

Cultivating a Consequential Faith in a Consumer-Driven World: from Object to Subject to Agent.

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Part 1: A reality check!

Even in death, Phoebe Prince was bullied. On a memorial page dedicated to the Massachusetts teen who had recently committed suicide, Facebook members left taunting comments that had to be removed. The 15-year-old -- a recent immigrant from Ireland with a pretty face and a soft brogue -- was found dead in her South Hadley home Jan. 14, according to police. Afterward, her fellow students came forward to tell school officials that Prince had been teased incessantly, taunted by text messages and harassed on social networking sites like Facebook. "It's heart-wrenching," said South Hadley Police Chief David LaBrie. "She had only moved here last summer."¹

The underlying question when I hear such stories is, why? Phoebe Prince is just one of a growing number of teens whose suicides have been tied to cyberbullying. Such stories lift up the extreme consequences that can result from cyberbullying, calling attention to a growing phenomenon. In the past decade many organizations have dedicated attention to this issue. School boards are creating policies, educational resources are being developed, and, as of 2011, 34 states have created laws regarding cyberbullying.² Today research and resources are available online, hotlines have been established, and media campaigns are drawing needed attention to this issue.³

But how big of an issue is it really? Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. and Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D. have been concerned with cyberbullying since 2002⁴ and their research estimates that, depending on how you define it, between 10 and 40% of youth experience cyberbullying,⁵ with about 10% being both victim

¹ Susan Donaldson James, "Immigrant Teen Taunted by Cyberbullies Hangs Herself," ABC News Website, January 26, 2010 <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/cyber-bullying-factor-suicide-massachusetts-teen-irish-immigrant/story?id=9660938> accessed July 22, 2011.

² The National Conference of State Legislators website. <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=13495> accessed July 22, 2011.

³ Research is being conducted by various sources, and many of these have accompanying websites. Examples include: <http://www.cyberbullying.us> (the Cyberbullying Research Center), <http://kameron.org> (Kameron Institute Research Center), and <http://www.stompoutbullying.org> (a national anti-bullying and cyberbullying program for kids and teens is a signature program of Love Our Children USA™). In addition, major organizations and businesses are taking on this issue, like the *Delete Digital Drama* partnership created between the ABC Family network and Seventeen Magazine. Seventeen's August 2011 issue will feature this topic and ABC Family created the two-hour original movie "Cyberbully" which aired July 17, 2011. <http://abcfamily.go.com/movies/cyberbully/blogs-details/delete-digital-drama-abc-family-and-seventeen/806550> - accessed 7/22/2011.

⁴ Together they direct the Cyberbullying Research Center. The purpose of the Cyberbullying Research Center is to provide up-to-date information about the nature, extent, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying among adolescents. For more on the Center see their website: <http://www.cyberbullying.us/aboutus.php>.

⁵ In their research, cyberbullying is when someone "repeatedly makes fun of another person online or repeatedly picks on another person through email or text message or when someone posts something online about another person that they don't like." Sameer Hinduja and Justin W. Patchin, *Cyberbullying: identification, prevention, and response*, Cyberbullying Research Center Website,

and offender.⁶ And cyberbullying is on the increase; studies report that it has increased as much as four times in the past five years. While bullying is not new, cyberbullying offers different challenges than face-to-face bullying.⁷ Younger teens are one distinct population of concern. Social networking sites are one place cyberbullying takes place and looking at Facebook, the largest social media site,⁸ can shed light on this issue. In a 2011 Consumer-Report Survey it is reported that of the 7.5 million active Facebook users under 13 about 1 million experience some sort of cyberbullying.⁹

Statistics present one picture, stories another. I, like some of you, might know this world first hand. As the parent of two teens, I have watched the complexities of sociality in a digital age unfold in my own home. As a “digital immigrant,”¹⁰ I can’t keep up with digital technology. And while technology itself is not the issue, being a “digital immigrant” limits my ability to communicate with young people, or “digital natives,” and means I operate within a different worldview. Today technology *is* shaping young people, like it or not. It is shifting relational expectations, changing communication patterns, reframing how young people make meaning and process their world, and informing their identity. For those of us that care about young people, it’s time to be attentive to the realities of the digital world.

http://www.cyberbullying.us/Cyberbullying_Identification_Prevention_Response_Fact_Sheet.pdf, accessed July 22, 2011.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Approximately half of U.S. students are impacted by traditional bullying each school day...This type of bullying happens in the ‘physical’ world and that world has time and space limits. Cyber-bullying is making school days even more painful ... Bullying in cyberspace is not bound by school hours, school days, or facing the intended bully victim. Unfortunately, the perceived anonymous nature of the internet often insulates the bully from the consequences of their damaging behavior.” And “Studies indicate that cyber-bullying incidents have quadrupled in five years... In 2005, studies of 1500 Internet-using adolescents found that over one-third had been cyber bullied and half of those admitted to cyber- bullying others (Hinduja and Patchin, In Review.) A 2005 study by National Children’s Home Charity revealed that 20% had been cyber-bullying victims. A 2004 survey conducted by i-Safe America of 1556 adolescents found that 42 % had been bullied online.” Magaret Ross, “Cyber Bullying Articles and Facts” Kamaron Institute Website, <http://kamaron.org/Cyber-Bullying-Articles-Facts> accessed July 21, 2011.

⁸ According to the January 2011 Statistics, Facebook is the largest social network in the world, with 500 million active users of whom 50% log in on a daily basis. <http://blog.kissmetrics.com/facebook-statistics/> Accessed July 28, 2012. For more details on Facebooks statistics, see: <http://www.digitalbuzzblog.com/facebook-statistics-stats-facts-2011/>

⁹ Shan Li, “Consumer Reports: Facebook has 7.5 million underage users,” LA Times website, May 10, 2011 <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2011/05/facebook-has-75-million-underage-users-survey-says.html> accessed July 22, 2011.

¹⁰ Marc Prensky, an educator and designer of learning video games, coined the phrases “digital immigrant” and “digital native” in 2001 in an effort to describe the discontinuous change that is taking place in the way people think and learn as a result of the digital age. “Digital natives” represent our current student body (K-college) and are the first generation to grow up having been socialized in the midst of computers, videogames, digital music players, video cameras, cell phones, etc. Hence, digital natives only know a life in which digital technology is integral to their lives. “Digital immigrants” are those that have learned to adapt to the digital world, but who have not been able to lose their prior accent because they were socialized differently. In other words, they do not naturally process information in the way the digital world presents it. For more on this topic see Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,” *On the Horizon* (MCB University Press, Vol. 9 No. 5, October 2001) <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/prensky%20-%20digital%20natives,%20digital%20immigrants%20-%20part1.pdf> accessed July 28, 2011.

As a youth ministry leader, I wondered about the impact this digital shift will have on ministry. My experience is that young people operate differently in cyberspace than in face-to-face interactions. For example, at church one middle school girl is pleasant to others, but then texts or posts on Facebook harsh comments to those same people throughout the week. For various reasons, it is easy within the digital world to make cruel statements or pass along embarrassing pictures. When adults discovered the hurtful things taking place, it's hard to know how to intervene and at some level it's too late. The damage is done, the person hurt and their image questioned. A new reality is unfolding in our midst, and the rules of interaction are being rewritten as a result of digital technology.

Again, technology is not the issue. Something more fundamental is taking place. Yes research and education are critical, school boards and government need to address issues of online behavior, and campaigns should invite people to join forces, but these responses aren't enough and don't go deep enough. They don't get at the heart of the issue. Cyberbullying, at its core, has to do with one's understanding of humanity; it has to do with identity and understanding what it means to live in community. Understanding what it means to be human is not what is being addressed by schools or government or media campaigns, yet it is central to the Christian faith and calls for the church to pay attention.

For the church, and in particular children, youth and family ministry leaders, to speak into this phenomenon, it must do so with its primary resources, including theology. And if the church is going to help God's people discover what it means to live a Christian way of life *in this time*, it will need to explore what it means to be human and live in community not only in face-to-face encounters, but also in the digital world. This is a missional moment, one in which the church can offer a prophetic voice. Hence, this essay is a small attempt to speak into this critical reality by naming underlying issues in our current cultural milieu, proposing a theological view of identity within community and suggesting a way forward for Christian communities to engage those embedded in the digital world with an alternative vision of abundant life.

Part 2: A distorted point of view! Who or what is driving the ship? Economy, identity and agency.

Young people today are socialized in a culture that projects a distorted sense of identity and agency. How did this happen? How did we get here? This section will explore our reality by looking at one aspect of North American culture, consumerism, and the economy, identity and agency that accompanies it, in an effort to gain insights into how ministry leaders can intercede into this situation and offer another way of being.

Consumerism – American capitalism and Economy

North America is a consumer society. True, yet has consumerism overstepped its place in our lives and redefined our way of life? Like fish who give little (or no) attention to the water of their environment, most North Americans acknowledge the fact that they live in a capitalistic society, but do not understand the impact of the very culture in which they inhabit. For those that have tried to distance themselves from such forces, the complicated and pervasive reality of capitalism make it extremely hard. Today capitalism's complex, multi-dimensional and sophisticated nature extends well beyond our

financial systems, impacting most areas of life changing virtually every system in our midst, including our understanding of human identity and agency. Joyce Mercer, a practical theologian and professor of Christian education, makes the bold and startling assertion that American capitalism has in fact remade and restructured childhood itself.¹¹ For those engaged in ministry with those in the first third of life, such an assertion should cause alarm. It's time to pay attention to the environment in which we inhabit.

American capitalism emerged with early modernism just prior to the turn of the twentieth century and has gone through three broad periods.¹² Each of these periods has impacted society, not only economically, but also politically, culturally and religiously. Consumerism emerged out of capitalism. But what is consumerism?

Consumerism is the experience of someone that lives in a capitalistic system, and capitalism is the system "in which investment in and ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange of wealth is made and maintained chiefly by private individuals or corporations."¹³ Capitalism relies on the production, distribution, and exchange of goods and services to survive. Capitalism literally has to have people buy into the system. To do this, it has to create an economy where consumption is needed for survival, or perceived as needed for survival. This reality has resulted in a society oriented by consumerism. Joyce Mercer reflects on consumerism saying:

"Consumerism" refers to a way of life structured by and around various practices of consumption and accumulation. In a consumerist society, consumption dominates social practices, such that relationships, activities, space, work, and leisure come to be structured around various practices related to consumption. Consumption becomes a way to achieve social solidarity – relational connections with others, even as it also marks identity and status.¹⁴

In American capitalism, consumption is the orienting principle. And this core principle extends beyond goods and services into a lifestyle, which as Mercer highlights has changed relationships and social order. Vincent Miller, a Roman Catholic theologian, calls the church to do the hard work of understanding this consumer culture and critique it from a theological perspective.

Miller alleges that "[t]heological reflection on the problem of consumerism is often guided by the implicit assumptions that beliefs and values are the principal causal factors within human action and culture. As a result, the most common tactic for countering consumerism is to contrast its premises and values with those of the gospel."¹⁵ While it might be helpful to contrast the differences between the values and beliefs of the gospel and consumerism, such an approach has not resulted in changing the consumer lifestyle. Why? Because this approach doesn't adequately attend to the problem. The reality is culture itself has been commodified. Miller says:

¹¹ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 73. David Harvey names the three eras of capitalism as the free-market economy, Fordist-Keynesian, and late capitalism. For more on this see chapter 3.

¹² Joyce Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalis Press, 2005), 79.

¹³ Dictionary.com – capitalism. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/capitalism> Accessed August 3, 2011.

¹⁴ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 73

¹⁵ Vincent J. Miller, "Taking Consumer Culture Seriously," *Horizons* 27, no. 2 (September 1, 2000: 276).

The most pernicious effects of consumerism are manifest not by changes in the “content” of beliefs but in their underlying form. Religious and ethical beliefs are commodified – reduced to objects of exchange and consumption, to shallow, interchangeable commodities.¹⁶

So, not only are relationships and social order commodities within the consumerism, but so are beliefs and values. The shift to consumerism has in fact changed the function of many aspect of culture.

What’s at stake? If the notion of culture, belief and relationships are being reshaped within consumerism, then it follows that our understanding of what it is to be human is also being reshaped. While culture is the composite of what is meaningful for a particular group of people, at its core it is about their understanding of what it means to be human and live abundantly. The work of creating and shaping culture takes place at many levels. One level is shared ideals and commitments; another is concrete, daily practices. Sometimes these levels align, yet often they don’t. Exploring the current engagement between religious beliefs and practices and consumer culture, Miller believes it is the concrete, daily practices that need to be addressed. And there is a power driving those practices which Miller describes as the discursive regime or “the structures, rules and power relations that construct and constrain discourse below the level of meaning.”¹⁷ This third level is the economy or invisible force present in any system.

Addressing culture at the level of discursive regime is not easy, yet it can be unearthed as one investigates practices. Working with concrete, daily practices is both ordinary and transforming. Let me explain. I may believe in living a healthy lifestyle and understand that exercise is a critical part of such a lifestyle. Yet creating a practice of working out on a regular basis is another thing. I may want to get into the habit of going to the gym after work each day, but there may be rules (dinner time is family time), structures (the gym is not open at that time) or power relations (my family is not supportive of my spending time working out) that become obstacles for putting such beliefs into practice. These structures, rules, and power relations may not be explicit, but their impact is real. These invisible forces greatly influence one’s way of life.

Applying this thinking to religion, consumerism has taken the defining elements of religion (beliefs and ideals) and made them objects to be used according to the rules of the capitalist system. This is what Miller was referring to regarding *the form*, not *the content* of beliefs has changed. Consumers orient their life around their values *by the choices they make in their consumption*. And while choices are being made based on values, people are still living according to the principles of consumerism. In order to break into this prevailing paradigm, culture must be seen as *more than* a system of beliefs and values. What is needed is an understanding of culture that can “address the underlying structures in which meanings are formed and received.”¹⁸ This requires attending to the economy or invisible force which drives the culture. So what economy drives our choices?

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Miller, “Taking Consumer Culture Seriously,” 277. In his essay, Miller draws on Michel Foucault’s work here.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Economy is a system which helps any community manage its resources. A shared economy helps a community work together to attain a particular vision of life.¹⁹ When thinking about economic systems, the first that comes to mind is a financial one, for often the word *economy* is used as a short-cut for the financial state of society. However there are other economic systems at work in society. This essay suggests that *economy* is what Miller describes as discursive regime, or the underlying structures, rules, and power relations that construct or constrain beliefs and content. In this way economy attends to the invisible, yet powerful forces that inform and drive human action which create meaning in everyday life.²⁰

Invisible, yet powerful forces exist in each and every group or community, and each has its own commitments, methods and hoped for ends. All of us experience these forces and live within multiple economies. These economies impact decisions and practices; some economies are more prominent and some exist in tension. Capitalism is one economic system, but family, work, clubs, societies and religious communities all have their own economies. Humans navigate multiple economic systems every day, yet are not consciously aware of them. Might it be time to ask questions about the economic systems around us? Might church leaders help God's people intentionally navigate their multiple economies? What would it mean for communities of faith to actively engage in living within God's economic system? More pointedly, are God's people called to have consumerism as their primary economy?

Commodification – and the human experience

The sophisticated nature of consumerism which has developed the ability to turn relationships, beliefs and even human experience into commodities depends on *protean power*²¹ or commodification. Protean power is how culture has been turned into a collection of objects and how capitalism has turned the tables on religion. The church must understand this aspect of capitalism if it wants to reclaim human experience from a different economy.

Commodities, the objects that are packaged, sold and consumed, are only worthwhile as they serve to exchange goods and labor for something that is needed or desired.²² Without a need, goods (and labor) aren't of any value. That is the consumer equation, that human need is filled by some good or service. Yet, ironically Karl Marx observed that more often than not commodities steal the show, transferring the value from the human need to the commodity itself. This reversal has many consequences. One

¹⁹By definition, economy is "the management of the resources of a community, country, etc., especially with a view to its productivity and/or the disposition or regulation of the parts or functions of any organic whole." This definition is drawn from "economy" on Dictionary.com. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/economy> - accessed July 27, 2011

²⁰For those in ministry, it is worth noting that the English words "economy" and "economics" have their origin in the Greek words *οικονόμος* "one who manages a household" (derived from *οἶκος* "house", and *νέμω* "distribute (especially, manage)"), *οικονομία* "household management", and *οικονομικός* "of a household or family". Ibid. Managed a household or family means attending to much more than finances. At the center of managing a household is creating an environment for life, community, and for human to thrive. So, one way to see economy is any (or all) systems that exist for the production and management of the human to thrive.

²¹ Protean power is the power to "turn anything into a product to be packaged, sold and consumed." Miller, "Taking Consumer Culture Seriously," 280.

²² Ibid.

consequence is that it has deprived labor of its meaning for sustaining life and creating community. Yet labor is critical for human's self-understanding, for both agency and purpose. Without meaningful labor and a way to exert one's self, humans do not know how to contribute to community and/or sustaining life. If labor is refashioned as a commodity it is reduced to exchanging one part of one's life (work) for some necessity identified by consumerism, not necessarily contributing to the common good of human life. This hidden agreement has "gradually colonized all dimensions of human existence"²³ and has resulted in "our very lives become objects of exchange."²⁴ In other words, our lives are not a collective whole, valued in and of themselves, but rather are a collection of commodities to be used to negotiate one's way of life. This commodity logic has invaded human experience and slowly eroded the value of human beings and community life. In fact taken to the extreme love can be "reduced to a calculus of maximum returns,"²⁵ where relationships are used solely to meet one's emotional and relational needs with objects and human experiences serving as commodities in a consumer equation. While this may seem comedic, think about ads around Valentine's Day. Love, the most relationally intangible aspect of life, is the end product of the "right" gifts and experiences. This line of thinking, commodification logic, has resulted is a shift in the way humans frame their life; from being to having.²⁶

This is but one of two shifts which took place as capitalism became more sophisticated. With the "rise of consumption as a positive value and [with] the emergence of style, advertising and media culture"²⁷ two things resulted. First, as a result of mass production, commodities were now readily available and affordable, making consumption a social responsibility and changing frugality from a virtue to a vice. For the first time products were standardized and promises of "the good life"²⁸ accompanied consumption. This promise began the process of redefining abundant life around accumulation, and consumption was now the right and proper thing to do in society. Second, with consumption encouraged advertising and fashion emerged, shortened the life of a product. Ads, new to this era, added a distinct aspect to consumer society - images. The result was that "[p]eople were no longer primarily interested in the goods themselves, but in their images...[and now] consumption became an imaginary activity whose object is the advertisement as much as the product itself."²⁹ So not only did capitalism displaced labor, it also redefined the goods themselves. Goods were not the end, but merely the means to an end. With these realities, the focus for humans shifted again from being to having to now appearing.³⁰

"Appearance rather than exchange or usefulness now determines value,"³¹ Miller states. The "seems like" factor entered society and people began to "prefer that which 'seems like' the real thing," substituting images or replications for the thing itself."³² This reality, Guy DeBord says, became a form of

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 282.

²⁸ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 80.

²⁹ Miller, *Taking Consumer Culture Seriously*, 283.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 90.

ideological control which distracted people from the particular situations of their everyday lives.³³ Today this phenomenon plays out all around us. For example, it is very common for people to spend more time digitally recording an event than actually experiencing it in real time. Why? Because the image, photo-shopped and edited, connected to the current ideal, as defined by *fashion* or *trend*, is what people aspire for. Everyday life is ordinary, imperfect and often hard. And everyday life takes a back seat to the imaginary, because “[i]n the face of a spectacular world with which our everyday lives could never compare, we are reduced to passive spectators, consumers.”³⁴ Now as spectators, or worse yet a collection of commodities, human agency is reduced to consumption and identity to consumer, a consumer for whom labor is deprived of its meaning other than to propel the consumption treadmill and feed the *seems like* identity.

But there is one more thing. “Commodification tears things from their context, making them into floating carriers of value.”³⁵ Yet commodities need meaning to operate in the capitalistic equation. So advertisers shifted their focus from the usefulness of products to associating products with a value, a value that the consumeristic society tells the consumer they desire. Within this paradigm, tradition and history lose their place because all aspect of culture are lifted from their background and objectified.³⁶ Uniqueness of time and place are lost and people are left to construct their own way of life apart from their particular location or story. And so today shopping or “[t]he practice of consumption is now as much a way of organizing values as it is of obtaining particular goods.”³⁷

Religious communities must acknowledge how values and beliefs function in this economy. Why do people “church shop”? Because shopping, literally, has become the way one expresses their values. Do you shop at high end stores or bargain retailers? Where one shops and what types of products one buys is how one’s values are expressed. Dislocating commodities from context allows products and retailers to have a “universal” quality, valued across contexts. Since we, active participants in the consumer society, have (to varying degrees) adopted the identity of consumer and we, God’s people, seek ways to live our values and contribute to society in meaningful ways, we exercise our agency through the only way we know - consumption. Capitalism, as a learning system, has adapted to consumers values, creating value-driven products and niche markets. Today consumerism has commodified more and more areas of life. Arenas once off limits (schools and churches, bumpers and T-shirts, bathrooms and buses) now fuel the consumption machine, implicitly or explicitly tying products to values and meaning.³⁸

³³ As quoted in Miller, *Taking Consumer Culture Seriously*, 283 from Guy DeBord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), 42, 44.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 284.

³⁶ Ibid., 285.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Advertising now takes place in almost every area of our lives. Schools promote programs for collecting box tops and have students sell products for fundraisers. Churches have companies pay for bulletins or newsletters in return for listing their business, have photographers take pictures of members to create a directory so they can sell photos, and some even have bookstores on site. Cars and clothes are no better. People often pay top dollar for

Individuals, within this economy, are left on their own to craft a lifestyle based on their values which reflect their hoped-for identity. And lifestyle is based on one's ability to choose, modify and enjoy life in the capitalistic society.³⁹ Humans, displaced and dislocated from traditions and heritage, are left to discover their identity disconnected from any larger narrative. Values become detached from any particular, and ethics reduced to compassion without any greater commitment.⁴⁰ In a world where culture is another object to consume and choice is the meta-value,⁴¹ identity and status become intimately connected to the economy of consumerism. Status is marked by one's ability to choose and society is stratifying based on one's choices within the current cultural ideal (defined by fashion or trend).⁴² Hence, those "with more limited choice-making power are at the lower end of the status hierarchies in a consumeristic culture."⁴³ In this economy, identity is formed outside one's self, tradition and history, and against a bar that is temporal and based on choice. Identity formation revolves solely around the self, creating one's mosaic identity within a sea of choices, weighing the tension of conformity and uniqueness within one's place in the social order. And to top it off, the ultimate goal of human flourishing, or abundant life, is reduced to personal fulfillment, achieved primarily through accumulating.⁴⁴ Choice gives the illusion of personal freedom, yet protean power has subtly made every aspect of life a commodity, giving the illusion of freedom, but ultimately leaving consumerism with the final say.

Miller reminds church leaders that "[t]his logic is our cultural default"⁴⁵ or the water in which North Americans swim. The effects of the commodification of culture not only impact individual human persons, but also communities of faith.⁴⁶ Without a different hermeneutic, a different view of the human identity, meaning and personal agency, faith communities operate by default within a commodification economy where religious beliefs are commodities in a milieu of commodities for the consumer to choose from as they form their identity as consumer.

items (i.e. bumper stickers and T-shirts) which display a particular product or business. And if it wasn't enough billboards cover the landscape of our country, our public transportation and now in our restrooms!

³⁹ Miller, "Taking Consumer Culture Seriously," 285.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 288.

⁴¹ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 92.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Miller states, "[i]n its desire for self-fulfillment and freedom of choice to meet its own needs, the therapeutic self is precisely the consumer self. Its engagement with the world is one of choosing the goods most consonant with its own particular *lifestyle*." Miller, "Taking Consumer Society Seriously," 291.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 282.

⁴⁶ "In this culture, religion, like other commodities, serves to fill the identity of the consumer. It can only do this insofar as it confirms the fundamental form of the self as consumer." Ibid.

As devastating as this economy is for all human beings, the impact it has on children and youth is profound and not hard to miss in society today.⁴⁷ Consumerism is in all aspects of young people's lives, defining their humanity as consumers with choice as the meta-value and status determined by their consumer choices. While adult experiences may touch various points in the shift of humans from being to having to appearing, children today are forming their identity in a *seems like* world, dislocated from context and with no understanding of meaningful labor outside the economy of capitalism. Given this, Mercer's bold statement around the remaking of childhood doesn't seem so far-fetched. Add the digital dimension of culture, which collapses time and space, and children, constantly stimulated, are developing an understanding that "the novel" is the norm. Branded from an early age, children are the targets of marketing from birth, and have been "told" what they need and should value every day and in all arenas of their life. Is it any wonder why their view of humanity and life allows for cyberbullying?

Given this picture is there any hope? I believe there is. And I think that the consumer culture has provided key places for engaging those in the first third of life in meaningful ways and offering a different economy. This essay will now shift to articulating a Christian economy which reorients human identity and abundant life as a pathway for moving forward.

Part 3: It's a Theological issue: Objects to Subjects to Agents in Time and Place

Viewing humans as commodities, or objects in a consumer society, should raise red flags for people of faith. If ministry leaders are going to cultivate a consequential faith, a faith that matters in the current culture, we need to help young people shift from seeing humans as objects to understanding humans as subjects and agents. Yet can young people who have been socialized as commodities discover a different identity? Can young people who have breathed the air of consumerism all of their life believe that they are subjects? This shift may be hard, but it has to be addressed and can happen only within a different economy.

Created in the image of God, the identity of humans is reflective of God their creator. Without discovering God's identity, humans cannot understand their own identity. Drawing from theologians John Zizioulas and Jürgen Moltmann, this section will explore God's identity and economy, and assert that our identity as humans is as subjects and agents of God's love and such an identity can only be discovered in relationship with God and others by participating in God's creative and redemptive mission in the world.

Humans are not objects but subjects – persons with identities

⁴⁷ Children, even before they are born, are drawn into the momentum and power of branding. Take, for example, the number of adult clothing chains that have lines for youth, children and expectant mothers. Gap, one such chain, was an adult clothing store and now has multiple expressions of their brand targeted to different age groups. Why? Because branding children produces both the child (both short-term and long-term), as well as the parents (the ones paying the bills) as the customer. For more see Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 89-94.

At the heart of this complex, 21st century world lies a basic, age-old question – What does it mean to be human, to be a person in God’s world? This ontological issue has been taken up by various disciplines throughout history and theologian John Zizioulas believes it to be significant in our time as well.⁴⁸

View of Personhood through the View of the Triune God

Using history as a lens for understanding personhood today, Zizioulas looks to the theological works of the Ancient Fathers of the fourth century (the Cappadocian Fathers - Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa - and Athanasius of Alexandria).⁴⁹ They claimed that for God and humanity love and relationships defined personhood and life is a communal affair. For the Ancient Fathers the notion of communion was an ontological concept, revealing that “the being of God could be known only through personal relationships and personal love.”⁵⁰ This idea was counter to the common thinking of the day and in this idea “the ancient world heard for the first time that it is communion which makes beings ‘be’.”⁵¹ Their discovery had existential, as well as societal, impact.

Perhaps it is hard for 21st century Westerners to imagine personhood as anything other than an independent and ego-centered individual. Yet the modern concept of person would be as foreign to the Ancient Fathers as the Ancient Fathers’ is to us. So, how did such a realization come to be?

In both the Greek and Roman worlds of the Ancient Father’s era, personhood was viewed as separate from an individual’s essence or being. For the Greeks, personhood was something added to one’s essence, like the mask of an actor, and was what allowed humans to act independently. Within a worldview where harmony between all things, or *cosmos*, was assumed, personhood allowed society to work out humans place within the tragedy and conflicts in their midst.⁵² For the Romans, personhood was connected to a legal term and had to do with the role one played in society, having nothing to do with the ontology of the person.⁵³ In this view, there was a sense of particularity and connectedness, but

⁴⁸ Zizioulas says, “Respect for man’s [sic] ‘personal identity’ is perhaps the most important ideal of our time...although the person and ‘personal identity’ are widely discussed nowadays as a supreme ideal, nobody seems to recognize that *historically* as well as *existentially* the concept of the person is indissolubly bound up with theology.” Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² For the Greeks, *hypostasis* or *ousia* was the concept of one’s essence and personhood, having the possibility to act in an independent and free manner, was something added. This idea of personhood was understood by the concept of *prosopon*, a word that most commonly referred to the mask an actor wore. At this time the overarching understanding of the world was a harmonious relationship between all things or *cosmos*, with God’s being and the being of humans unable to be disconnected. Yet tragedy and conflict of human freedom had to be worked out somehow, so the idea of mask or identity placed on one’s essence was created. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 29, 31-32.

⁵³ For the Romans, the concept of person was centered on *persona*, a sociological and legal term. The concept of *persona* was “the role which one plays in one’s social or legal relationships, the moral or ‘legal’ person which either collectively or individually has nothing to do with the *ontology* of the person.” Humans existed outside of such relationships, but it was within such relationships that one’s agency or place within society was defined. So, for the Romans the view of person was centered on relationships with others, be it associations or contracts to organize human interactions within society. Ibid., 34.

“*identity* – that vital component of the concept of man [sic], that which makes one man [sic] differ from another, which makes him *he [sic] who is* – is guaranteed and *provided* by the state or by some organized whole.”⁵⁴ In this way one’s personhood, or identity, was outside of one’s self and dependent upon an outside system.

The way forward for the Ancient Fathers came from connecting existing but separate ideas of the Greeks and Romans. By connecting the essence of a human with the human’s ability to act independently (from the Greeks), and naming this ability, particularity tied to connectedness (from the Romans), as essential, true personhood emerged. In other words, one’s essence and one’s relational connections are not separate, rather they are what makes one a person or are the constitutive elements of being.⁵⁵ This is true for human beings because it was true for God. And for this to be true persons must have freedom. For God the freedom exists in the relationship between the three persons yet one God. Communion is what allows this to happen, with love constituting not only the communion, but also God’s very being.⁵⁶ This love, central to God, is lived out in relationship and requires distinction, as well as connectedness. Persons must exist as a separate, “concrete, unique, and unrepeatable entity,”⁵⁷ while at the same time be connected to another. This reality means personhood is dynamic requiring separation, as well as connectedness and distinctiveness, as well as commonality.

A Perspective of Life and Living

Understanding life and living is guided by one’s understanding of personhood. With personhood defined communally with love at the center, Zizioulas says:

Life and love are identified in the person...Death for a person means ceasing to love and to be loved, ceasing to be unique and unrepeatable, whereas life for the person means the survival of the uniqueness of it hypostasis, which is affirmed and maintained by love.⁵⁸

If loving and being loved is what makes humans subjects and gives them their identity, then life’s journey is a journey of love; a journey in which each person discovers their unique and unrepeatable personhood while being connected to God, others and the world. In other words, personhood is not a physical state, but a web of living relationships,⁵⁹ it is not determined by what one does, but by the fact that one is in relationship. Humans form and are formed by their relationships as parents, spouses, siblings, aunts/uncles, friends, colleagues, and neighbor. And these relationships extend a person’s identity beyond the confines of time and space. An example of this is my brother Scott. His life was

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ *Being* wasn’t adjunct to personhood, being was in fact the very idea of personhood. The Cappadocian Father’s “identified the Greek term *hypostasis*, which hitherto had been synonym of *ousia*, with *prosopon*... [and b]y connecting *hypostasis* with *prosopon* ... the Cappadocians transformed ‘person’ into the constitutive element of a being, and the concept of being itself became relational.” The result was “*To be* and *to be in relation* became identical.” Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 136.

⁵⁶ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 46.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 49.

⁵⁹ “A person is not a static entity ... not the self-existent substance of Aristotelian philosophy determined by its inherent boundaries.” Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 138-39.

short, only 2 ½ years, but he's impacted our family in ways that cannot be measured by the length of his life. His presence, his story, and the reality that he was loved and had a place in our family have extended his story four decades after his death. Evolving within a sea of relationships in space and over time, personhood is dynamic. Living relationally connected, yet unique and unrepeatable, our personhood morphs as we discover what it means to be an "I" in relation to other distinctive "I's," connected, yet separate being.

If being human is determined by being in relationship and love is central, then what is the source of that love? What is the invisible force driving this economy? Simply put, God. Our communal God exercises freedom not only within the three persons of the Trinity, but also with the world. Humans, created out of love to be in relationship, are constituted as persons in the very reality of being born. So human beings, the *objects* of God's love, become transformed into *subjects* of God's love as a result of God's creating action. Living into and out of this identity, subjects of God's love, is the *work* of human beings; it is the journey of life.

And God's love does not just make humans subjects; human beings are designed to let God's love flow out of them into the world, extending their relationship with God to others. Paradoxically separate and distinct, as well as connected and in relation, human persons discover life and love *through* their interactions with God and others within God's world. *Living in relationship, connected by love to God and others, is what defines life.* Hence, essential to discovering one's personhood is otherness, or engagement with persons outside of one's self. Relationships with others shape and refine personhood, meaning others are not to be feared, but to be sought out and engaged. Such a life requires dancing between being free and being connected.⁶⁰ As persons engage in this dance they discover both what they share and what makes them unique and together they flourish. In this dance humans come to know what it means to be a person with purpose and agency. But what is agency within this understanding of personhood?

Humans are not just subjects, but also agents – a call to action in God's economy

As humans explore their freedom, they learn at an early age that their choices impact others. This discovery is the agency that accompanies freedom and is a gift from God. But how are God's people to exercise their agency for fostering life? And what are the organizing principles of human community and abundant life in God's economy? Having explored the shift of humans from objects to subjects, it is now time to explore human agency. Zizioulas' view of personhood combined with Jürgen Moltmann's Trinitarian theology will illustrate what informs, drives and is foundational for human existence, as well as what it means for God's called, gathered and sent people.

Life and Personhood – Creative movement of God's love in the world

⁶⁰ Zizioulas says, "True being comes only from the free person, from the person who loves freely – that is, who freely affirms this being, his [sic] identity, by means of an event of communion with other persons." Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 18.

All economies have a vision of a preferred future. In John 10:10⁶¹ God's preferred future is for humans to have abundant life. Abundant life from Zizioulas' perspective is persons living in communion, distinct and connected. Community, freedom and love orient this abundant life and are central to God's economy. God's people foster abundant life by discovering what it is to be human; to have an identity as a person in communion in an environment of freedom which allows for receiving and sharing love from God and others. Fostering abundant life is what undergirds the work of humans and propels human agency; it informs and provides the foundation for human action. Fostering life draws from the separation and uniqueness, as well as connectedness and embrace of personhood, to create a posture open to the other while securely rooted in the never changing love of God.⁶²

Fostering abundant life in God's economy of love has two movements. The first is creative in nature. Initiated by God and extending to all of God's creatures, God, first and foremost, is a creating God. God not only created in the past, but is creating today and will continue to create in the future. Humans are not only invited into this creative movement, but are, in fact, *created to be participants* in it. This movement seeks God's vision of abundant life, not only for human persons, but for all God's world. This creative work is where human agency is to be directed. According to theologian Michael Welker, "The creature's own activity, which is itself a process of production, is not only a consequence and result of a creation that is already completed...it is [also] embedded in the process of creation and participates in that process."⁶³ So, humans are both the product and agent of God's creative love and have work to do! Persons have been given agency for a purpose, to participate with God in creating and sustaining life.

A crucial aspect of abundant life for theologian Jürgen Moltmann is life lived as distinct, yet equal persons dwelling one in another. Using the idea of perichoresis to describe God, Moltmann sees "perichoresis as the way to describe the divine community of persons as being thoroughly egalitarian and nonhierarchical."⁶⁴ Drawing from John's gospel, Moltmann "speaks of each of the three Trinitarian persons as being in each of the others [and] ... at the heart of which is the 'intimate indwelling and complete interpenetration of the persons in one another.'"⁶⁵ This indwelling speaks to the distinct, yet connected understanding of personhood that Zizioulas names, highlighting an egalitarian perspective.

Openness is an important aspect of Moltmann's view of God, for "[t]he very special suggestion of perichoresis is that the divine persons are 'habitable' for one another, giving one another open, life-

⁶¹ I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. John 10:10

⁶² In *Communion and Otherness*, Zizioulas "points out that the concept of 'otherness' stands as perhaps the central existential concern in the postmodern society. In this context, the Cappadocians doctrine of the Trinity provides the appropriate ontology of communion, he argues, for their understanding of persons-in-relationship takes otherness seriously and leads to the realization that rather than being merely a cause of division, difference is a vital element in true communion." Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 139. And "otherness is not consequent upon unity but is constitutive and a sine qua non condition of unity." Ibid.

⁶³ Michael Welker, *Creation and Reality*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 11-12. Welker gets more specific about this work saying we are called to "the activity of separating, ruling, producing, developing, and reproducing itself." Ibid., 11.

⁶⁴ Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 81. It should be noted that Zizioulas works with a hierarchical view of God within his social view of God.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

space for their mutual indwelling.”⁶⁶ And as God makes room for other persons, so too does God make room for the world. Such openness is possible because of the freedom that accompanies personhood, freedom which allows the other to be in relationship and provides the opportunity for *indwelling*.⁶⁷ Such a life is made possible because of the overflowing of love that persons have. This *open* and *room-giving* life is a result of, as well as necessity of, one’s identity as a person created in the image of God. This open and room-giving posture is critical to the creative movement of God in the world and is not abstract, but particular. God locates God’s self in human history, hence, the *world* is the place where God reveals God’s self and God’s love is to be shared and the place this open and room-giving work takes place.

Abundant life for Moltmann is defined as cosmic perichoresis or the ultimate open, indwelling of God, humanity and all of creation that takes place at the end of time.⁶⁸ Life before the eschaton is an unfolding of this reality. Operating from a Hebraic view of time, Moltmann allows the promised future to break into the now. He says:

While physics teaches us that time and space are complementary, our human engagement with them is not symmetrical: We can experience different times in the same place, but not different places at the same time. In space we exist beside each other and together, but in time we exist one after the other. In space simultaneously, in time successively. Thus we miss the reality of God, creation, and our bodily existence if we experience them only in time and not in space as well.⁶⁹

For Moltmann, our lives as God’s people include being attentive to the present and the concrete, while also living with hopeful anticipation of the coming of the kingdom of God. Understanding humans live in multiple economies, Moltmann’s theology names the brokenness and the promised future and helps Christians navigate the paradoxes of the various economies in their midst. Yet how do we know God’s promises? Through the concrete, particular person of Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified, and risen.

Freedom and Choice – God’s redemptive love in the world

Freedom and choice, central for God’s economy, can be both constructive and destructive. Freedom and choice can foster life or foster death. Ideally humans exercise their freedom to foster life; to understand their personhood as being distinct and connected, room-giving being centered in love with an eye toward abundant life for all. Yet the reality is sin exists! Persons are not always open and room-giving

⁶⁶ Jurgen Moltmann, “Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology,” in *Trinity, Community and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000), 114.

⁶⁷ “The divine Trinity is ‘open’ not because it is imperfect but by virtue of the graciously overflowing love, open for all the beloved creatures.” Ibid., 118.

⁶⁸ “Mutual indwelling and perichoresis are also the life secrets of the whole new creation, because in the end God will be ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28) and everything will be in God. The perichoretic unity of the triune God should therefore be understood as a social, inviting, integrating, unifying, and thus world-open community. The perichoretic unity of the divine persons is so wide open that the whole world can find room and rest and eternal life within it.” Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 117.

⁶⁹ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 112.

and abundant life is not always understood as cosmic perichoresis. We've all witnessed sin, experienced brokenness and been caught up in sin's lure. Therefore, it is imperative that God's economy deals not only with God's creative movement, but also the redeeming and reconciling movement of God in the world.

Acknowledging the counter-cultural nature of personhood, Zizioulas understands that only through becoming new creations can this communal life ultimately happen.⁷⁰ A new way is needed, for the communion of God's people and the fulfillment of personhood is not possible without some intervening force. Humans cannot of their own accord bridge the gulf of God and humanity.

Speaking about this gulf and brokenness, Moltmann says God knows the suffering and brokenness that comes with being open, for as one risks opening one's self to another, one is open to life and love, as well as pain and rejection.⁷¹ Suffering and loss is not only experienced by humans, but also by God. God also suffered "the loss of community within himself in order to absorb and heal the brokenness of community in his world."⁷² Embedded in the communal nature of life, in the separation, freedom and choice that accompanies love, is sin, brokenness and isolation. This reality recognizes that love is not only a creative movement, but must also be a reconciling and redeeming one. This redeeming love is known most concretely in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God is revealed not only in creative moments in life, but also in the broken places, in isolation and loneliness, in pain and suffering. And God's people are also invited into those times, and in so doing discover their identity as persons constituted by love in new ways. By living with and accompanying others in the dark times, new aspects of life and love are discovered. God's redemptive movement calls humanity to name the brokenness in the world, to face death and continue living, and to be driven by hope even in the midst of despair. God's people participate in this movement by connecting the isolated, by being agents of healing in broken relationships, by advocating for life, and by witnessing to God's promises in places where God's grace is absent. Yet how do God's people do this in a *seems like* world?

The Future and the Now – God's people as the cruciform community of hope

Having stripped away contextual particularities and offering the allure of a *seems like* reality, our capitalistic economy has robbed people of an adequate way of living in a now and not yet world. Life lived in the abstract is not only dislocating, but also dismisses human agency related to the creative and redemptive dimensions of everyday life. God's economy calls humanity to reclaim context as an imperative to being a subject and agent of God's love in the particular of time and space.

⁷⁰ Zizioulas says "[b]etween the being of God and that of man remains the gulf of creaturehood ... [Therefore t]he demand of the person for absolute freedom involves a 'new birth,' a birth 'from on high,' a baptism." Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 18-19.

⁷¹ "If one conceives of the Trinity as an event of love in the suffering and death of Jesus – and that is something which faith must do – then the Trinity is no self-contained group in heaven, but an eschatological process open for men [sic] on earth, which stems from the cross of Christ." Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 82 from Moltmann's *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 249.

⁷² Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002) 100-101.

Truth be told, there is nothing but the here and now. While persons can be guided by the promise of the anticipated future, the messy now is all that's available. But the now can be oriented by God's economy of love with practices which make it come alive each and every day, planting ideas, values, core commitments and lofty ideals into the particulars of life. These small, repeatable actions reclaim context and humanity's place in history. And knowing our story and our place, honors humans as subjects of God's love in the world.

All economies have a preferred future, and that future is the lure of the system, it pulls it forward. Within God's economy, the end is both in the future *and* breaks into the present; it is a *now and not yet* reality.⁷³ This claim is unique to Christians. The reality of attending to time *and* space allows Christians to live in the now with hopeful anticipation. While the present is all that can be attended to, it is not all that there is. A promised future has already been realized and the now is being transformed. So Christians live not only in today's realities, but also in anticipation of a future of abundant life for all of creation. Because of this understanding of God's future, life changes in the now. Therefore, God's creative and redemptive movements are revealed both in the here and the now *and* in the future.

God's economy locates both God and humanity in time and space, yet time and space operate differently. In time, God is "going ahead and paving the way to the future of the eternal kingdom."⁷⁴ And in space God exists simultaneously. One without the other doesn't work. And as it is for God, so too is it for God's people. Moltmann says:

hastening with the accelerated speed of the modern/already 'postmodern' world into the future[,] we must also dwell in our bodies, and with our senses linger in the sensual world of nature and find rest again and again in the peace of God. We not only exist and struggle against one another in a hostile world, but also must live together and make home in neighborhoods, friendships, and love. We can only live and breathe freely if we give one another space to live our lives.⁷⁵

Time is crucial, but so is space. Space, being alongside, is necessary to indwelling, room-giving living. And dwelling is part of both the creative and redemptive movements of God. Giving others time *and* space is central to living out our personhood and fostering life.

This is as true for communities of faith collectively as it for God's people personally. For just as human actions coalesce into a way of life for individual persons, so to do concrete, human actions make up a community's life together. Communities of faith need both time and space. Human actions or "practices" are given by God to connect faith communities to God and one another across time and space. Community practices have been part of the Christian story, our story, across space and time and they remind Christians who they are and help them live into and out of the creative and redemptive movements of God's love.

⁷³ For Moltmann "the future penetrates into the here and now, releasing events that propel the present into the future." Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God*, 77.

⁷⁴ Moltmann, "Perichoresis," 111.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

Congregations are the concrete, particular places where God's people live together. Lifting up human identity as subjects and agents of God's love, God's people participate in God's creative and redemptive movements in the world. Such communities are where persons live separate, yet connected lives and experience a foretaste of the abundant life God promises. They are communities who open themselves to the broken places of the world and seek justice and God's vision of abundant life. The now and not yet reality of God's economy allows God's people to live paradoxically as saints and sinners in the midst of brokenness with hope. Communal practices proclaim and embody the gracious love of a God whose overflowing love makes humans subjects and agents.

Part 4: What does this mean? Possibilities for Congregations and Ministry with those in the First Third of Life

Having taken a theological turn to address the issues of identity, economy and agency, now it is time to ask what does this mean, in particular for those engaging in ministry with those in the first third of life. What practices might congregations engage to help God's people live within God's economy? And how might these practices offer young people a new vision of abundant life?

As stated earlier, culture is composed of several layers – beliefs, practices and the invisible force of the discursive regime. If church leaders are going to speak God's promises into the capitalistic economy, attending to the discursive regime is necessary. Taking clues from cultural resistance and the work of Michel de Certeau's work, Vincent Miller invites church leaders to approach consumerism acknowledging their minority position. Noting the difference between strategies and tactics, he believes the church has to operate from a tactics vantage point. While strategies are actions exercised by subjects who occupy the dominant culture, tactics come from those with less power. Tactics "are 'the art of the weak.' [w]ho dwell within foreign territory, making do and getting by in terrain and cultures not of their own design and beyond their control. Tactics are small practices in which individuals and groups twist the dominant cultural regime to their own benefit."⁷⁶ Trying to distinguish a Christian culture from a consumer culture at a beliefs level utilizes a strategic approach, yet from a non-dominate culture position. However, practices or "tactical actions can provide an alternative way forward."⁷⁷ It is through concrete human actions in everyday life that we can move toward addressing the *discursive regime* or "the structures, rules and power relations that construct and constrain discourse below the level of meaning."⁷⁸

Congregations, as the gathered and sent people of God, are uniquely situated to make this possible with their existing frameworks, rituals and traditions. Therefore this essay will conclude by outlining three sets of practices that make congregations cruciform communities of hope: incarnational, sacramental and missional.

Incarnational Community of Human Persons

⁷⁶ Miller, "Taking Consumer Culture Seriously," 292.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 277.

Maybe we've got some things wrong. Maybe we've forgotten the heart of the matter. Currently the majority of approaches to faith formation for those in the first third of life center on beliefs. Such a focus has resulted in placing doctrine and education at the center of discovering a Christian way of life. While doctrine and education *are* elements of the faith formation process, they are not at the center and not the place to begin. The orienting principles of God's economy remind us there is a much more basic place to start.

If personhood is foundational to understanding God and ourselves, and being persons is defined relationally, the central focus of ministry should be on personhood. Ministry then belongs to the relational dimension of life and is about accompanying humans in discovering their identity as children of God and understanding what it means to live a Christian way of life. Ministry is living in and among a community of human persons actively seeking to discover their personhood in the face of the other in the now and not yet world. And while most ministry with young people is said to be relational, what economy is driving such relationships and with what view of the human person?

Living in a culture where individualism trumps community and the primary identity of humans is consumer, personhood as separate, but connected is counter-cultural. In a world where freedom and choice are intimately connected with a "shopping" lifestyle, fostering abundant life and creating an open, indwelling community is foreign. Moltmann notes that, "[t]oday's society is marked economically by the globalization' of industry and markets, and socially by a growing individualism. The market society isolates peoples, destroys their communities, and infects them with the poison of competition."⁷⁹ Yes, life has more to offer. He continues:

The grace of Christ, the love of God, and the community of the Spirit work together in the liberation of human beings toward the true life. Christ accepts us in grace; God loves without reserve; the Spirit gives us new vitality. The three persons are personally differentiated: Christ-God-Spirit. Each person works his or her own way: grace-love-community. But they work together in a unified movement that liberates and unites the creatures who are separated from God. We live in the Trinity; our lives are Trinitarian lives.⁸⁰

God's people live in the Trinity! God's communal view of life is the community we are drawn into; this is the community that the creator, redeemer and sustainer of life makes possible. This is the community where persons are distinct and connected, free and loved. Such a community is the only place to fully discover what it is to be a human person. "Modern individualism does not serve the freedom of human persons, but more their new enslavement."⁸¹ Yet this is the world most young people find themselves. It is time for communities of faith to advocate and defend the communal way of life. Moltmann continues:

Where do I feel personally free? In a supermarket where I can buy whatever I want as long as I have the money for it, but where no one knows me and not even the cashier looks into my eyes? Or in a community where I am accepted, where people know me and look into my eyes

⁷⁹ Moltmann, "Perichoresis," 123.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 120.

⁸¹ Ibid., 124.

and affirm me as I am? The first is the experience of individual free-choice; the second is the reality of communicative freedom. The first focuses on things; the second on persons.⁸²

This communicative freedom that Moltmann describes is a community living into and out of God's economy in concrete, particular ways. But what are concrete practices, the tactics, God's people exercise to create such a community? How does a congregation create a community where human persons are the focal point and love and grace are the orienting principles? It is a community that takes seriously the existential questions of persons in relation; it is a community that places existential questions in the midst of God's creative and redemptive movement in the world.

While there are unlimited way of making this come alive, three areas will be lifted up as examples. First, in a world that segregated and separates, fostering intentional community is a radical move. Segregation happens in many areas of life, one area being between generations. Creating an environment for persons of different generations that share stories, joys and sorrows attends to person formation, as it also honors the particularity of each human experience. In past eras, relationships across generations were tended in various places of society. Today, however, such interactions are uncommon, especially outside one's family system. Attending to person formation by connecting people in the first third of life with those in the last third of life open up new relationships, as well as also offer greater perspective of life. Examples could include creating spaces for young married couples to be with couples married 40+ years, for newly retired persons to mentor Jr. High students, and preschoolers to connect with persons in nursing homes. Conversations could include discussing their life experiences, passions and challenges. Over time conversations could progress past to deeper issues like what brings joy, pain and gives meaning to life. Each encounter would connect people and create community, as they also highlight the unique, unrepeatable aspects of each person's life journey.

Second, intentional practices centered on encountering "the other" are not only critical to person formation, but also for navigating our world today. Encountering others is inevitable and necessary, yet intentional, reflective encounters with others which seek understanding are hard to find, and often not encouraged. What if relational ministry with those in the first third of life took seriously encountering others and how critical it is for forming personhood? What if rather than see others as persons to be feared, ministry could help foster environments that open us to the other and the world? What if such an inviting posture was not centered on charity or judgment, but on exploring our identity as humans? Encountering others can include another generation, but it could include any crossing of boundaries...be they ethnic, socio-economic, sexual orientation, geographical, etc. Creating such encounters means being attentive to reflection, reflection on what one learned about one's own personhood, living in community and discovering abundant life. While many practices in this area already exist, how might reframing such practices around person formation change these experiences?

Third, being in community includes the joyful and the painful aspects of life. Relational ministry with those in the first third of life must include both. What are practices that mark the joyful times? What are practices that name the painful places? Society is more apt to journey with people in joy than in

⁸² Ibid., 124.

suffering. Hence practices that name injustice and accompany persons in the painful parts of life are critical. Such practices not only are counter-cultural, they also embody a theology of the cross. Humans' sinful nature is real and evil will touch our lives. Human persons will put themselves first, and they will hurt those in our midst. Relationships will end and lies will be told. People will be treated as commodities and will be tempted to doubt their personhood, forgetting they are subjects of God's love. Sickness will overcome our bodies and humans will be reminded of their temporal nature. Accidents will take loved ones, jobs will be lost, material things stolen, and promises broken. And at just such times, personhood will be tested and affirmed. What human actions might communities of faith take up to foster incarnational practices at such times? What would it mean for God's people to live as kenotic people?⁸³ Let me suggest a few. Create space that allows and names brokenness. Such spaces may take the form of small group sharing, public prayers or one-on-one conversations. Noticing and naming brokenness is vital for cruciform communities, and sets the tone for the relational encounters that follow. Young people listen and wonder what matters to communities of faith. Hearing brokenness named acknowledges the pain in the world and opens the possibility of young people naming their own pain. Yet, naming brokenness is not enough. Hope and action must follow. Accompaniment, a ministry of presence, is one tangible way. Accompaniment is joining another, in space and in time, with one another. It is dwelling with them. It can be hard and inconvenient; it may be accompanying someone physically, listening to their story and drying their tears or it might be using digital resources or holding someone in prayer. Accompanying people in broken, dark times means letting go of any agenda or need to fix the situation and making one available to simply being there, person to person.

Sacramental Community of Now and Not Yet People

Maybe we've got something to offer. Maybe our practices matter. We are human persons that need concrete relational practices to attend to the existential aspects of our lives, but we also are ecclesial beings. Christian practices help God's people live out their personhood in the mystery of the now and not yet world within an economy of God's creative and redemptive love.

Two very particular practices of the now and anticipated future are the sacraments. The sacraments are points within space and time where God's future breaks into the now and in so doing changes our earthly reality and personhood. The sacraments give us our identity, defining and transforming our way of life, personally and communally. The sacraments reconstitute the earthly way of life into the Christian way of life.

In baptism our relational identity is constituted, as we are named child of God and placed within a network of relationships. This community is particular and located, as it also expands space and time. In baptism Christian persons have faith and hope as part of their personhood, as they live their life's journey paradoxical saint and sinner. "This way of being is not a moral attainment, something that man [sic] *accomplishes*. It is a way of *relationship* with the world, with other people and with God, an event

⁸³ Moltmann highlights this aspect of the Trinitarian community. "Through their mutual indwelling the divine persons are giving each other themselves and the divine life in selfless love. The perichoretic community can also be seen as a kenotic community: The persons are 'emptying' themselves into one another." Moltmann, "Perichoresis," 115.

of *communion*, and that is why it cannot be realized as the achievement of an *individual*, but only as an *ecclesial* fact.”⁸⁴

In the Eucharist the redemptive movement of God breaks in, regularly reorienting the personhood named in baptism. In baptism God’s people are reminded of their identity and of God’s unfolding promised future placed within community. In the midst of this community the Eucharistic meal is the ongoing expression of God’s redemptive love.⁸⁵ And as the Eucharist forms the gathered people of God, it also claims the eschatological nature of the church. In the Eucharist ordinary elements, bread and wine, liberate human persons from their self-centeredness and fear of others, restoring them again to be persons who live for others. True community, that way of life that leads to abundant life, is possible only through such a gracious and reorienting activity. Partaking of bread and wine is a concrete way God’s economy unfolds in the world.

The sacraments are not the only practices that embody God’s economy, but they are means of God’s grace central to shaping the Christian way of life. Sacraments locate God’s people in time and space, just as they transcend it. In the sacraments the gulf between humanity and God is realized; the open, perichoretic community tasted, and the foretaste of the feast to come offered. The communal nature of God and God’s people is lived out and we become an eschatological community. This eschatological community “is not simply an institution. She is a ‘mode of existence,’ *a way of being*.”

The *perichoretic community*, described by Moltmann, allows one to stand “outside one’s life in love.”⁸⁶ The love that drives this community draws from both the creative and redemptive movements of God and is defined as a “community of mutual indwelling. [For t]hose who love are not in themselves, but in others.”⁸⁷ Such a community is a “social, inviting, integrating, unifying, and thus world-open community ... so wide open that the whole world can find room and rest and eternal life within it.”⁸⁸ This community, located and transcendent, as well as open and inviting, allows for freedom and choice, distinction and separation, as it lives in the creative and redemptive mission of God in the now and not yet world.

But how might the sacraments become embedded in everyday life and ministry? Three concrete practices for ministry with those in the first third of life will be put forth. The first practices center on seeing baptism as a way of life, rather than an event. Baptism is both a one-time event and a lifetime journey; it is an unfolding future of discovering one’s identity as a child of God in a network of relationships. Living one’s baptismal identity is a counter-cultural way of life. In a world that has commodified religion, practices that hold persons in community and accompany each other in life are uncommon. What would it mean for communities of faith to not only commit to accompanying the newly baptized in a worship service, but also in the years to come? What if a congregation’s role was less focused on providing education and more focused on their person formation? What if each newly

⁸⁴ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 15.

⁸⁵ The Eucharist “gives the taste of eternal life as love and communion, as the image of the being of God.” Ibid., 22.

⁸⁶ Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 115.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 122.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 117.

baptized person was paired with another person or family to share life with, to pray with and for, to regularly share a meal and their unfolding story? What if each worship service began by reclaiming ourselves as persons in community and each day ended with family members reminding each other of their baptismal identity? What if the mirror in our homes had a sign, “You are a child of God, marked with the cross of Christ forever”? Would such practices, over time, chip away at our consumer identity? Would lessening our programmatic focus and heightening our relational focus be a faithful way of helping those in the first third of life live into this reality?

The second set of practices center on the Eucharist. The world needs tangible ways to live into God’s promised and unfolding future. Ordinary bread and wine regularly draw God’s people together and provide sanctuary in the midst of a world where war, suffering and pain are real. How might the Eucharistic meal hold a dynamic place within ministry with those in the first third of life? How can church leaders help God’s people experience the means of grace in real life and in real time? What if the times when people in the first third of life *need* to experience the means of grace are *not* on Sunday morning, but Friday night after the football game or on the evening before they go off college? What if the Eucharist meal got out of the church building and into the hands of God’s people? What if families created *sanctuary* in their homes and the Eucharistic meal was available to them throughout the week? When might God’s people need to remember they are now and not yet people? When a tragedy happens. When one doesn’t make the team or do well in an audition. When one has hurt or been hurt by a friend or family member. When someone dies. When someone is born. When a family member loses a job. When divorce cuts a family. When someone is hospitalized. The Eucharist speaks most profoundly in the moment of emptiness and void, as it names brokenness and announces a different future. Bread and wine acknowledge the reality of sin, just as they release its power on us and point us to hope and abundance.

The third set of practices center on the now and not yet reality of the Christian life. This paradox is hard to understand, but regularly experienced. As sacramental people, God’s Word regularly reminds us that we do the things we don’t want to do at the same time God’s promises are unfolding in their midst. The present reality is not the end, but it’s hard to keep our bearings in a world that seeks black and white, discounts mystery and invites us to narrow our vision. God’s Word embodied in the sacraments expands our vision of the future, connects us with the past and calls us into the present. How can reorientation of time and space help persons live in a world that values the immediate and novel? God’s people need practices that ground their actions, while also opening. Christian practices, such as reading Scripture and praying, guide our lives and remind us of our eschatological reality. Engaging these practices help God’s people imagine their life more broadly than the present. Invited into the future, while remembering the past, Christian practices allow us to break our fixated on the now. For children, this may be thinking about what they want to be when they grow up or about God’s place in their lives. For youth and young adults, it might be helping them live into their agency by writing future stories of their lives, naming the impact they hope to make in the world or thinking about the passions and gifts God has given them. Framing these imagination sessions within the creative and redemptive movement of God and their relational identity allow persons in the first third of life to believe in God’s economy and their own place within it. The eschatological nature of faith needs practices to embed God’s economy into ordinary life

experiences, transforming the here and now to the now and not yet. And within such invisible forces the possibility of abundant life is reframed.

Missional Community of Creative and Redemptive Agents of Love

Maybe we've got something to do. Maybe the world needs us. As objects turned subjects, human persons are also agents. As agents of God's love in the world, humans participate in God's creative and redemptive mission in the world. And as God is a "social, inviting, integrating, unifying, and thus world-open community"⁸⁹ so are God's people. What does it mean to be inviting and open to the world? What does it mean to be social and integrating? Maybe God's people have been too passive. Maybe God's people have work to do, a mission to participate in. What if God's people were engaged in creative and redemptive tactics? Would the world notice? Would such actions begin to dismantle consumption as the orienting principle and reintroduce a shared life of love?

Human beings have agency. Children learn this at an early age. Teenagers test this power. Young adults become frustrated when not allowed to exert their potential. Families struggle to balance their personal and communal agency. As persons in relationships that discover their identity in relationship, we need help learning how to direct our agency. In God's economy, agency is not directed toward consuming, it is about fostering abundant life. According to God's design, fostering abundant life requires participating within God's two movements of love – the creative and redemptive work of God in the world. How will congregations help children, youth, and young adults discover their agency? How will they foster creative and redemptive practices that call and send God's people into the world on a mission?

Human actions in this area are endless. Yet for our purposes, three broad areas will be named. First, communities of faith must help those in the first third of life discover what it means to be creative and redemptive agents of God's love in concrete ways. This discovery is lived before it is understood. Welker names five concrete ways the creative process is lived out: separation, ruling, producing, developing and reproducing. Each of these areas is ripe for expanding, but this essay will work primarily with the first, separation.

All humans are created with unique gifts and passions. Helping children, youth and young adults discover and name their own particular gifts and passions is an important and primary step is discovering agency. Attending to this aspect may include using specific gifts discovery tools to develop an environment with specific language and practices. Or it may be more organic, seeing each person as a gift to be unwrapped, noticing and calling out their unique passions through informal means. Regardless, it is about being intentional about naming gifts and giving opportunities to develop them. Engaging in such efforts, across the first third of life and within the whole faith community, grow persons that imagine themselves as unique persons with purpose. Helping God's people reflect on the impact those gifts make in the lives of others help them discover agency in ways outside of consuming.

And all humans experience brokenness. Helping children offer and receive forgiveness, giving teenagers environments to make amends and helping families implement practices which invite God's redemptive

⁸⁹ Moltmann, "Perichoresis," 117.

movement into their daily life are simple, but transformational ways God's people can *be* redemptive agents of God's love in the world. Long before persons can cognitively understand God's grace, they can experience it. As relational people, we can experience reconciliation within our congregations as they gather regularly and order their lives around God's Word, the sacraments and Christian community. Tactics around God's redemptive movement confront capitalism's protean power, allowing humans to reclaim their agency within God's economy and making God's promised and preferred future a possibility.

A second set of practices rest on being open and inviting. If God is not threatened by being open to the world, God's people need not be. Yet being open and inviting is hard and doesn't come naturally. Practicing hospitality, noticing those on the "edge", is one practice to engage. As faith communities seek to foster a foretaste of abundant life, God's people are called to notice the people and places where life is not abundant and do something. Hospitality is one way of acting; inviting persons outside one's community to share their story around a meal or challenging persons within one's community to create relational connection in their everyday life are just some particular ways this might happen. Being open entails becoming aware of circumstances that diminish life and discovering where injustice exists, often areas society tries to cover up. Being open and inviting requires opening one's eyes, ears and hearts to the pains of the world, both locally and globally, and is as much about awareness as action. Children, youth and young adults want to know the realities of the world, the good and bad, and they want to contribute in the good and right the wrong.

A third set of practices focus on the sent aspect of being an agent. God's people are a gathered people, but they are also a sent people. Congregational gatherings are times to let God's anticipated future break into the present, as a foretaste of the abundant life to come. But such times are not the primary mode in which God's people live. God's people live dispersed in the world, the world which offers a different view of abundant life and personhood. So what are concrete ways communities of faith can help God's people live in the realities of their everyday life as creative and redemptive agents of love? How can communities of faith help students seek abundant life at the public school? What does it mean to be a creative and redemptive agent of God's love when discerning what to do after college? How does a family foster abundant life amidst their own shortcomings and brokenness? What impact does being a subject and agent of God's love have in friendships? In dating? In our behavior on the bus or on Facebook? What does it mean to be a witness to God's gracious love and share the good news in a broken world? Accompanying God's people as they wrestle with these questions in the midst of God's economy shifts the invisible forces of person's living in a dislocated capitalistic society and allows them to experience the reality of life lived within concrete communities of faiths that exist within a greater story.

Conclusion

Maybe we have some things wrong? Maybe working with those in the first third of life is less about creating programs and more about helping God's youngest persons discover their identity as subjects and agents of God's love. And maybe in discovering who we are in relation to others and the world, humans actually come to know the God that created and loves them. And maybe the irony of

discovering a Christian way of life in the midst of a consumer society is that humans will find hope as they reclaim their identity as persons and reject the winds of consumerism.

And maybe we have something to offer? Might our belief about God not only guide us to discover key elements of faith and life, but also inform our practices and provide scaffolding for discovering our identity? And might this scaffolding be as meaningful for congregations, as it is for human persons, and help leaders rethinking ministry with those in the first third of life? Congregations, as gathered persons of faith, must remind persons of their identity and calling, help them discover their agency, collective and personally, and send them into the world. As cruciform communities, they are incarnational, sacramental and missional, locating persons in the messiness of lived community, in time and space. They are embodied perichoretic communities that bring the future into the present, reorienting personhood and community, and remind persons of the paradoxical nature of their lives.

And maybe we have something to do? As objects transformed to subjects, human persons are also agents. Invited to participate in God's creative and redemptive mission in the world, humans have purpose and a place in God's unfolding story. In a society where agency has collapsed into consumption, this is good news.

Last month my daughter was captivated by a movie on cyberbullying. The movie started as this essay did, with a high school girl attempting to take her own life as a result of being the "victim" of bullying on a social networking site. This girl, surrounded by a broken but caring network of family and friends, was accompanied in her suffering and introduced to practices that helped her discover her agency in a new way. Both accompaniment and practices contributed to her journey from pain and suffering to hope. The pivotal moment in the movie is when the "victim" returns to school. It's her first day back, she's in the lunch room and comes face-to-face with the bully, her best friend, and the group that perpetuated the bullying. The best friend and the victim reconcile, committing to make a new start. The group, on the other hand, didn't miss a beat and start right where they left off, bullying. First one, then another, and soon all of them are offering their cutting remarks. The best friend encourages the "victim" to simply walk away. But she refuses. Seeing it as a test of her agency and recognizing there is no time like the present, she pauses and says, "Words hurt you know." Taking a risk, testing the agency she discovered from a different economy, she counters the prevailing economy. And an amazing thing happens. Silence covers the room and the group backs down. And then, with texts flying from one person to another, students in real time step up and join her, exercising their own agency. And suddenly the tide turns. This scene shows the two economies have been living alongside each other all along. Some students recognize it and name the tension that they'd experienced the past weeks. Others see, perhaps for the first time, that an alternate economy might be possible, and have hope.

I believe children, youth and young adults want help not only of discovering abundant life, but also in naming the various economies that surround them. I get why my daughter, planted in the midst of our contradictory world, was captivated by this film. It named for her the tensions she experiences on a daily basis, tensions that our faith community and youth ministry don't speak about in a way that she understands. Those in the first third of life are open to having people accompany them in their journey to discover their identity and a Christian way of life, but I'm not convinced our current ministry

approaches are digging deep enough and getting at the heart of what matters, person formation within God's economy. Society operates on an economy that tries to reduce human beings to commodities and young people believe there is more. They want abundant life, but are cautious, aware of the present realities and tentative about the vision consumerism presents. They are wary of the current culture's distorted view of human identity, yet have no other scaffolding available to them. Young people are not afraid of naming brokenness and yearn for hope. They want to understand the paradox of living in the now and not yet of Christianity. In this moment, the church has something to contribute. But if the church is to have an impact it will have to be aware of today's complicated and sophisticated world and be diligent in finding ways of proclaiming the gospel message. Young people are open to spiritual issues and are willing to be connected to communities of faith. There are opportunities for adults to accompany young people in their journey in discovering their identity, as humans and as Christians. The question is – Will we, the church, be open and willing to join them in this journey? What's at stake? The future of the church AND the lives of young people! The church has a call to help all people discover a Christian way of life. And currently we need to step back and ask if we are effectively engaging the youngest generations in forming a faith that is consequential, that matters in their everyday life and experience. It is time to take seriously our call to awaken and ignite all of God's people to discover, or perhaps rediscover, their identity as subjects and agents of God's love in this digital age.