The Gospel and Suburban Youth Cultures

by

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Introduction

The general focus of my PhD study is on Spiritual Formation for the missional church in the context of middle-class United States suburbia. I am the Associate Pastor of Spiritual Formation at Grace Lutheran Church (GLC)—an ELCA congregation—in Andover, MN, where I work with all ages trying to create spaces in which people can develop spiritually. My case study for this paper is focused on the high school youth group that I work with and a new curriculum/praxis that I developed for the students this fall called *How Do I Fit*?

The paper will proceed in three basic movements. The first movement will look through the wide-angle lens of Gospel and Cultures to establish the general theological framework from which I will operate. I will address each topic separately, asking first, *What is the Gospel?* and then, *What is Culture?* The second movement will zoom in on three specific theological questions that come directly from my case study: 1. Is it possible to create community among suburban youth, given both the cultural divides that exist between social groups and the seemingly disconnectedness and disembodiedness that characterizes the suburban existence? 2. How much does race—specifically the issues of whiteness—play into spiritual formation in suburban congregations? 3. How does power factor into youth ministry and spiritual formation? The third movement will attempt to synthesize the discussion and provide constructive implications for a suburban missional spirituality.

The entire conversation flows from within the perspective of my specific case study. However, I have decided not to front-load the paper with my thick description of the case study. Rather, I will scatter the description throughout the three movements.

Wide-Angle Lens

What is the Gospel?

Christianity is built upon the answer to this question. And yet, those who call themselves Christians do not agree on the answer. What is the Gospel? All Christians would agree that the Gospel has to do with Jesus. But how does it have to do with him? Is it about the Word becoming incarnate? His moral teachings? His fulfillment of Jewish prophecy? His death? Was it propitiary, atoning, exemplary? Is it his resurrection? Is it his servanthood? His lordship? His exalted place at the right hand of the Father? His imminent return? His place in the Trinity? His sending of the Holy Spirit? All of the above?

Jesus said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news [Gospel]."[1] Jesus preached "The Gospel" three years before his death, burial, and resurrection. There was a time in my life—all of my childhood and adolescence, in fact—in which the theological impact of this fact was completely lost on me. How could the Gospel exist, I would have thought, before Jesus paid the penalty for our sins and provided a way for us to go to Heaven?

It is appropriate to share my personal journey at this point for two reasons. First, it provides context for the case study, since I am intricately involved in the study. *Who* I am

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[1] The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. 1989 (Mk 1:15). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

has great bearing on *how* the youth ministry is framed and *how* I perceive what is happening in it. Second, my personal story crosses through at least three typical theological ghettos of Christian thought and thus serves as an interesting vehicle for exploring various responses to the question, "What is the Gospel?"

I am a stranger in a strange land at GLC. I was not raised Lutheran. My knowledge of God was planted in the soil of Independent Baptist Fundamentalism. The Gospel, in this context, was a very clear-cut transaction that could be explained by the four spiritual laws. 1. God created us. 2. We sinned and deserve eternal punishment. 3. God paid the price for our sin through the death of Jesus. 4. Anyone who receives Jesus (the transactional piece) as personal Lord and Savior will be granted eternal life in Heaven.[2]

My Dad was never legalistic and he seemed to have an authentic, deep, spiritual relationship with God that did not match up with the other men in our fundamentalist world. His passion for a relationship with God that went beyond "winning the lost" and "selling fire insurance" motivated me to seek God beyond the walls of fundamentalism.

God led me on a wild adventure. It began at Moody Bible Institute and quickly branched into the broader world of protestant evangelicalism at Wheaton College. My first adult church experience was a seeker-targeted ministry in a mega church in Las Vegas that tried to blend *Willow Creek*[3] and *Saddle Back*[4] into a *Christian Church*[5] pot.

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[2] The implication here is that all others will be lost in Hell and damnation forever. The kinder ones of us didn't like to emphasize this point. Others loved to shove it down the throat of our "lost" friends.

[3] This is a mega-church in the suburbs of Chicago that is led by senior pastor Bill Hybels. The Willow Creek model is known as a non-denominational, "seeker-targeted" model in which the weekly Sunday services are tailored to spiritual seekers and fashioned in "culturally relevant" media for the purpose of communicating the Gospel and connecting it to everyday, suburban lifestyles.

God called me into ministry there and I spent eight years earning a Masters of Divinity

degree from Bethel Seminary in their In-Ministry[6] program while serving in adult

ministries on the church staff. I discovered that the seeker church model was not really

different from my fundamentalist roots. We simply sold tickets to Heaven in a much

cooler, "culturally relevant" manner.

God used Dallas Willard, Leonard Sweet, Stanley Grenz, and Alan Roxburgh,

among others, to change my ecclesiology and, to some extent, my soteriology, to the

point where I could no longer exist within the mega church. We started a house church

and I began reading Brian McLaren and Richard Rohr and much of the literature

generated by the Emergent Village Group. They gave names to the theological

imagination that had been percolating in me over the past several years.

It was Dallas Willard that first exposed me to the realization that Jesus proclaimed

the Gospel at the beginning of his ministry. The good news was that the kingdom of God

was *at hand*. Jesus demonstrated with his life and teaching that the kingdom of God is an

alternative way of being in the world, *right now*. The Gospel, in this understanding, could

be defined like this: A person can know life—abundant life—in the here and now, not

just in the pie-in-the-sky-in-the-great-by-and-by, by following the ways of Jesus. The

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[4] This is another mega-church in Southern California that is led by senior pastor Rick Warren. Saddle Back is built upon a "Purpose-Driven" model in which spiritual seekers are led through a linear plan of spiritual growth.

[5] Here I am referring to the specific movement called the Christian Church. It is one of three splinter groups from the original Stone-Campbell movement in Kentucky that followed the Civil War. It is also known as the Restoration movement. It was a reformation movement that moved away from the Presbyterian church. The church I served in was moving from a Christian Church background to a blend of Willow Creek and Saddle Back.

[6] This is a program that allows the student to stay working full-time in ministry while pursuing an education in distance and contextualized learning formats.

Kingdom of God is about justice for the poor and the sick and the voiceless. It is about countercultural rhythms of life that cultivate peace and justice in the world.

I liked this vibe. It resonated more with my intuitions about God and the teachings of scripture. However, it left me confused on some of the fundamentals upon which I was raised. What is sin, then? How does justice work with grace?

The people in our house church weren't ready for the theological shifts that I was experiencing and it shattered our community. Some called me a moral relativist. Others accused me of demon possession. Things ended badly in the house church. I was so beaten and broken that I vowed I would never be a pastor again. I saw myself as a two-time loser in ministry who did not have the "emotional intelligence" to lead people with courage and conviction. I told myself that I was too abstract and not practical enough to accomplish anything of value.

God told me to move to Minnesota and get a PhD. My wife, four children, dog, and I moved to Minnesota with no idea where or how to get a PhD. I tried to make a living as a freelance illustrator/animator. We were waiting in the frozen spaces—literally and figuratively—wondering if God was really leading me, or if I had fallen so far away from Him that I was lost in the cold.

Then my Dad introduced me to a Lutheran pastor at the church down the street. He had attended Wheaton College in the late 70s. He had also spent some time in Baptist and Christian Missionary Alliance contexts before he chose to return to the Lutheran Church where he, for the first time, truly understood God's grace. God used Pastor Mark to thaw my frozen heart. He invited me to work with GLC as a consultant in Adult Spiritual Formation. I dipped my toe in the water. I was terrified of an institutional

church—a Lutheran one, no less. The congregation at GLC received me and my family with warmth and generosity. This allowed me to hear God's call to ministry once again. I surrendered to God, to Pastor Mark, and to this congregation. I began the process to transfer my ordination into the ELCA.

Then Pastor Mark said, "You know Steve, I think you should pursue a PhD." Craig Van Gelder had been a consultant for Grace two years earlier and I was hired to implement the plan that he helped them fashion. Pastor Mark introduced me to Craig and that is how I ended up at the CML program at Luther.

While I was moving into ministry at Grace, the youth ministry was falling apart. The youth pastor moved on for reasons never publicly discussed. The people were upset because no one knew the truth. Things were broken. God tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to step into the Youth Pastor role. Now I am associate pastor, trying to lead adult formation, youth formation, and supervising Children's ministry directors while pursuing a PhD in Missional Ecclesiology.

This journey has shaped my understanding of the Gospel. So, I must ask again, what is the Gospel? It is good news. That much I know. Beyond that it is not as clear-cut as it used to be in my early days. Any human speech about God falls flat and can only be metaphorical in nature. The balance between kataphatic and apophatic theology tends to lean more toward the apophatic for me these days. One metaphor to describe the Gospel goes like this. The creator God is a triune God—a community of loving creativity from which all things are brought into existence—moving in an eternal dance whose rhythm produces life, love, and peaceful coexistence.[7] God creates, animates, sustains, and

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[7] Here I am drawing heavily upon Zizoulas' notion of "relational ontology." We are formed by the relationality of the persons of the Trinity into a relationally constituted existence. We cannot exist in

invites all creation to be in loving community with God and each other. When we move contrary to God's loving rhythm it creates discord, it disrupts, it destroys, and brings despair. This is Hell, this is darkness, this is isolation and separation, and is that from which we must be saved. God's incarnation through Jesus of Nazareth brought clarity to the dance and showed us how to live within God's rhythm, to hear the music once again, and know that we are, and always have been loved. This is Heaven, this is life, this is salvation, this is the good news. The Holy Spirit moves in, through, among, and around us, uniting us all in the music itself.

My current Lutheran experience has reminded me of God's grace and God's initiative in that grace. God is love and God loves us. We do not reach out to apprehend God, but God has reached across the void and entered into our brokenness, through the incarnation, to meet us here, to heal us, to make us whole, and to restore all creation to the dance. It is not what I have done or can do, but what God has done and is doing that brings new life. That is good news. That is the Gospel, as I see it, through my current frame, in this moment.

What is Culture?

Our course is named *The Gospel and Cultures*, not *The Gospel and Culture*. The emphasis is on the plural. The world is comprised of many cultures. This is a seemingly obvious statement. However, it is difficult, upon closer observation, to articulate what is exactly meant by the term *culture*. Is it possible to draw hard boundaries around something and call it a culture? Where would we draw that line? Would we draw it

isolation, but rely upon the interdependence we experience with the universe—air, water, sunlight, gravity, intergender procreation, etc.—and the emotional/physical/rational/spiritual/relational interdepence with other human beings for our very survival.

around a group of people in a certain place? Would we draw it around an ideology, a set of practices, or an ethnicity?

Tanner on Culture

Kathryn Tanner helps us understand the term *culture*. She traces its evolution through three basic eras of history. The term was most commonly used in Europe during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries to denote a sense of higher cultivated society or sophistication. This understanding was nuanced between France, Germany, and Britain, but, in essence, it carried with it the notion that a person, or a people, could strive to become more cultured through education and self-discipline.[8]

The definition of *culture* began to change in the early twentieth century and take on a more anthropological sense. The modern anthropologist observed the culture of a people group from a supposedly objective distance. The term *culture*, in this anthropological sense, was a "group-differentiating, holistic, nonevaluative, and context-relative notion."[9] A person or a people were no longer cultured, rather, people groups collectively formed *a* culture that was a self-contained whole, the boundaries of which distinguished it from other cultures. It was meaningless to pass judgment upon, or to evaluate cultural differences, through ethical lenses. Each culture contains its own set of values that are constructed within the cultural boundaries. This anthropologic sense of culture became dominant in the twentieth century and heavily influenced many fields of study. It influenced theological inquiry in that Christianity, Biblicial studies, and the

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[8] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, Guides to Theological Inquiry (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

[9] Ibid., 24.

notion of Christian culture were understood through the lens of cultural relativity, conveniently dividing Christianity into separate spaces of geography and time.

Tanner deconstructs the modern, anthropological sense of culture and introduces the current, post-modern reconstruction of the term. The need within the modern anthropological sense for culture to be a consistent whole revealed more the need of the anthropologist to explain culture than an authentic description of the practice of culture.[10] Culture, for the postmodern anthropologist, "forms the basis for conflict as much as it forms the basis for shared beliefs and sentiments. Whether or not culture is a common focus of *agreement*, culture binds people together as a common focus for *engagement*."[11]

Simply put, culture is messy. There are still large groups of people that, at the surface, may appear to be cultures as understood by the modern anthropological sense, but they have been "decentered or reinscribed within a more primary attention to historical processes."[12] Culture is formed by external and internal *engagement* and *conflict*. One culture engages another culture—sometimes overlapping, sometimes resisting—while each culture is simultaneously struggling internally as the members of that culture vie for power and sense-making of the current moment. There is no longer the notion of holistic, homogeneous cultures existing in self-contained spaces. The postmodern anthropocentric notion of culture sees the world as a mixture of cultures continually intersecting and evolving in a pluriform, polycentric interplay of engagement and conflict.

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[10] Ibid., 42.

[11] Ibid., 57.

[12] Ibid., 56.

Culture in Suburban Youth

The modern anthropologist might look at the youth of GLC, draw a hard circle around them, and place the homogenous cultural label of "white, middle-class suburbanites" to it. This may have some merit if one were to observe this group from a global perspective, or even a regional perspective. The students may be white, but within the context of the suburbs, this group is anything but homogenous. Tanner's description of culture as a mixture of cultures continually intersecting and evolving in a pluriform, polycentric interplay of engagement and conflict is highly descriptive of suburban youth. The youth group at GLC is constituted by two strata of cultural division. The first is that of particular schools. The second is that of cliques and/or social groups within each particular school.

A Thick Description of The Youth Group

Framing the Ministry Context

The youth ministry at GLC was very broken when I stepped into it. There has never been a truly dynamic youth ministry at GLC in all of its forty-two years of existence. GLC is the typical Lutheran church in which families see *Confirmation* as the end goal. We have over one hundred students in our catechism program (which I also lead), but there is a sharp drop-off after that. When the previous youth pastor left, the congregation was shocked and hurt. Most of the youth had disengaged from him because they thought he played favorites. Those families that were part of his alleged favorite group were angry when he moved on.

These were the waters I entered during the fall of 2010. The emotional and organizational temperature was one degree above freezing. The only thing I had going for

me was that people had responded very positively to my adult presence in both preaching and adult classes. The early months of my interaction with the high school youth were incredibly painful. The students—the handful that even risked, or were forced to attend—were understandably skeptical of me. We have spent the past two years trying to rebuild this ministry.

Describing the Students

The youth at GLC are suburbanites. GLC is located at the corner of Round Lake Boulevard and Bunker Lake Boulevard in Andover, MN, which is just north of Highway 10, thirty miles Northwest of downtown Minneapolis. This intersection sees more than 40,000 cars per day drive through it. It sits at the junction of four large suburban communities: Andover, Coon Rapids, Anoka, and Ramsey.

The students come from six different high schools: Andover, Anoka, Blaine, Coon Rapids, Elk River, and St. Francis. All of the students come from white, middle to upper middle class families. The only non-Caucasian students—two African American, two Asian, and one Central American—live with white families through adoption.

One word can best describe most of these students: busy. The vast majority of them are involved in a minimum of two simultaneous extra-curricular activities—sports, music, theater, etc. Many of them live in divided custody situations and spend a great deal of time alternating between family systems. Between eight-hour school days, home work, practice, and a social life, there is very little time left in their weeks. Most of the families—and so their high school children—view church as an optional activity on the weekend when they are not going to the cabin, in a tournament, opening hunting/fishing season, or watching the big game. The main motivation for most of the Freshmen to

engage in the OYF year[13] is to successfully fulfill the obligations necessary to be confirmed, thus concluding their religious transaction with God. This is not true for all the students, but I can safely say it is true for at least half of them.

The upperclassmen are a different story. They are no longer obligated to come. It is still unclear to me why many of them come. Some may still feel pressure from their families to participate. However, the fact that the upperclassmen are participating does seem to be a sign of some internal motivation and desire to grow spiritually. The entire group is currently made up of approximately 60% freshmen and 40% upperclassmen with a total of 60 participating at some level. Most of them have minimal Bible knowledge and little vocabulary for talking about God in everyday spaces. They could easily be characterized as functioning within the framework of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.[14]

Wrestling with Culture

The first group meeting of this fall was focused on Tanner's concept of cultures (of course, the students had no idea I was referencing Tanner). I divided the large group into clusters of small conversation groups and asked them to read Galatians 3:25–28 (NRSV)

> But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is *no longer Jew*

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[13] We set aside the freshman year of high school as a time-between-times for students. They are finished with the formal catechism, but are not automatically confirmed as if it were a graduation from catechism. The students are paired with an adult mentor and encouraged to have a year-long dialogue with the mentor to, hopefully, internalize what they learned in catechism and be able to authentically own their faith at Confirmation. This Own Your Faith (OYF) process (which I inherited) has created another layer of obligatory spiritual commodification in which many students become resistant attenders to our high school youth group, thus complexifying the spiritual formation process.

[14] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

or Greek, there is *no longer slave or free*, there is *no longer male and female*; for *all of you are one in Christ Jesus*. (emphasis mine)

I then asked them to focus on the emphasized text and create a poster that would represent what this might look like in their high school. A rich and fruitful conversation ensued. Most of them identified the typical cliques found in high school—jocks, band, choir, geeks, nerds, emos, druggies, etc.—and placed them in various groupings of adversarial couplets.

What is culture in the context of my case study? Culture is a swirling mass of cultures interacting within cultures. Sometimes they form momentary solid masses with rigid boundaries that smash into other cultures —like a group of belligerent wrestlers who have decided to bully a gay kid. Sometimes they are incredibly porous and two or three groups can intermingle as several members of each group find themselves functioning comfortably within each of the various cultural groups.

If we zoom in tightly we can observe that the engagement and conflict that Tanner uses to describe culture happens within each individual member of each culture. Each individual has conflicting internal voices that vie for power over personal identity and proper behavior in the world. When we zoom out and observe these internally conflicted individuals interacting with others within their own culture we see that, even within what might be considered an homogenous cultural group, e.g. the jocks, there is a struggle over who is in charge and what it means to be a jock. The rules shift and change as different individuals perform. When we zoom further out and observe the different cultures of the high school interacting, we see the struggle for who will control the larger cultural climate of the school. Will the various groups peacefully co-exist, separate but equal? Or, will one group seek dominance through bullying and intimidation? More than likely, the

school culture will shift between these two modes throughout the course of a school year, depending upon who wins dominance within each group at any given time.

When we take that turbulent, polymorphous cultural milieu, multiply it by six schools, and then mash it together in this thing called a youth group, it becomes a cultural conundrum. What does it mean to be "one in Christ" in all of that? How do you communicate Christian unity to high school students who are just now emerging into, what Robert Kegan calls, a third order of consciousness?[15] This sets the stage for our overarching question: *How does the Gospel intersect with these cultures?*

Close-Ups: Engaging Three Specific Theological Questions

Is it possible to create community among suburban youth, given both the cultural divides that exist between social groups and the seemingly disconnected, disembodiedness that characterizes the suburban existence?

There are two assumptions latent within this question. The first assumes that there are cultural divides within the youth group. I have already addressed this assumption in the section above. The second assumption requires further exploration. I am becoming increasingly aware of a systemic condition of disembodied living in suburban spaces.

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[15] It is beyond the scope of this paper to fold Kegan's theory into the conversation. However, it is important to note that human development is an important factor to keep in mind when dealing with youth and spiritual formation. It is only in adolescence that the human being can begin to understand that they have a place within a single cultural system. They are generally blind to the cultural system itself as just one system among many systems. Therefore, they lean toward seeing the "other" culture as wrong and confusing, rather than something to be embraced. Paul's ideal of "one in Christ" may be developmentally out of reach for the suburban youth during the period of adolescence. This is a topic worth further exploration. Robert Kegan, *In over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to expound deeply on this point, but a brief interaction with Willie Jennings' concept of *displacement* may prove helpful.[16] Jennings argues that European Christianity underwent a theological evolution, and distortion, during the late Middle Ages that gave rise to the theological justification for the colonization of most of the planet and the displacement of countless indigenous people groups. This evolution began with a supersessionist interpretation of the Christian Scriptures in which God's election of the nation of Israel was dislodged from time and space and reasserted onto the white, European ideal of civilization. Human identity was reconfigured into a universal ideal centered on whiteness as the standard of evaluation. It placed whiteness at the top of the scale (being mostly good, agency, godly, and thus Christian) and black at the bottom of the scale (being mostly debase, patiency, ungodly, and thus heathen). Everything—human beings, animals, land—was reduced to being a commodity to be used and exchanged by the agency of the autonomous white male.

> The new worlds were transformed into land—raw, untamed land. And the European vision saw these new lands as a system of potentialities, a mass of undeveloped, underdeveloped, unused, underutilized, misunderstood, not fully understood potentialities. Everything—from peoples and their bodies to plants and animals, from the ground and the sky—was subject to change, subjects for change, subjected to change.[17]
> With the emergence of whiteness, identity was calibrated through possession of, not possession by, specific land. All peoples do make claims on their land. But the point here is that racial agency and especially whiteness rendered unintelligible and unpersuasive any narratives of the collective self that bound identity to geography, to earth, to water, trees, and animals. People would henceforth (and forever) carry their identities on their bodies, without remainder. From the beginning of the colonialist moment, being white placed one at the center of the

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[16] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

[17] Ibid., 43.

symbolic and real reordering of space. In a real sense, whiteness comes into being as a form of landscape with all its facilitating realities.[18]

Simply put, white Europeans understood white European culture to be: 1) Synonymous with Christianity, 2) Detached from particular time and space, 3) Transferable to any and all specific locations of time and space. The result of this Christian imagination of human identity and land led the white European colonist to believe that he was a free agent in the universe, able to take over new land, parcel it into private sections, and re-create that land into anything that he wanted it to be.

Each European man was the autonomous king of his private domain. This domain was marked off by rigid boundaries of space, called private property, in which he was free to be and do whatever he pleased, apart from neighbor. This supposed freedom of individual sovereignty is what fueled the colonization of North America, the formation of the United States, the Westward Expansion into the "untamed Frontier," the displacement of the Native Americans, and the parceling up of land into pieces of private property.

This autonomous ideal was further fueled—both metaphorically and figuratively—by the invention of the automobile in the twentieth century. The automobile allowed the autonomous white self to move independently through space and find so-called unclaimed land further and further away from the other.[19] This is how and why the suburbs were formed. Suburban neighborhoods are comprised of streets lined with autonomous kingdoms standing in a row. They are close in physical proximity, but existentially separated by rigid boundaries of self-sufficiency, autonomy, and self-

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[18] Ibid., 59.

[19] Craig Van Gelder, "Effects of Auto-Mobility on Church Life and Culture," *Word & World* 28, no. 3 (2008): 241.

preservation. The autonomous king moves through space and time in his automobile, flying past the neighbor at blurring speeds, on his way to another location in which his professional identity is manifest. That professional identity is, in itself, a commodity which can be traded and moved interchangeably throughout the vast landscape of white economic power structures.

The suburbanite seeks economic and social ascendency, and thus is ready to relocate to new spaces in pursuit of that goal. When a new job opportunity arises, he simply takes his self-contained kingdom, and all human beings and animals within his domain, out of one neutral plot of land and relocates it in another neutral plot of land, regardless of how far away this new place may be.

This is what I mean by disembodied existence. The suburbanite operates deeply within this Christian Imagination of autonomy and commodification. We—speaking now as a suburbanite—don't live in a place. We live within the landscape of our own lives and ambitions, regardless of the others within physical proximity. Neighbors are non-essential components of the suburban existence. They are optional diversions to the autonomous endeavor. Each kingdom is self-sufficient with ample access to water, power, sewage, and telecommunications that are accessed from faceless utility companies.

What does this have to do with the youth group and the formation of spiritual community? Everything. The suburbanite youth breathes this air. They are the inheritors of the white Christian Imagination. This has two negative effects that are extremely difficult to negate. These two effects are the polarized outcome of the same problem. On the one hand, suburbanite youth fully embody the white, privileged, autonomous ideal, of this Christian imagination. Success and self-fulfillment are simply viewed as their

inevitable, inalienable rights. Christianity, if their family still considers the church relevant at any level, is simply another commodity to be utilized toward the achievement of personal goals. Church is used when it is convenient—for baptism, confirmation, weddings, funerals, and in times of feeling down. Otherwise, it can be rendered secondary to the pursuit of other self-fulfilling pursuits, e.g. sports, entertainment, academic achievement.

On the other hand, there are those youth who are becoming increasingly aware of the hypocrisy and damaging effects of white colonization on the planet. The popular culture is speaking more and more of global responsibility, diversity, and the need to bring justice to these issues. However, the popular culture is also aware that European Christianity is highly culpable in these ecological, economic, and global sins. This realization is pushing more and more young people away from institutional religion and into the "none" zone.[20] The irony of this phenomenon is that the local church has become a perceived enemy of youth who are seeking an authentically spiritual experience. In other words, the type of student that a youth pastor dreams of working with—one who longs to know deeper things and be formed spiritually—is inoculated against approaching the church.

Is there an answer to my question? Can community be formed? I have attempted to name the factors that make it difficult, but are there solutions? I will attempt to address that in my final section.

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[20] http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/174127941.html (accessed December 3, 2012)

How much does race—specifically the issues of whiteness—play into spiritual formation

in suburban congregations?

This question is deeply connected to the previous question. Willie Jennings'

argument for the whiteness of Christianity has deep implications for the suburban church.

Suburbia is defined by whiteness. I agree with Mary Hess that "racism is a central

determining characteristic of life in the United States. If we are to confront it adequately,

we white people need to confront our own formation as "white" in a raced society."[21]

The early development of modern, U.S. suburbia that happened in the late 1950s

and 1960s was referred to as "white flight." The suburban ideal was thoroughly

enmeshed with Jennings proposal of the whiteness scale and upward mobility toward the

Aristotelian ideal of self-actualization.[22] Rich, white people live in the suburbs. The

richer—and whiter—one is, the further away from the city one lives and the more

distance there is between one's neighbors.

White suburban Christians don't like to admit this, but it is true. Elizabeth Tisdell

says,

> Often people in North America who are white or who were socialized within the
> Christian tradition have little sense of their own culture. Perhaps when one is
> representative of the dominant culture, it is difficult to have a sense of where that
> culture is. As many have recently discussed in considerations of race in adult
> education, whiteness is the primary invisible norm, the invisible standard that
> people are often measured against. To be fully conscious of what is so pervasive
> that it is almost invisible is difficult, just as fish probably have little or no

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[21] Mary E. Hess, *Engaging Technology in Theological Education: All That We Can't Leave Behind*, Communication, Culture, and Religion Series (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 108.

[22] Thanks to Gary Simpson's lecture on Aristotle's thought as it relates to Jenning's arguments. A graphic representation of this lecture can be found at http://www.deepintheburbs.com/willie-jennings-the-christian-imagination/ (accessed December 3, 2012)

consciousness of water. But if fish were not in water, they probably would very quickly have a sense of what water is.[23]

She identifies a model of cultural identity for those who have begun to understand whiteness as a system of privilege that I would argue is an essential component to spiritual formation in white, suburban churches. The white Christian moves through three phases. 1. She experiences a disorienting dilemma, such as having a personal relationship with a person of color or a member of a marginalized group in which the imbalance of power and privilege becomes painfully apparent. 2. She begins to explore the assumptions that she has unconsciously absorbed.[24] 3. She begins to explore what it means to be an ally to people of color or other non-dominant groups.[25] Mary Hess also suggests the adoption of Katie Cannon's "Dance of Redemption" as a formational practice to help white people confront core issues of race.[26]

White, suburban youth groups must be given opportunities to experience these phases of awareness and formation. However, extreme caution must be used in the experiences and spaces created for this to happen. Often times youth leaders take youth groups on missions trips in order to encounter the "other." Or, the church has special events in which the congregation invests in helping the poor, the homeless, and those "less fortunate." It is absolutely necessary for the local congregation to be involved in these issues; yet, many times the ways in which these activities are framed actually perpetuate whiteness in the Christian identity. We take white Christian youth to minister

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[23] Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education*, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 169.

[24] I would argue that this is why Willie Jenning's work is crucial for suburban spirituality.

[25] Tisdell, 170-171.

[26] Hess, 108-110.

to "them" who are different and—invisibly insinuated—lower than "us." This "we-must-help-them" frame tends to be unidirectional and flows in a top-down direction.

If the suburban youth group is going to wrestle with white privilege—which I believe is crucial to authentic spiritual formation—then these methodologies must change. We need to move away from a Modern missions mentality of "cross-cultural" encounters, in which the white dominant culture brings truth and hope to the other. We need to move toward an "inter-cultural" exchange, in which suburban students get to participate with the other in a posture of learning and mutual service. This type of exchange would have deeper and longer-lasting impact if it were done locally within segregated groups in the metro-area.

<div align="center">The Issue of Power in Leadership</div>

I raise the issue of power because I have made an interesting observation this fall. I honestly thought that this paper would be more about the use of digital social media as a democratizing, liberating tool for media among youth. I have found this to not be the case. The *How Do I Fit* curriculum was built on a digital platform. Everything is online. We have a website, a YouTube channel, a Facebook page, and a closed Facebook group for online discussion. I personally use Facebook, Twitter, and blog regularly. I thought it would be a fabulous digital experience. I was wrong.

The best way to describe the experience is to draw an analogy. It was as if I spent weeks preparing the perfect banquet. I had chosen all the dishes. I had prepared the food, set the table, sent out the invitations, and built up great anticipation with visions of vibrant conversation taking place around the perfect meal. The day of the banquet came, I

opened the doors and three people slowly walked in and timidly sat at the table. I was

disappointed, to say the least. So, what happened?

I believe I ran into a *power* problem. Digital social media is about the free-

flowing, grass-roots, bottom-up social interaction of peers. The problem with my plan is

that *I* set the table. It doesn't matter how digitally savvy it may be, it is still a table set *for*

the students, not a table constructed *by* the students.

Let me use another analogy. It is as if I saw a group of students standing on the

corner, having a really good time together: laughing, talking, and connecting. I barge into

the group and start trying to "talk the lingo" and "fit in." What would happen in that

moment? The students would probably shut down, immediately. I am not a student. I am

not cool in the way that they understand their peers to be cool. I am a middle-aged adult

who bears the title "Pastor" before my name. That makes me, to use Elizabeth Schüssler

Fiorenza's term, the symbol of kyriarchal power that is the "other."[27] They may respect

me, and think I'm cool, but it will always be followed by the disclaimer, "for an old guy."

How, then, can I utilize my kyriarchal power to create space in which spiritual

formation and authentic social interaction—both in physical and digital spaces—can take

place? Schüssler Fiorenza's discussion regarding the democratizing of biblical studies

might prove helpful. She traces the history of biblical studies through three paradigms: 1)

religious-theological-scriptural, 2) critical-scientific-modern, 3) cultural-hermeneutic-

postmodern. Each of these paradigms, she argues, are hegemonic and perpetuate a

kyriarchal and malestream culture. The typical Christian education program of the

modern Western, suburban congregation would generally fall under one of these

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[27] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

paradigms, most often under paradigm one or two. This pedagogy places the Pastor at the

top of the power structure as the representative of universal, biblical truth that must be

transmitted down to the student, as empty recipients.

Fiorenza proposes a fourth paradigm which is emancipatory-radical-democratic.

This paradigm

> needs to understand biblical texts as rhetorical discourse that are to be
> investigated in terms of their persuasive power and argumentative functions in
> particular historical and cultural situations and constellations of power.[28]

> The fourth paradigm proposes

> a critical pedagogy for transforming Western malestream epistemological
> frameworks, individualistic apolitical practices, and sociopolitical relations of
> cultural colonization. By analyzing the Bible's kyriocentric power of persuasion,
> an emancipatory pedagogy seeks to foster biblical interpretation as a critical
> emancipative praxis of struggle against all forms of domination.[29]

I must pause for a moment at this point. My discussion of power and pedagogy

within a youth ministry must come into conversation with theories of human

development and pedagogical models. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into

that vast conversation. I simply want to point out the fact that Fiorenza's arguments

assume an adult learning space. Moreover, she assumes a highly educated and biblically

literate learning space in which the graduate students are biblically literate—meaning

they have been trained in the content of scripture. Their training, however, has been

within hegemonic systems that have distorted the message and perpetuated kyriarchal

systems.

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[28] Ibid., 91.

[29] Ibid., 121.

How does this translate to the suburbanite youth who has little-to-no biblical knowledge and is not yet an adult learner? How does the teacher/youth leader invite students into an emancipatory space when the student does not feel oppressed; when, in fact, the student operates within white privilege and feels that the scripture is irrelevant?

The question of power began with an observation regarding my use of digital spaces and the student's lack of interest in using those spaces. I created these spaces with a basic assumption that the world of information is flattening and the younger generation is increasingly engaged in communal meaning-making as they collaborate in digital spaces. I wonder if this is true for the suburbanite youth. Most of the conversations regarding digital space and democratizion of knowledge seems to be happening among a generation that has transitioned from an older, more analogical and lexical form of knowledge to a more digital and hyper-textual form of knowledge. This group of people has come from a deep place of tradition and is beginning to see the broader world of emancipatory-radical-democracy. In this new world they can bring their traditions into conversation with other traditions and seek inter-textual relatedness.

How does this connect with the younger generations who have been raised in a hypertext reality? Most students have no grounding in a single tradition. The Mashup Religion that McClure notices is the normal mode of being.[30] Students have been raised in a world where they can surf hundreds of channels, sample songs and remix them on their computers and tablets, and pick and choose from a wide assortment of worldviews in which they navigate at school and in media everyday. Spiritual seekers find as much truth in music and fan websites as they do in church youth groups. Students who have

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[30] John S. McClure, *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011).

been raised in this free-flowing culture need a place to anchor. McClure says that the place of the local congregation is to offer the consumer of Mashup Religion a place to slow down and to deepen in traditions.

What does all this mean for me in my use of power with the youth group? These students need to be grounded in scripture. Yet, the fact that they have no engrained preconception of scripture in the kyriarchical models of Fiorenza's first three paradigms, gives me an opportunity to create a new space. I stand at the transitional space for these students. They are moving from childhood to adulthood. They are moving from dependence to independence. I am still an authority figure and they still need authoritative voices in their lives. However, I can invite them into an exploration of scripture in which they can see it, not as a disembodied voice of universal truth that has been translated into strict rules, but as an authentic, embodied space where real people wrestle with a real God in real spaces.

Mary Hess' model would prove helpful in a move toward this goal. Hess suggests a pedagogy in which the learners are invited to gather around the "script"—the biblical witness—as a collaborative cast of characters learning a play. The cast, under the guidance of a director (the leader/teacher/youth leader), moves through four phases of learning: learning the script, practicing the script, performing the script, and then improvising.[31]

If I create a space in which my power simply invites and frames conversations in which students are encouraged to ask questions and feel freedom to fail and wrestle, then

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[31] Hess, 9-14.

perhaps the DNA of their scriptural knowledge will help form an emanicipatory-radical-democratic way of being that will direct their spiritual formation into adulthood.

Missional Implications

I have learned a great deal about myself, youth ministry, spiritual formation in the suburbs, and Gospel and Cultures through this case study. The Gospel is the good news that the Triune God creates, sustains, and invites us into eternally deepening relationships with God and others through the exemplary and atoning life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel, or Christian Identity, as Tanner states, is not so much about the content of the Gospel as it is about the style with which Christians pursue it. The Gospel exists within the inter-cultural spaces of engagement. God calls the high school students in this youth group into an ever-deepening awareness of the following engagements. We might call this a process of tending to the gaps that divide cultures.

Here I suggest three specific gaps that must be tended if the youth I work with are to experience spiritual formation in a missional imagination:

1. **The Gap between the students and their knowledge of scripture.** They must *engage the Gospel as it is revealed in the scriptural witness.* Students must be allowed space to encounter God through the scriptures in a collaborative and experiential space.

I had an amazing experience with the students three weeks ago in this regard. We decided to engage in *lectio divina* as a group. We read Isaiah 6:1-8 three times. The first time I read it slowly to allow the students to find definitions of terms that might be unfamiliar. They clarified the terms. We then read one line at a time. Each person read a line and we circled around the room, reading slowly as we went. We paused and allowed

time to quietly meditate. I then invited everyone to read a word or phrase that God was using to speak to them. They jumped around throughout the passage in a non-linear fashion. I was amazed at how intensely they were engaged in the process. We continued speaking the words passionately for several minutes. When I felt we were winding down I invited everyone to speak the words "holy, holy, holy" in unison. We then sang the song "I See the Lord." It was a powerful time of worship. Several students shared with me later that the scripture had never been so clear to them before this experience. It reinforced to me both the power of the scripture as a vehicle for God's voice, and the power of collaborative space that is open to free movement.

2. **The Gap of Race.** Students must e*ngage the issue of white privilege.* Suburban students must be given opportunities for disruptive encounters with privilege and its inhibition of the Gospel. This is crucial to breaking the hegemony of white Christianity and the breaking open of what it truly means to be "one in Christ."

3. **The Gap of Body and Place.** Students must e*ngage the disembodied suburban existence and the need for spiritual community.* The suburban student needs to understand that s/he is not an autonomous self, but is an interconnected part of the entire universe. Each individual is a unique part of the greater whole and has been given gifts and talents that are designed to contribute to the greater good of the whole. The Gospel and the process of spiritual formation is learning that we are connected to each other, and it is only when we learn to love each other as Christ loved us, that we will begin to experience the reign of God's peace on earth. This process begins by tending the gaps between jocks and nerds, between Cardinals and Huskies, between rich and poor, between Christian and Muslim. We must tend these gaps until we all realize that our

small youth group is one part of this interconnected community of Anoka county, the
Metro Area, Minnesota, the United States, and the planet.

My job is to use my power as Christ used his. I am to call students to join our
group as we strive to follow Jesus. I must model humility and service, encourage them to
learn collaboratively, and empower them to improvise as they move in the Spirit of God.
The *How Do I Fit* curriculum is not great. I think it focuses too much on the individual
self, and I can see my modernistic tendencies flaring up in its design. When I redesign it,
I think I will create more emphasis on the engagement points listed above and allow more
space for the students to set their own digital table as they see fit.

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