this is the Heretical Imperative.

Bridge between Culture and Theology

Barna, George. *Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001.

This volume reports Barna's research highlighting the impact of North American culture on Christian youth. He details the contradictory and inconsistent beliefs of Christian youth who are enmeshed in the effects of pluralism and relativism. He also suggests that Christian adults have a significant role and responsibility to help youth think and live as Christians.

Bosch, David J. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Missions*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.

An exhaustive treatment of mission and culture identifying past errors in mission activity due to the cultural blind spots of the missionary and encouraging current missionaries to be self-critical and humble so as not to be self-deceived and ineffective in other cultures. The emerging ecumenical mission paradigm is described by personal interdependence and creative tension in the realm of ideas in contrast to self autonomy and dichotomy of thought in the enlightenment paradigm. I see this as an encouragement for Lutherans to speak openly about the paradoxes inherent in our theology.

Newbigin, Lesslie. *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1995.

He helps the reader evaluate cultural assumptions about certainty and doubt that ultimately lead to placing proper confidence in God's revelation in the Bible. It also contains an especially useful treatment of the two kinds of knowing that elevates the necessity and validity of interpersonal knowing over investigative knowing in matters of faith.

Veith, Gene Edward, Jr. *Post-Modern Times: "A Christian guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture"*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994.

An excellent introduction to post-modernism that traces its philosophical roots and examines its view of life in light of orthodox Christianity.

Theology

Brueggemann, Walter. *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.

Christians in the post-modern world are in the minority and can learn how to survive by following the examples of the exiles in biblical times according to Brueggeman. This Old Testament view of life sheds new light on living as Christians in a postmodern world.

Bruner, Frederick Dale. *Matthew: A Commentary; Volume 1: The Christbook: Matthew 1-12*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2004.

This commentary uses catechetical themes to order and explain each chapter of Matthew's gospel and its presentation of the life and teachings of Jesus. His approach is very Christological and a great resource for my new 8th grade confirmation curriculum that is based on students uncovering catechetical themes as they are studying the biblical text.

Bruner, Frederick Dale. *Matthew: A Commentary; Volume 2: The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2004.

This second volume also uses catechetical themes to order and explain each chapter of Matthew's gospel and its presentation of the life and teachings of Jesus. His approach is very Christological and a great resource for my new 8th grade confirmation curriculum that is based on students uncovering catechetical themes as they are studying the biblical

text.

Dawn, Marva J. *A Royal Waste of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being Church for the World*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1999.

In a culture that is obsessed with productivity the author encourages wasting time in worship where God is at work but not in a manner that seems very productive or meaningful to our postmodern world. Her treatment of the Bible as the meta narrative for life, the VII Act Play, is essential to my project.

Dawn, Marva J. *Is It A Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1997.

The author assists readers in making worship accessible to children and adults since worship is formative for life and faith. She also treats the VII Act Play. Her treatment of the Christian life in a pagan consumerist world is richly theological and eminently practical.

Forde, Gerhard O. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1997.

An extensive treatment of the theology of the cross based on Martin Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518 that leads readers to become theologians of the cross. A rewarding and challenging read for every theologian that tells the ugly truth about our good works and the wonderful reality of a God who kills sinners to make them alive in Christ Jesus.

Forde, Gerhard O. *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005.

Free will is the topic of choice in a culture of choice. This same discussion engaged Erasmus and Luther in the mid-1520's. While Luther agreed that humans have freedom of the will in things beneath us he resisted and refuted Erasmus' philosophical approach that also claimed humans have freedom of the will in the realm of things above us, such as choosing of God. Forde leads readers to the significance of this debate for Christians today.

Forde, Gerhard O. *Theology Is for Proclamation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

God's Word does its work in the hearts of sinners when it is proclaimed not merely explained. Because the will of sinners is in bondage mere explanation of the work of God appeals to the will but does not set it free. However, the Word of God proclaimed sets sinners free by doing God's work of killing and making alive. This truth transforms the doing of theology. Forde introduces the "upward fall" in these pages which is a key insight for this project.

Foss, Michael W. *Power Surge: Six Marks of Discipleship for a Changing World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

The six marks of discipleship relate to the acronym "PoWeR SuRGe." The first set of marks relate to coming to faith and gaining the power of God through prayer, worship

and reading the bible. The second set of marks relates to putting that faith into loving action through service, relations with other Christians and giving. A memorable way to help Christians of all ages retain the balance of faith and love in the Christian life.

Hauerwas, Stanley and William H. Willimon. *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989.

The authors warn Christians not to unwittingly accept a cultural assessment of what is good and right according to pluralism and paganism. They call on Christians to impact the world by being a church that orients people to God and confronts the deeply held values of our culture.

Kolb, Robert. *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005.

The debate over the freedom of the will is not an intellectual pursuit but a matter of faith and eternal life to Martin Luther and the 16th century theologians. Man is bound in sin and must be set free to be truly human and truly a child of God. This theme and the theology of the cross are traced in the theological writings of Luther and his followers.

Kolb, Robert. "Nothing But Christ Crucified." In *The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century: Signposts for a Multicultural Witness*. Edited by Alberto Garcia and Victor Raj. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002.

This concise essay tells how God transforms individuals and whole cultures by setting them free to be truly human according to the work of Jesus Christ through the theology of the cross. The sections of this article show the scope of this brief essay: The Conversion of Saul, The Message of Saul; The Theology of the Cross Reveals Who God Is; The Theology of the Cross Reveals Who God's People Are; The Theology of the Cross Reveals How God's People Live.

Kolb, Robert. *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993.

The author delivers a complete systematic theology in an engaging manner for today's reader that includes an overview of Lutheran presuppositions for interpreting the Bible. The treatment of the theology of the cross, freedom of the will, and election are essential for this project.

The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Ed. Kolb, Robert and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

The Formula of Concord articles on Free Will (II) and Election (XI) are foundational for this project.

Luther, Martin. *The Bondage of the Will, 1525*. American Edition of Luther's Works, Volume 33. Ed. Philip S. Watson. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972.

Luther's response to Erasmus' *Diatribes* is the classic treatment of the topic of free will. Luther leads the reader to see that one is bound in matters pertaining to coming to faith and that one's eternal life thus rests in the work of God who kills the sinner and makes

alive in Christ Jesus. The reader may benefit from a companion text that explains the historic debate and its 16th century style.

Okamoto, Joel, Jeffrey Kloha, et al. "The Bible in God's plan and work of salvation." Unpublished article. October 2006.

This brief article describes the essence and authority of the Scriptures. It provides a useful introduction to how God reveals himself and accomplishes our salvation. It also describes how these writings came to be acknowledged as Word of God.

Pasewark, Kyle A. "Predestination as a Condition of Freedom." *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (1998): 57-78.

This article highlights the current trend to dismiss or ignore the doctrine of predestination then leads the reader to find in predestination the pure grace of God. If one is chosen by God for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus then salvation is solely the work of God. Then all good works have no bearing on one's salvation and self is then free to truly serve others and God. Thus predestination is the condition of true freedom.

Peter, David J. "A Framework for the Practice of Evangelism and Outreach." *Concordia Journal* 30 (2004): 203-216.

This article addresses the three kinds of righteousness as they relate to the three articles of the creed considering the topic of evangelism. My interest lies in the treatment of the three kinds of righteousness as portrayed in the framework of Dr. Joel Biermann. This framework helps the Christian understand the call to righteousness in daily living.

Placher, William C. *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989.

This treatment of how Christians can make truth claims related to the story of the Bible is essential for Bible interpretation in the midst of extreme subjectivism and relativism. Particularly insightful are his twin foci of typology and the history of salvation as keys for interpreting the Bible.

Schmitt, David. "The Tapestry of Preaching." In *Reaching Out to People*. Symposium Papers Number 9. St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Publications, 1999.

The four threads of preaching are insightful for the preaching task and informed my 8th Grade Worship Summary. The description of the important role of theological confession also informs my understanding of thinking theologically.

Voelz, James W. *What Does This Mean? Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Post-Modern World*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003.

While his use of linguistics may seem daunting the resulting Christocentric approach to interpretation and his Lutheran confessional approach outlined in the final chapter are invaluable for informed Bible interpretation in postmodern times.

Warren, Richard. *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message*

and Mission. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

This popular book appeals to Christians and non-Christians who seek purpose for daily living. I borrow the acronym SHAPE that describes helping a person find their “fit” for ministry. Helping a person understand their SHAPE for ministry relates to helping them see how God has uniquely prepared them for ministry according to their Spiritual gifts, Heart (or passion), Abilities, Personality, and their Experiences in life. See especially pages 369-375.

Willimon, William H. *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1992.

Christians are called to live as a community of the baptized without accommodating the perspective and priorities of the wider world. This means we must accept that we will and must “talk funny” to those not informed by the Bible and our baptismal link to the story of God in the world. In the last chapter, the concept of learning Christianity like learning a foreign language is masterful and rich with insight for passing on the faith to all generations.

Theology and College

Campolo, Tony and William H. Willimon. *The Survival Guide for Christians on Campus*. West Monroe: Howard Publishing Co., 2002.

A nice blend of sociology and theology intended to help the college student address matters of faith and life while living on campus in the midst of postmodern challenges. The need for involvement with a Christian community to remain Christian in college is stressed throughout. Key topics include how to read the bible, understanding worship, sexual temptation, developing ethics, and how to pass on the faith in a postmodern world.

Luther, Martin. *By Faith Alone*. Iowa Falls: World Bible Publishers, 1998.

This daily devotional presents the words of Martin Luther in short articles. Readers gain great insight from across the centuries in this fresh translation. The detailed index also allows the reader to find topics of interest for faith and life on the college campus.

McDowell, Josh and Bob Hostetler. *Beyond Belief to Convictions*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002.

This volume is written to challenge adults to intentionally prepare youth for the potential dangers to faith that are prevalent in our postmodern culture. It uses story telling to communicate the intricacies of what the author calls “relational apologetics.” This apologetic is developed around three key questions (Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?) that find their answers respectively in the incarnation of Jesus, the revelation of God in the Bible, and the resurrection of Jesus.

Winkler, Kathleen. *College Bound*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1998.

Written to help students and parents prepare in advance for the changes and challenges of college life while maintaining Christian faith. A practical guidebook about personal adjustments relating to such issues as staying healthy, sex and dating, drugs, academics,

faith, politics, roommate challenges and home visits.

Home-Centered Congregation-Supported Ministry

Anderson, David W. and Paul Hill. *Frogs without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

An introduction to the "Home-Centered Congregational-Supported" philosophy of ministry that can also be used in a preaching and teaching series. Its intended audience includes all Christian adults as well as church staff and leaders. It is organized around five principles that describe the link between home and congregation and four key discipleship behaviors to be practiced at home and as a congregation.

Freudenburg, Ben and Rick Lawrence. *The Family Friendly Church*. Loveland, CO: Vital Ministry, 1998.

A guide for individual church workers or the entire staff for evaluating current personal and corporate ministry practices in light of their impact on all homes and families in the congregation. It promotes the "Home-Centered Congregational-Supported" philosophy of ministry and provides resources for implementation.

Kolb, Robert. *Teaching God's Children His Teaching: A Guide for the Study of Luther's Catechism*. Hutchinson, MN: Crown Publishing, 1992.

An out of print resource written to help Christian teachers and parents pass on the faith to their children. It begins with cultivating a theology of the cross worldview in "Knowing how to live and die" and concludes with a call to live out the Christian faith daily in "Called to practice our humanity." I believe this final chapter is essential material for high school students and all adults eager to put faith into action by impacting the world around them.

Luther, Martin. *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005.

The catechism collects and displays the treasures of the Bible and is an essential guide for reading the Bible and thinking theologically. The catechism is instrumental for passing on the essentials of the Christian faith. The catechism is intended for use in the home (see Luther's preface) and in the church. As such it is an essential resource for the "Home-Centered Congregational-Supported" style of ministry supported by the project.

Lutheran Worship. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982.

The hymnal is a classic resource for linking home and congregation. The baptismal service is referenced in this project as it stresses the parental responsibility to feed faith through home and congregational activities.