

NAZARENE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A CULTURAL SHIFT TO FACILITATE A REDISCOVERY OF GENUINE
CHRISTIAN FAITH FOR MILLENNIALS AND GEN Z AT CROSSROADS
COMMUNITY CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

by
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KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI
APRIL 10, 2023

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Dissertation Title: *A Cultural Shift to Facilitate a Rediscovery of Authentic Christian Faith for Millennials and Gen Z at Crossroads Community Church of the Nazarene*

Date of Defense: March 16, 2023

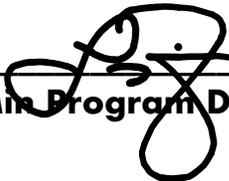
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ABSTRACT

Lee Young

A Cultural Shift to Facilitate a Rediscovery of Authentic Christian Faith For Millennials and Gen Z at CrossRoads Community Church of the Nazarene

This research analyzes the exodus of millennials and Gen Z from the evangelical church in order to strengthen outreach and discipleship to these generations at CrossRoads Community Church of the Nazarene (San Antonio, Texas). Focusing mainly on research from Christian Smith as well as the philosophical work of Charles Taylor, Andrew Root, and James K. Smith, this project assesses the causes of the cultural shift of the 1960s. At this time, the social imaginary of American young people radically changed, resulting in a mass exodus that continues to increase with each generation. From these sources the goal is to articulate a new approach for evangelicalism and CrossRoads Community Church to reverse the generational trend of increasing percentages of those leaving Evangelicalism and the Christian faith. The goal is not simply keeping the churches full but to facilitate a rediscovery of authentic Christian faith that brings meaning and fulfillment that will last for generations.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This process of development through education leading to the research of this thesis has been continual steps into the unknown. Throughout my ministry, I have sought to help people find what took me so long to see on my own: an intimate relationship with God. My growth will continue, and this process has opened my mind to new ways to process and think theologically which has already enhanced my ability to minister. I am forever grateful for the opportunity that has been afforded to me.

I am grateful to the Lord who has saved me and spurred me on to greater intimacy for self-edification, healing and being better equipped to help others. I am very grateful to my boys, my daughter-in-law, and my grandson who fill my heart with love and inspire me to do more. I am grateful to my mom and dad who have fought through their obstacles to stand firmly on the Rock of Jesus Christ and faithfully continue to do so in love to one another, the church, and Christ.

I am so grateful to my family. They patiently supported and encouraged me every step of the way even when I was working when normally, I would have been spending time with them. I am especially grateful to my wife, Amy, who, when I struggled with all of the newness found on this path, her words kept me moving in the right direction. I would not have had the confidence to venture into this stage of education, the patience to endure the hard work, or the persistence to not give up if it were not for her love and support.

I am grateful to an incredibly supportive church staff. They have often picked up some slack because I could not make it to meetings or events to meet a deadline. And I am grateful to have a supportive Church Board who has allowed me the time to complete this project.

Finally, I am grateful to the many friends, both in and out of my church, who have prayed incessantly, encouraged, and spurred me on to finish this project.

CHAPTER 1

THE EXODUS

Introduction

“About 20 percent of those raised in the Christian faith eventually will become non-affiliated by adulthood.”¹ This staggering statistic reflects a trend that has been ongoing for decades in America. According to the Pew Research Center, this decline continues rapidly with each generation. In a study done in 2018-2019, the generational decline of those Americans who identify as Christian has decreased from 84% in the Silent Generation to 49% of Millennials. Between the Silent Generation and the Baby Boomers, the number fell from 84% to 76%, an 8% drop. Between the Baby Boomers and Generation X born between 1965 and 1980, the decline fell 9%. Between Generation X and millennials, there was a drop of 18%.²

Sixty-three percent of American respondents believe in God³ with absolute certainty compared to 10% in Germany, 11% in France, 12% in the United Kingdom, and

¹ James L.S.M. Heft and Jan E. Stets, eds., *Empty Churches: Non-Affiliation in America*, 1st edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 9.

² “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, October 17, 2019, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

³ Michael Lipka, “Americans’ Faith in God May Be Eroding,” *Pew Research Center*, n.d., accessed August 19, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/04/americans-faith-in-god-may-be-eroding/>.

26% in Italy.⁴ European Christianity gives a peak into the direction of American Christianity. Charles Taylor posits a new secularity where Christianity is no longer the norm but one of many options for pursuing spirituality. Americans are not becoming less spiritual as much as less Christian. Taylor says the new secular age has created “...something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond. This phase extends up to the present.”⁵ Heft and Stets state that religious non-affiliation is “most likely to happen during adolescence.”⁶ Very few of those who leave the church will return. This will result in greater numbers exiting the church, but also greater numbers of those who do not believe in God.

The Rise of the Nones

The earliest American surveys reveal a steady increase in those who, when asked about religious affiliation, marked that they have ‘none’. The rate of those identifying as religious ‘nones’ regularly increased by 7% each year until 1991.⁷ Then, the pace suddenly began to rise drastically. In 2014, 23% of Americans considered themselves as religious ‘nones.’ A recent Pew Research Center study recorded the number at 30%. The

⁴ Jonathan Evans and Chris Baronavski, “How Do European Countries Differ in Religious Commitment? Use Our Interactive Map to Find Out,” *Pew Research Center*, n.d., accessed August 19, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/05/how-do-european-countries-differ-in-religious-commitment/>.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 299.

⁶ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 144.

⁷ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 1.

same research predicts that by 2070, less than half of the American population will have any religious affiliation.⁸

There is little doubt that America is following in the footsteps of Europe. More and more millennials and Gen Z are leaving the church and declaring themselves as ‘nones’. Because most Americans identify as Christian, this trend is mainly disaffiliation from Christianity.⁹ Heft and Stets recognize the fallacy of the common theory of secularization. This theory posits that modernity and science will eventually replace faith in the supernatural, and individuals will move away from religion both publicly and privately. However, these authors cite three reasons in criticism of this theor.

First, there is no decline in spirituality according to Taylor. Although there is a move away from Christianity, there is not a corresponding rise in devotion to science: most still have some type of religious or spiritual beliefs. Second, those who are most religiously active are not participating less, which might be expected if secularization was happening. Finally, even those who report no religion still consider themselves spiritual.¹⁰

It is interesting to note that the rise of disaffiliation with Christianity among immigrants to America seems to parallel the overall increase in the US population, suggesting that there is a move toward non-religious affiliation as immigrants come to America.¹¹ According to Heft and Stets, first-generation immigrants tend to maintain the

⁸ “Modeling the Future of Religion in America,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, September 13, 2022, accessed September 16, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/>.

⁹ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 1.

¹⁰ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 3.

¹¹ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 29.

religious traditions of their homeland. However, by the second generation, there is increasing assimilation into American society. The more ‘Americanized’ each immigrant generation becomes, the more likely they declare themselves as a ‘none’ religiously.¹² Why is American culture, with every generation moving away from the faith? What is it about the American culture that can drive new generations away from family and cultural values that have existed for centuries?

For the church to fulfill its mission in the new secularism, it must find ways to minister to young adults just out of high school into their late 20’s. young adults. If not, churches will age slowly, and then they will be forced to close their doors. Some may restart, but in a sense, these also become new churches. And the struggle of restarting an old church with new strategies may often prove to be more than a congregation can withstand. This is the challenge we face at CrossRoads Community Church as well. However, after announcing to the congregation what I believe is God's call for us to start ten new campuses in ten years, the district leadership approached us about including in this number two Nazarene churches that closed for the reasons just described. They asked if both churches could remain under the supervision of our main campus where I as the pastor would train new ones to lead these congregations. This mentoring aspect, however, necessarily involves another issue related to recruiting these new pastor-trainees. Because we cannot give a full salary, two main possibilities stand out. We look for retired persons or young people who feel called. However, they must not need a full-time salary but be able to provide a good number of hours to the church. The energy necessary to restart a

¹² Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 30.

church leads me in the direction of young people more than retired persons. This is a difficult task as well.

CrossRoads Community Church of the Nazarene

I have been the lead pastor of CrossRoads Community Church of the Nazarene (formerly Valley Hi Church of the Nazarene) since November 2000. CrossRoads is located in a poverty-stricken area of San Antonio, Texas called South Flores, and was established in 1931. Initially, the church was named after its location as the South Flores Church of the Nazarene. To honor a beloved pastor who passed away, it was renamed the Hatfield Memorial Church of the Nazarene. The church moved in 1978 to its current location in Valley Hi, a neighborhood on the southwest side of San Antonio, and was named after that new locale. The area consisted mostly of retired Air Force families to the immediate north along with low-income and government housing to the south. The pastor was an architect named “Skeet” Rhodes. The building was designed by Pastor Rhodes and built primarily by the church's men. The church has seen many pastors with attendance fluctuating over the years. Pastor Jim Hill led the church to its highest average attendance up since the inception of the church. After Pastor Hill relocated, the church experienced a decline in attendance. The pastorate before mine lasted for seven years with seven consecutive years of decline in attendance. The church makeup was almost 100% white, while the immediate neighborhood was over 80% Hispanic. The community also struggled with gang activity, teenage pregnancy, and alcoholism.

As mentioned above, I was called to pastor Valley Hi Church of the Nazarene in November 2000. The church board had declared its desire for diversity and reaching the immediate neighborhood. Many changes were made at that time, including the music and

the name of the church. It was renamed CrossRoads Community to reflect the identity as a place where people who are at a 'crossroads' in life may find a safe space to be loved by the people and encounter God's love. Over the last 22 years, CrossRoads has successfully transformed into a community church. It is now a diverse congregation with predominantly Hispanic families and a smaller but nearly equal makeup of white and black families. The church's average attendance and community involvement have grown. However, most of the attendance growth during this time was with families. Those who were children when I arrived more than 20 years ago are now young adults. Like many churches, we have struggled to keep our young people after high school. My response was to hire a pastor of the same age as those we were trying to reach. She has proven to be skilled in growing a young adult ministry. However, most of these men and women started coming to church as young adults compared to children who were raised in the church. This ministry has improved our ability to keep those who graduated high school and did not relocate for work or college. However, we could do better with those who have been in the church since childhood, but I have struggled to find good solutions.

Our attempt to begin reaching this demographic was rudimentary without any research. The plan was to find someone who fits this demographic and sensed a call from the Lord to start this new ministry. She was single, Hispanic, from the neighborhood, and in her early 20's. She was saved and discipled at CrossRoads after she began working in our learning center at the age of 18. She became a Children's Ministry Assistant, then took over as our Children's Ministry Director. She expressed a call into ministry, which she is pursuing now. She became our Gen X pastor to reach young adults. Her idea was to start this new ministry with a weekly Bible study with friends in her home. The

average number of those involved each week eventually reached 50. Many of these have gotten saved and involved in the young adult ministry. However, this group has peaked in attendance. Its ability to reach others is limited, because it centers on the charismatic personality of the pastor. Although the church has many young adults regularly attending the main worship service, they are not assimilating into the broader church events. The fear is that when they age out of this group, they will no longer remain part of CrossRoads.

Problem Statement

Historically, the struggle for the evangelical church has been a response to the exodus of young generations from the church whose lives are locked in the immanent frame of Charles Taylor's *Secular3*, a new secularity that is not absent of spirituality, but full of many options for spirituality. The response to evangelicalism since the 1960s has failed to remedy the decline of those choosing Christianity as their spiritual path. This trend decline continues with each generation, and is not limited to attendance. Rather, it persists so that the allegiance to the Christian faith shrinks with each new generation. American evangelicalism continues to decline not only in religious affiliation but belief in the existence of God, especially the Christian God. The remedies for this come from pure hearts, pure motives, and great efforts expending many human and financial resources. There have been places and sweet spots where an individual church was able to reverse the trend in their location, but the overall trend continues picking up speed. Denominations are slowly dying, and evangelicalism needs a solid ministry or program and a complete cultural shift to address the trends away from Christianity and transcendence altogether in the attempt to find fulfillment.

This dissertation assesses the exodus of millennials and Gen Z from the evangelical church continuing the trend of young adults leaving Christianity beginning in the 1960s. Working primarily within the philosophical framework of Charles Taylor, I analyze the religious and secular (politics, race, and family elements) involved in this exodus. I also employ scholars who engage Taylor's work, such as Andrew Root and James K.A. Smith as they apply it to Christianity as a whole and evangelicalism specifically. Root also analyzes evangelical responses to the culture shift delineated by Taylor and provides possible reasons for the failure of such reactions to reverse the young adult exodus. I will extend these scholars' analyses and contributions to the evangelical church along with the research from Christian Smith to explore new possible responses of potential benefit to reaching these younger generations. Specifically, I will consider how James K.A. Smith's formational and liturgical ecclesiology opens a window for a cultural shift to re-shape the heart of current evangelical ecclesiology. Then I will suggest how this cultural shift would re-shape the heart and practices of my church. Finally, I will analyze how these practices might re-engage Gen Z and Millennial populations that have left the church for the reasons that I have outlined.

To accomplish these ends, I begin in Chapter 2 with a review of the philosophical literature by Charles Taylor, James K.A. Smith, and Andrew Root, along with the research presented by Christian Smith. I also review in this chapter Charles Taylor's narrative of societal movement into Secular3, considering the new social imaginary within the immanent frame and the Age of Authenticity. Then, I assess secularism's effect on millennials and Gen Z, society as a whole, contemporary evangelicalism, and the historical evangelical family. From here, I highlight the increasing divide of millennials

and Gen Z from the evangelical church in this secular age. Considering this secular age as defined by Charles Taylor and its effect on society, young generations, and the church, I propose some cultural movements necessary for a cultural shift in evangelicalism.

Chapter 3 presents a theological foundation of assimilation into the Body of Christ, the individual transformation that occurs in the Church, and the transformation that occurs in a family embedded within this ecclesial setting. Chapter 4 lists some movements needed in the evangelical church to facilitate a cultural shift. This chapter concludes with proposed new practices in the local church to create a cultural shift better aimed at reaching and making disciples of millennials and Gen Z in my local context.

CHAPTER 2

SECULAR3 AND THE AGE OF AUTHENTICITY

Introduction

For this dissertation, I will be coming from the perspective of Evangelicalism. Though evangelicals are doing better at retaining young adults between 18 and 28 years old than mainline denominations and Catholicism, the decline in attendance continues to increase among young generations.¹³ Each generation of young adults that departs from the church may have different reasons for doing so. However, statistics reveal that the trend we see now has continued for decades; but with each generation, a greater number of people are affected.¹⁴ As people leave the church in one generation, more from the next will also go according to this current trend. If the church cannot understand its cause and effect, the underlying issue will not be addressed, and the trend will continue with steeper declines. The trend, however, seems to be diminishing hope within the church that anything could alter the trajectory of American Christianity. Andrew Root says “...it appears the church has shifted into despondency.”¹⁵ Societal shifts move faster than ever with each new generation, and the church struggles to keep up. The energy necessary for churches to adjust to society's pace can be daunting and creates congregational burnout.

Consequently, the church tires of the continual need for transition. The culture of America is unlike historical mission fields, where it would remain somewhat stagnant for

¹³ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 87.

¹⁴ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 87.

¹⁵ Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life*. Ministry in a Secular Age Book #3. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2021), 12.

decades. On the contrary, American culture is constantly shifting with increased speed. Andrew Root puts it this way, “Revvng the engine to get up to speed to meet every new change over every new horizon produces the fumes of depression.”¹⁶ Spirituality is often connected to rituals, and rituals attach us to what is spiritual. But as the church worked unsuccessfully to address this issue of life lived at greater speeds, most solutions involved stripping local congregations of the meaningful worship rituals present for generations. Changes in music, preaching style, Sunday dress, and more has wearied many congregations in terms of their finances as well as on emotional and spiritual levels. At times, the attempted changes have for decades left those in the church feeling unwanted or forgotten altogether by church leaders.

A church's sense of 'depression' in the face of Charles Taylor’s Nova Effect has created the perfect storm leaving Christianity, including evangelicalism, gasping for breath. The American evangelical church is dying. It is not a quick death but a brutal one characterized by protracted suffering. The big difference is that the patient is not always aware. The doctors and nurses who come to assess are quite aware, but the patient is dying slowly, which is easy to miss. The statistics shared in this dissertation create urgency, but few among average congregants (unaware of the church's increased difficulty breathing) see reasons to do anything different.

Many possible explanations for the generational exodus from Christianity will be explored throughout this dissertation. We will follow Charles Taylor’s work in *The Secular Age* as he defines a new secularism that has dramatically affected the rate of

¹⁶ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 16.

decline from Christianity in each generation beginning in the 1960s with the Baby Boomers who were coming of age. Within this new secularism, an analysis follows of its effect on society in general with the emergence of the Nova Effect and the Age of Authenticity as defined by Taylor. The new secularism's effect on the church's ecclesiology will also be discussed, and the impact on the historical evangelical family is analyzed. Race relations and their effects on Christianity are also considered. Then, the impact of secularism on politics and American Christianity is examined. This is followed by analysis of evangelicalism's directional development and the Age of Authenticity in order to see increasing divide between the two. The trajectory of these two social phenomena and their effect on the church's mission, the family, race, and politics will be explored. The last chapter involves potential helps for mitigation involving a reconnection to the Gospel in terms of re-establishing mystical union between Christ and the church, re-defining the community of faith, and re-constituting Christian involvement in politics separating from Americanism. The next section turns to Andrew Root's analysis of the church's response. While the evangelical church is experiencing burnout from its inability to keep pace with rapid cultural change, there have been attempts to transition in hopes of at least slowing the exodus of the younger generations.

The Rise of Humanism

Comprehending the spiritual movements of Millennials and Gen Z requires a better grasp of the current spiritual and religious milieu and its development. Charles Taylor makes the point that only 500 years ago, the cultural default of Western society

was a Christian belief in God.¹⁷ He chronicles the shift “from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.”¹⁸ According to this view, each generation since the 1960s has lived in a society increasingly saturated in socially acceptable spiritual options. Taylor refers to this phenomenon as the Nova Effect of spiritual options.¹⁹ The Nova Effect is how Taylor describes the spirituality derived out of the rejection of Christianity. Rather than seeing the death of spirituality with the rejection of Christianity, a great number of alternative spiritualities were suddenly available. The previous theory, which posited that technological advancement would render spirituality obsolete never happened. Instead, “a viable humanist alternative, set in train a dynamic, something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps beyond. This phase extends up to the present.”²⁰

The journey toward the spiritual and moral nova effect in which millennials and Gen-Z are now immersed began in the 1960s, however the underlying currents of thought leading to that period started brewing during the Enlightenment as many began to disbelieve anything outside of the natural world.²¹ As a result of a world ravaged by war,

¹⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

¹⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

¹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

²⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

²¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 10.

Hugo Grotius and John Locke advanced the theory of natural law.²² Natural law proposed the pre-existence of natural rights since society exists with a moral background. The goal and purpose of this theory was to live at peace with others, on both individual and national levels, which would provide the security necessary to maintain the natural rights of all human beings. Though this theory was initially political, it bled into Christianity's definition of God's role in general human life.²³

Before Grotius and Locke, society functioned in a natural hierarchy where some people were viewed as having more value than others. To believe and behave otherwise would have seemed foreign to everyone regardless of class status. However, natural law deviates from this by placing no value on hierarchy. Any debt owed to other members of society was not based on a caste system, but on mutual respect without reference to the structuring of social class.²⁴ From this, according to Taylor, the “primary service to each other was thus (to use the language of a later age) the provision of collective security, to render our lives and property safe under law.”²⁵ Society's goal was no longer to establish one's 'place', but safety and security in order to protect the natural rights of every human being. And this required a high degree of virtue for each one to play their part.²⁶ This

²² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 447.

²³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 159–160.

²⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 165.

²⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 166.

²⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 166.

shift most dramatically affected Christianity, leading to the current dominance of humanistic thought and the spiritual/moral nova effect.

The role of God is adapted to natural law theory by limiting His provision of beneficence, logic, and reason to humans so that they may live out their natural state of mutual benefit and thus secure safety and prosperity.²⁷ Everyone benefits as each individual person helps the other maintain these. This theory as the purpose of human existence, would fall apart in selfishness and pride. Selfishness and pride seek one's advantage to the detriment of another, which would violate natural law. But, according to this view, natural law began as biblical thought. It was the understanding that God had given man the essentials to fulfill this purpose. God's role was to equip humanity with what was necessary for man to produce a mutually beneficent society that had at its heart the need for virtue. According to Taylor, "God's goals for us shrink to the single end of our encompassing this order of mutual benefit He has designed for us."²⁸ The reduction of God as the supplier of virtue rather than a personal deity to be venerated was a radical shift from medieval times. No longer was Christianity primarily concerned with love and worship of God. Transcendence was removed from the primary goal of human flourishing. Instead of worship, what was owed to God was "the achievement of our own good."²⁹ Natural law posited that since God has given human beings beneficence, logic, reason, and self-discipline, humans should be able to thrive on their own with the use of

²⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 221.

²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 221.

²⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 222.

these essentials endowed by their Creator.³⁰ God's only other role is to be the Judge, punishing those who do not make the most of what He has given to achieve human prosperity and well-being.³¹ Acceptance of the human ability to achieve its own advancement through these God-given gifts made the need for grace obsolete.³² Without supernatural intervention, belief in the mystery of God declined, which gave rise to an understanding of salvation defined as human flourishing.³³ The nature of Christianity shifted with preaching in churches being “less concerned with sin as a condition we need to be rescued from through some transformation of our being, and more and more with sin as wrong behavior which we can be persuaded, trained, or disciplined to turn our backs on.”³⁴ “Religion is narrowed to moralism.”³⁵

The Insufficiency of Humanism

This shift in Christianity all but removed from it any sense of the transcendent, and reduced its essence to moralism. Religion was reformed to support a human quest for the high virtue necessary to create a mutually beneficial society where natural rights were protected moral goodness. No longer was divine intervention needed to transform our hearts by rescuing us from the condition of death brought about by original sin; neither was it seen as essential to living out the purpose of our existence. Instead, it was believed

³⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 222.

³¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 222.

³² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 223.

³³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 223.

³⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 225.

³⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 225.

moralism would make us all good people benefiting one another to achieve security and happiness. However, the *telos* of being a good person proved to be empty. Humanistic philosophy caused life to be “lived as a limit, even a prison, making us blind or insensitive to whatever lies beyond this ordered human world and its instrumental-rational projects. The sense can easily arise that we are missing something, cut off from something, that we are living behind a screen.”³⁶

By contrast, orthodox Christianity teaches that the law presented in Scripture is not the path to achieve happiness, but rather to find God. When Christianity is reduced to moralism for the sake of human happiness, there is a perverse alteration erasing the ontological purpose of man to be in a loving relationship with God. When human flourishing replaces love for God, humans experience a malaise.³⁷

Orthodox Christian belief is therefore offensive to deistic (and therefore humanistic) views. The offense pushes people away from the ontological path of communion with God presented in Christianity. One might think Christianity would provide a solution to the malaise of humanism, but even when overwhelmed by the emptiness of humanism, Christianity’s call for sacrifice in the pursuit of fulfillment is offensive to those seeking personal gratification. Instead, new paths to spirituality are formed outside of or even opposed to orthodox Christianity. Humanism charges Christianity with offense against reason through its insistence on mysticism and mystery that cannot be explained by reason. Humanism also holds Christianity to be essentially

³⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 301.

³⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 302.

authoritarian by claiming to be the only path—thus removing freedom, a key component to finding the virtue necessary for human flourishing. Furthermore, humanism views Christianity as threatening to the idea of mutual benefit through the Christian doctrine of a self-sacrificing life that includes abstinence from some sensual satisfactions.³⁸ Rejection of Christianity combined with the sense of emptiness of humanism to create what Taylor refers to as “cross-pressure.”³⁹ These are the pressures felt between a sense of fulfillment that can be found in the natural on one side “and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by encounter with existing milieu of religious practice, or just by some intimations of the transcendent.”⁴⁰ This pressure works toward the Nova Effect of spiritualities in our society today alongside continual overall rejection of orthodox Christianity pushing people into the frame of flourishing that is to be found in the natural. This is the society that has raised up and educated millennials and Gen-Z on all things spiritual and religious. Taylor’s point is not that they have been reared in a completely secular age, but one in which Christianity is one option out of many possible truths developed to compensate for the malaise found in the humanistic goal of happiness from mutual benefit. It is an age where spirituality in all its forms develops as a means of counteracting the emptiness of humanism while also experiencing the cross-pressures embedded in these generations.

The religious exodus of Gen Z and Millennials is not a sudden occurrence, but rather the culmination of societal transitions throughout the past 500 years leading up to

³⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 305.

³⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 594.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 595.

what may be called the "Age of Authenticity." Five hundred years ago, it was a given that most Western Europeans were Christian. However, their understanding of Christianity fell more into various kinds of superstition than the biblically directed lifestyle of faith. Charles Taylor refers to their social imaginary as "enchanted," meaning humans lived "in a field of spirits, some of whom were malign."⁴¹ However, the Reformation began to focus on God's activity in nature and thus put a greater emphasis on the natural world. This idea was convoluted with another emerging philosophy, nominalism. The result of this amalgamation created a new path of spirituality that would eventually lead to exclusive humanism. Nominalism allowed for God to be autonomous from creation and vice-versa. This allows humanism to develop so that man would be able to achieve the goals of God without God. Human exclusivism becomes anew option of spirituality contained in the immanent. Exclusive humanism, according to Taylor is "humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing."⁴² This reflected a move from a society in which disbelief in God was unheard of toward a social paradigm where exclusive humanism made atheism a viable option.

On one hand, the Reformation placed a greater emphasis on God incarnate, God in the world, but on the other, nominalism gave rise to the belief that God was unnecessary. The emphasis on God active in nature was translated into God giving nature to created man with a specific *telos* where God was unnecessary. This new philosophical

⁴¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26.

⁴² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 18.

mixture was to allow for flourishing but once man was created, God could not be constrained or 'conformed' to this *telos* because this would reduce the essence of God and in a sense trap him into the *telos* of created humanity without the continued freedom to determine what is good.⁴³ This began the separation of the human *telos* from God. The emphasis on nature exceeded the idea of God in nature until the *telos* of man was separated from the existence of God. The combination of these ideas opened the door to exclusive humanism. This is extremely important in the progressive exodus of each new generation from Christianity in general and evangelicalism in particular. The move into modernity and exclusive humanism where this new option of flourishing within the immanent frame without transcendence began having an impact after World War II on into the Age of Authenticity, thus furthering belief that Christianity is but one option while diminishing the importance of organized church.

The Age of Authenticity

Charles Taylor pinpoints the 1960's as the hinge moment that altered American religious and spiritual thought to what he refers to as The Age of Authenticity.⁴⁴ This is the term Taylor uses to describe the evolution of exclusive humanism. The apex of existence is within ones self according to exclusive humanism. Thus, the logical development of this philosophy was that what one felt one to be was sacred in pursuit of fulfillment within the immanent frame. Therefore, the need to treasure one's own authentic self became supreme. Whatever one felt itself to be had to be lived out and

⁴³ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, 1st Edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2014), 41.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

celebrated as that person's unique path to fulfillment. They had to be authentically who they believed themselves to be. The Age of Authenticity in the US has had a dramatic effect even on those coming to America from non-Western cultures. It is the altered social imaginary that produces greater emphasis on individual expression and resistance to traditional institutions being allowed to dictate to people their own identities, experiences of love, and beliefs. The Age of Authenticity comes of age in the 1960s. It was in this decade that the youth of America, teenagers and young adults, rejected any institution or any person representing an institution attempting to define them according to what societal norms. Instead, they sought to be their authentic selves and anything attempting to hinder this was deemed immoral. However, to grasp what happened in the 1960's in America, we need first to assess the social, religious, and spiritual changes that began to happen during the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment (1685-1810) set the stage for the modern Age of Authenticity (1960s-present). Christian belief hundreds of years prior had been bound up in superstition more than adherence to Scripture. At that time, people responded to spiritual things as if there were demons everywhere able to enter into material objects. If a household article was believed to be possessed by a demon, then the Holy Water of the local Roman Catholic priest was widely believed to be infused divine power to redeem that object, but such thinking had nothing to do with adherence to Scripture. The social imaginary at the time was that everything and everyone was porous to spirits and vulnerable to demon possession. However, throughout the Enlightenment, greater emphasis was put on pure thought and logic in contrast to credulous superstition. Charles

Taylor describes this as a movement to the ‘buffered self.’⁴⁵ Society, through science along with better biblical understanding, buffered itself against this pervasive idea of spiritual entities possessing every person or inanimate item. Taylor described it this way:

“But seeing things this way understates the strangeness of the enchanted world. Thus precisely in this cult of the saints, we can see how the forces here were not all agents, subjectivities, who could decide to confer a favour. But power also resided in things. For the curative action of saints was often linked to the centres where their relics resided; either some piece of their body (supposedly), or some object which had been connected with them in life, like (in the case of Christ), pieces of the true cross, or the sweat-cloth which Saint Veronica had used to wipe his face, and which was on display on certain occasions in Rome. And we can add to this many other objects which had been endowed with sacramental power, like the Host, or candles which had been blessed at Candlemas and the like. These objects were loci of spiritual power, which is why they had to be treated with care, and if abused could wreak terrible damage.”⁴⁶

The nominalism and new emphasis of from the Creator along with a rejection of superstition, relegated the role of organized religion as optional. Two movements were occurring. First, people were no longer tethered to the church for the sake of relics and prayer. Additionally, hostility stemmed from the Church's haughty tone in claiming to be the only path by which people could access the power of God. Furthermore, the church's role of enforcing biblical morality (including the suppression of so-called natural proclivities) was seen as the enemy with its dogma and ascetic commands.⁴⁷ However, this was only the beginning.

⁴⁵ Sondra Matthaie, *Formation in Faith: The Congregational Ministry of Making Disciples* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2008), 10.

⁴⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 31.

⁴⁷ Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness*. Ministry in a Secular Age, Volume 1. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), 10.

The older generations were already set in their ways. The shift in young generations was to throw off the repressive ways of the church and pursue self-actualization by unmasking one's identity rather than conforming to a model imposed by institutions of authority, especially the church.⁴⁸ The drive to self-actualization without transcendence in the pursuit of fulfillment within the immanent frame, as described by Taylor, constituted by a "natural order" and not a "supernatural order."⁴⁹ Taylor refers to the malaise of modernity. As the buffered self no longer sat defenseless against the spiritual world, a sense of human freedom developed. This combined with an autonomy from the church moved people away from transcendence toward a search for meaning in the here and now. However, this produced a "wide sense of malaise at the disenchanting world, a sense of it as flat, empty."⁵⁰ But the malaise of modernity caused by the lack of fulfillment being stuck in the immanent frame without transcendence pressed people back into the spiritual realm in search for fulfillment, though it did not direct them to Christianity. Instead, Taylor refers to the Nova Effect where many spiritual paths appeared.⁵¹ We can thus see the parallel movement of the Age of Authenticity and the Nova Effect. As people returned to a spiritual quest, they continued rejecting organized Christianity. The pursuit of self-actualization and the rejection of the church's model way of being went hand in hand. Organized Christianity was seen as an institution forcing people into a way of being that suppressed the natural human inclinations, so people

⁴⁸ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 10.

⁴⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 541.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 301.

⁵¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 301.

rejected this and pursued individual self-actualization and expression. Andrew Root characterizes this as a “battle between repression and desire.”⁵² The pressures of authoritarian institutions were perceived to be forming people into something that denied their authentic self. Andrew Root says, “this is the very crime of inauthenticity”⁵³ to force one to be something that does not come authentically from within themselves. The Age of Authenticity is therefore a total rejection of such institutions and authorities such as family, society, class, and religion. Andrew Root says “Sex, drugs, and rock and roll, it is believed, are the hidden but marked trails in the forest of repressive culture that lead to the fertile valley of genuine authenticity.”⁵⁴ This rebellion is formed by unleashing all that was perceived as being repressed.

We see this social imaginary pervading current society today. Along with sex, drugs, and rock and roll, American culture uses consumerism to express authenticity. From hairstyles to fashion to whether a person identifies as an Apple or Android user, so the products a person possesses must match his or her individual path of authenticity. This was manifested primarily in young generations in the dawn of the Age of Authenticity beginning in the 1960’s in America. Andrew Root posits that American culture became obsessed with youthfulness. Young people were buying products to complement their self-expression. Older generations are unaffected by this social phenomenon. Consumerism then became a way for young to achieve authenticity.⁵⁵ As

⁵² Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 10.

⁵³ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 9.

⁵⁴ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 9.

⁵⁵ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 17.

the Baby Boomers grew into adulthood, the Age of Authenticity stayed with them and has permeated every generation since. We in the US continue to be a society that seeks fulfillment outside the authority of organized Christianity and associated forms of morality. The cross-pressures keep us spiritual, but less Christian. This pattern increases as we continue in the Age of Authenticity.

Defining the Secular Age

The secularization of Western society has not developed as many people thought decades ago. As science and technology progressed, it was assumed that interest in and need for spirituality would decrease until it ceased to exist. However, this has not been the case. Taylor describes the current secularization not as an absence of spirituality, but in terms of lacking a consensus of it as a transcendental experience. According to Taylor, “we have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside of or ‘beyond’ human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it (in a wide range of different ways) ‘within’ human life.”⁵⁶ The expected decrease in spirituality in favor of secular humanism experienced an overlay of another phenomenological movement. The result has not produced an absence of spirituality, but more an absence of transcendent communion with God. Secular humanism developed in conjunction with what Taylor refers to as the Nova Effect of spirituality.⁵⁷ We are experiencing a hybrid of humanism and spirituality so that the pervading belief in God, and in particular, the Christian God is

⁵⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age* 15.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

all but gone—replaced by the human attempt to find fulfillment within their own spirituality. The effect is the rise of those who refer to themselves as ‘spiritual, but not religious.’⁵⁸

It is not that millennials and Gen-Z have discarded their spirituality completely. Rather, it has morphed into a kind of grasping for something beyond while remaining contained within the self. The new spirituality is a self-constructed higher level of existence beyond the carnal that is sought after to help create a better life through happiness and being a good person. The highest goal of this new spirituality is not to commune with a transcendent god, but to reach beyond one’s physical resources to a spiritual place in order to "be happy and feel good about oneself."⁵⁹ The idea of a god, regardless of doctrine being actively involved in the inner transformation to achieve these goals, has become increasingly foreign to younger generations.⁶⁰ But we do not live in a fundamentally secular age. The secularity of this current era is characterized by self-created spirituality and finding oneself to catapult above the fray of human existence to find the elusive happiness and "feel-goodness" that is supposed to produce fulfillment. Religion and/or spirituality, for millennials and Gen-Z has ceased being the means to transcendent communion with God. The emphasis is now on a quest for higher thinking to help everyone “treat people fairly, be happy, solve our own problems, and get along.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Reprint edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

⁵⁹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*, Illustrated edition. (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14.

⁶⁰ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 14.

⁶¹ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 26.

This has not erased traditional religion, but secular humanism has shifted the religious experience into a self-guided spirituality so that whatever religion does exist in a person's life exists within loose parameters that can be moved or changed to ensure happiness in the present moment without any concern for traditional Christian concepts such as sin and the need for atonement. Christian Smith and Melinda Denton describe the current Christian religiosity of millennials and Gen-Z as “colonizing many historical religious traditions and, almost without anyone noticing, converting believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness.”⁶²

The shift to humanistic spirituality is not seen by younger generations as inferior or less than that of traditional religious beliefs. James Smith says “‘they are no longer bothered by the God-question’ because they are devotees of exclusive humanism – a way of being-in-the-world that offers significance without transcendence. They don’t feel like anything is missing.”⁶³ The consequence of this shift is that religion no longer carries much significance. Without the need for transcendence, religious life is optional. Millennials and Gen-Z are not overwhelmingly atheist, but exclusive humanists who seek transcendent meaning within a human spirituality that either denies or reduces the role of any god to that of a “guidance counselor or cosmic lifeguard who listens nonjudgmentally and helps youth feel good about themselves.”⁶⁴

⁶² Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 14.

⁶³ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 15.

⁶⁴ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 17.

Traditional religion is no longer important in this secular age. On the contrary, it can be easily seen as destructive. Secularity has created a social imaginary where exclusive humanism is the path to fulfillment. This gives permission for each person to decide their own path to spirituality. There is no god, no set path that is right or wrong. Instead, each person possesses freedom to pursue any spiritual, atheistic, or agnostic path to achieve happiness and be a good person. When organized religion attempts to restrict persons to one path posited as the right one, it encounters strong pushback. The current secularity sets no path as exclusively right. Any course that helps one to be happy and nice is not only acceptable but should be celebrated. According to Smith, “this brave new world is not just the old world with the God-supplement lopped off; it’s not just the world that is left when we subtract the supernatural. A secular world where we have permission, even encouragement, to *not* believe in God is an accomplishment, not merely a remainder. Our secular age is the product of creative new options, an entire reconfiguration of meaning.”⁶⁵ The result is a weakening of all spiritual paths. Specifically concerning Christianity, there is a significant weakening of Christology in millennials and Gen-Z. All paths are fragile.⁶⁶ Such fragility reduces friction between religious beliefs. Because all religious options are acceptable, each is therefore correct and any path self-described as exclusive sits in opposition to the spirituality of authenticity where all paths are good and right for the one who has chosen that path.

⁶⁵ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 47.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 303.

According to Heft and Stets, 70% of those who report no religious preference continue describing themselves as “somewhat spiritual.”⁶⁷

The current religious milieu is a watered-down version of traditional religion that denies the need for transcendence to achieve fulfillment. At the same time, spirituality without transcendence is not only encouraged but celebrated. This has not happened in a vacuum. Historical events pushed the social imaginary toward this new secular age which in turn impacts the daily life of each young generation. Where there is no absolute deity or path to fulfillment, one must search through the many available options to discover what seems to work for them. If a path is not found, it can be created. The explosion of secular spirituality has elevated the ordinary to the sacred. From career to fashion, from sexual behavior to gender identity, from education to political causes, from musicians to politicians, this secular age continues to give birth to more gods and more paths. This is the nova effect. It is the background of our Western culture, and it bleeds into everyday life and pushes each new generation further in the same direction.

The Effect of Secularism on Millennials and Gen Z

Charles Taylor chronicles the movement from the 16th century, when disbelieving in God was not viable, to our current secular age in which Christian theism is but one of many options within the framework of human exclusivism. The underlying issue is a quest for the good life, meaning, purpose, and significance. The ontological understanding of this quest has radically changed from pursuing a transcendent God for inward transformation into a spiritual supplement to the humanist search for something

⁶⁷ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 144.

transcendent without looking beyond oneself. This pursuit is not compartmentalized from all other areas of life. Secularism does not lend itself to orthodoxy, but the pursuit of spirituality hemmed in by the immanent frame.

This new secular age has no specific god or path to fulfillment, but each must pursue their own spirituality. And each road, because it is authentically one's own, cannot be wrong and any others cannot be exclusively correct. Right is relative to the individual journey. When the goal is to pursue what is right when what is defined as right is grounded in personal preference, the origin of everything is recalibrated to these goals and anything can be used as an instrument to propel one closer to their individualized creation of spirituality. Tradition has lost all value. It is no longer worth considering in this age.

The Effect of Secularism on Society

The shift from belief in God to a thousand potential paths of spirituality begins in response to societal institutions seen as coercive. These are primarily made up of government and orthodox Christianity. But when the curtain was pulled back and these institutions were seen as self-serving and hypocritical. There was actual hypocrisy, but also an attempt to reform each generation according to traditional values. Rebellion against these institutions ensued.

After the Great Depression and the Second World War, the West moved toward consumer-driven Christian societies to produce wealth along with a morality that would guard against a recurrence of war or depression. At first, there was great trust in the government and churches. But during the 1950's and '60's, trust was broken due to

scandals, and these institutions were rejected. Alan Ehrenhalt conducted a study of 1950's Chicago and summarized his findings as follows:

“Most of us in America believe a few simple propositions that seem so clear and self-evident they scarcely need to be said. Choice is a good thing in life and the more of it we have, the happier we are. Authority is inherently suspect; nobody should have the right to tell others what to think or how to behave. Sin isn't personal, it's social; individual human beings are creatures of the society they live in.”⁶⁸

Church and government were the two prominent institutions that attempted to impose a model dictating to people how to live. This restricted people from following their inward desires to be authentically themselves, which seemed to those guided by authenticity. Taylor says about the 1960s, “The pursuit of happiness has come to seem not only not to need a restrictive sexual ethic and the disciplines of deferred gratification, but actually to demand their transgression in the name of self-fulfillment.”⁶⁹ The dogmatics of religious morality in sex, sobriety, and conformity were rejected in the 1960's. However, consumerism was not discarded. Products from cars to clothes were used to express the individual in a way that reflected the attitude of individual autonomy and refusal to conform to a model imposed by outside institutions all of which is characterized by “choice” as a means of individual expression.⁷⁰

The pervading acuiense to human exclusivism sancitized choice and individual expression. Individual expression presented a new morality and a new spirituality. At the

⁶⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 479.

⁶⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 492.

⁷⁰ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 85.

same time, the traditional values and roles presented in Christianity were rejected because they called for self-discipline prohibiting the free expression of self. The result is an “explosion of options for finding (or creating) ‘significance.’”⁷¹

The Age of Authenticity not only affected society's overall spirituality, but reoriented it toward an exclusive humanist worldview in which the individual is at the center seeking happiness and becoming a good person. Those who continued as Christians saw a change in the church as well. Churches began appealing to the new definition of good as a resource to help people feel better about their individual lives while reaching their individual goals and dreams.⁷² The Age of Authenticity produced a rise in the spiritual ‘nones.’ The religiously affiliated population in America has been declining steadily from the 1970’s in America, but in 1991, there was another sharp downturn. By 2000, the percentage disaffiliating with Christian churches rose from 7% to 14% annually. By 2010, 18% has disaffiliated and as of 2014, it has risen to 23% annually.⁷³ The Age of Authenticity and exclusive humanism continues pushing more people away from the church with each generation. This age and its associated exclusive humanism did not produce the promised utopia. Instead, younger generations have experienced significant emotional, mental, and spiritual issues. In the next chapter, we will consider the effects of this age in the areas of anxiousness, spiritual emptiness, and moral confusion.

⁷¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 62.

⁷² Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 162.

⁷³ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 2.

The Effect of the Age of Authenticity on Emerging Adults

Uncertainty

Before the Age of Authenticity, the social imaginary consisted of loyalty to institutions. For example, whole generations of families all worked in the same industry. However, the birth of authenticity brought about a new paradigm so that the expectation was no longer to follow in the footsteps of parents or grandparents. Such institutional dedication would have been viewed with contempt for appearing 'conformist' and lacking individualism. However, youth who rebelled did not have a path set before them after rejecting the type of loyalty expressed by their families. These young people were on a journey to find their own individual vocation and identity. Authenticity is about choosing one's pursuit of spirituality and fulfillment without allowing outside pressure to dictate to the self what it must be or become. For the first time, generations of young people were seeking fulfillment outside previous norms with intense societal pressure to find themselves.

Spirituality was characterized in the Age of Authenticity by a sense of something beyond the physical realm, but which served the authentic self rather than the other way around. Without direction from any element within society or any spiritually prescribed path, emerging adults had to find their way in seeking fulfillment. Christian Smith described the features of this new adulthood as marked by "intense identity exploration, instability, a focus on self, feelings of being in limbo, in transition, in between; and a sense of possibilities, opportunities, and unparalleled hope. These, of course, are also

often accompanied...by large doses of transience, confusion, anxiety, self-obsession, melodrama, conflict, disappointment, and sometimes emotional devastation."⁷⁴

This speaks to the malaise of modernity that, according to Taylor, comes from the loss of transcendence while still experiencing the cross-pressures of transcendence: "The whole culture experiences cross pressures, between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by an encounter with the existing milieu of religious practice, or just by some imitations of the transcendent."⁷⁵ Smith notes six macrosocial changes in American life that have dramatically affected younger generations because of this secular age in which emerging adults sense pressure from outside to find their path.⁷⁶

1. The growth of higher education
2. Delayed marriage
3. Less security in the job market
4. The increased cost of success
5. Greater access to birth control
6. Postmodernism

Each of these has also created financial stress, delayed career and family stability, and disconnected sexuality from ideas of family and procreation—creating more relational drama. Postmodernism has moved their social imaginary away from certainty to

⁷⁴ Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, 1st edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 15.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 595.

⁷⁶ Smith et al., *Lost in Transition*, 12–15.

uncertainty, from reason to emotionalism, from consistency to fluidity.⁷⁷ This creates an uncertainty engulfed in societal pressure to become the highest form of oneself. Because of breakdowns in institutional stability, the Age of Authenticity pushes emerging adults to find solace outside of traditional parameters of behavior and morality and so it is deemed unacceptable to be institutionally formed. The youth rebellion of the 1960s was in response to dogma and resulted in a lifestyle of freedom to enjoy it with individual expression. The cross-pressures of transcendence would not allow the hunger for spirituality to dissipate. These combined dangerously as the movement of authenticity became characterized by sexual revolution, drug use, and the hippie lifestyle. Today's emerging adults still exhibit ideas and behaviors of free morality, consumerism, alcohol, and drugs, along with civic and political engagement.⁷⁸ The hippie movement, according to Allen Matusow, searched not for a thorough reorganization of society, but for individual self-reconstruction where freedom stood against the "rational, disciplined, puritanic life."⁷⁹ However, at the same time, consumerism produced industry that created indirect pressure that actually propelled the hippie movement despite their hatred of the present consumer society.⁸⁰ The pursuit of individualism was expertly tapped into for increased sales in a capitalistic economy. Ad agencies made the most of the time by marketing products to promote the general milieu of the young hippie generation. Advertising no longer simply revealed what a product was or did but presented it as a

⁷⁷ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 12.

⁷⁸ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 4.

⁷⁹ Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*. (Athens, Ga: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 279.

⁸⁰ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 232.

means to further self-authenticate the individual consumer who would thus expect to feel better about oneself. The pressure to become something or someone combined with the lack of transcendence in an expressivist age created the perfect storm for malaise. These may way for “extremely shallow notions of what a good life could be, in which mass consumerism and material possessions define an extremely limited horizon of vision.”⁸¹ This resulted in generations of young people focusing on “community and celebration” which gave alcohol a significant place in their life and—after these quieted down—left them with “stress, anxiety, boredom, and temporary relief.”⁸²

Moral Confusion

As children grew up to see the institutions to which their parents had been so loyal fail to create the good life, they chose to seek after new, uncharted paths to fulfillment. However, the rebellion (much like Eve’s sin in Eden) came from a good desire. Their want for peace and love could be characterized as biblical goals. But the chosen path of pursuit is equally important to that being pursued. The Age of Authenticity's emphasis on individualism creates an egocentric state of mind and when one’s desire is more highly prioritized than what is good for all, destructive behavior will result . However, to deprive anyone of their authentic quests, feelings, or ideals came to be viewed as immoral. Morality was reversed by the social imaginary in the Age of Authenticity. According to a survey conducted by Christian Smith, 60% of emerging adults described morality as a “personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decisions”

⁸¹ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 229.

⁸² Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 229.

and that “moral rights and wrongs are essentially matters of individual opinion.”⁸³ Since the highest virtue is individual expression, criticizing personal choices and individual decisions was tantamount to wickedness. For these younger generations of emerging adults, “to express one’s own moral view is thus synonymous with dominating and controlling others, a kind of pathology that violates other people’s dignity and rights.”⁸⁴ Emerging adults, congruent with the Age of Authenticity, do not look to any outside guide for morality such as religion or government. Rather, theirs is a culture of moral relativism. However, the individualistic pursuit of fulfillment, peace, and love in the Age of Authenticity produced the opposite. Individual expression seeks the approval of others. People sought to become what they knew would be met with approval. This moved society in the general direction of authenticity. To reject one’s authenticity was seen as immoral so everyone approved of the other’s form of authenticity. Then the cycle was completed when those seeking approval went further in their authentic expression seeing this expression would be approved and celebrated. Because individual expression is the highest virtue, the rate of repentance from traditional values and roles increased in inertia. The definition of morality changed from doing what was right to pursuing actions that were viewed as acceptable by those guided by authenticity. As the social imaginary shifted, conventional notions of right and wrong were replaced by a relative morality based on the immediate desire. The result is a generation that rejects traditional values and moral systems in order to freely express who they feel themselves to be regardless of how it might hurt others. The general population must be ready to accept them or be

⁸³ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 21.

⁸⁴ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 23.

considered purveyors of evil. Morality derived from an external source such as the Bible is overwhelmingly rejected by a large majority of millennials and Gen-Z. Younger generations consider this to be immoral. The more this is expressed, the more others conjoin to the movement.⁸⁵ Any institution that declares a superior path to fulfillment is considered immoral even if their mission is fulfillment. It is the perceived arrogance to proclaim one way better than another that made it wicked. Christian doctrine fits into this category. Though Christianity teaches love, it also teaches the good life is not attained by indulging the self. Instead, it teaches the virtue of self-sacrifice for the good of the other. Our current social imaginary lingering from the 60s sets itself up against this theological approach to human flourishing.

According to Smith, about half (53 percent) of emerging adults said immorality was “defined as anything that hurts other people physically, emotionally, financially, or otherwise.”⁸⁶ For emerging adults, the greatest factor is what makes them happy. Smith also points out that the moral confusion of emerging adulthood is also a product of the overall culture. The drift has continued for generations and adults from the '60's, '70's, and '80's now hold positions of leadership in education and religion. The power of the social imaginary now has now institutionalized authenticity upon each new generation. According to Smith, “the families, schools, religious communities, sports teams, and other voluntary organizations of civil society are failing to provide many young people with the kind of moral education and training needed for them even to realize, for

⁸⁵ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 42.

⁸⁶ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 38.

example, that moral individualism and relativism make no sense, that they cannot be reasonably defended or sustained, that some alternative views must be necessary if we are to be at all reasonable when it comes to moral concerns.”⁸⁷

Moral confusion stems from the redefining of what morality is and the insufficiency of new standards as defined. Free self-expression will inevitably lead to placing self above others with the potential to cause at least emotional harm if not other types of harm as well. According to the current social imaginary, that which causes harm is immoral. Following this logic, a person cannot operate with total freedom of expression because of the possibility of harming others, but to not live freely in one’s desires is also immoral. Thus, the confusion. Younger generations are not abandoning traditional values and morality because they deliberately seek destructive ways: just the opposite is true. Our cultural milieu pushes authenticity as morality. To be caught up in this redefined morality does not stem from a desire to abandon tradition morality as much as it is an attempt to be moral. However, this new morality falls in on itself. This phenomenon is seen when those who have adopted this new morality do not go far enough with it. Then, they are seen as immoral. This has given rise to what is often called "cancel culture."

For example, novelist J.K. Rowling recently expressed her support of feminists who do not agree that gender is relative to one’s state of mind. This directly relates to the transgendered community who, per the social imaginary of the Age of Authenticity, feel compelled to live the truth of their gender as they perceive it regardless of biological genitalia. However, their free expression to take on another gender as their own conflicts

⁸⁷ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 60.

with the feminist movement according to Rowling. The transgender community's free expression allows biological men to retake what women have fought for in areas such as collegiate sports. The transsexual community retaliated against her by referring to her as a "TERF" (trans-exclusionary radical feminist.) This term has been reserved to describe feminists who do not believe that trans women are truly women because they retain male genitalia. As a feminist, Rowling supported the advancement of women, but the trans movement demonizes her for not going far enough in supporting people's free expression when it comes to gender. Rowling argued, "If sex isn't real, there's no same-sex attraction. If sex isn't real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn't hate to speak the truth."⁸⁸ It could be said the moral confusion present in the Age of Authenticity has been the result of love being redefined. Rather than love being what is best for the well-being of others, it has come to mean whatever produces good, pleasant, and euphoric feelings in the other so long as their fulfillment doesn't infringe on one's own path to fulfillment. The redefining of morality has likewise redefined love in such a way that it may be immoral not to not celebrate what could constitute harmful behavior to others. According to Christian Smith, "Moving on next to the accounts offered by emerging adults about the source or basis of morality, again we find little reason for encouragement. One-third said they simply didn't know what made anything right or wrong, good or bad. Others offered ideas—that moral action is determined by what other people will think of the actor, for example, or by whether it

⁸⁸ "Why Was J.K. Rowling Canceled? The 'Harry Potter' Author's Controversies Explained.," last modified May 16, 2022, accessed February 14, 2023, <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/why-was-jk-rowling-canceled-controversies-explained-154219370.html>.

improves circumstances functionally—that make little sense.”⁸⁹ His point is that this generation is morally bewildered while attempting to be good, moral people⁹⁰

Spiritually Lost

Andrew Root writes in his analysis of spiritual formation: “The worst thing you can do in the age of authenticity is waste your youth.”⁹¹ Authenticity is the refusal to deny any natural inclination. Younger generations struggled with the church because its dogma teaches traditional morality rather than the new morality of the Age of Authenticity. Because the traditional form of acceptable boundaries follows Judeo-Christian morality, the rebellion of these in the age of authenticity has led each young generation to shed the shackles of traditional Christianity. To young generations, the church seems ‘repressive, ignorant, and a major buzzkill....’⁹² Rather, the pursuit of a “lifestyle of hooking up, binge drinking, and having fun” is more formative because it is the “height of authenticity.”⁹³

Within a new secularism where the most blasphemous act would be to not indulge every natural desire, traditional religion and morality (but not spirituality) were rejected. However, this left humanity with a sense of loss. Taylor refers to the historical period after the enlightenment when the world grew disenchanting. Operating as if spiritual

⁸⁹ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 64.

⁹⁰ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 65.

⁹¹ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 12.

⁹² Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 14.

⁹³ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 12.

beings were attached to every moment and relic with the intent of entering human souls was no longer acceptable. Taylor says, “I am thinking much more of a wide sense of malaise at the disenchanting world, a sense of it as flat, empty, a multiform search for something within, or beyond it, which could compensate for the meaning lost with transcendence; and this not only as a feature of that time but as one which continues into ours.” Going on Taylor points to the growing number of people rejecting orthodox Christianity seeking new spiritual paths.⁹⁴

Andrew Root and Christian Smith suggest the explosion of available spiritualities also changed the way younger generations approach Christianity. Christianity in the form of ritual worship to connect and be transformed by God was no longer acceptable. It was redefined as Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD).⁹⁵ The faith of the “nones” is characterized by MTD. The “nones” are those who were raised in Christian churches and denominations who, as adults, would choose “none” when asked with what religion they affiliated. MTD removes the orthodox beliefs in a personal God who seeks to rescue humanity from the corruption of original sin. Instead, God has become “moralistic.”⁹⁶ This is best described by the thought, “God wants me to be a good person and not a jerk.”⁹⁷ And God was “therapeutic” best described in this way: “God or religion should

⁹⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 301.

⁹⁵ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 11.

⁹⁶ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 11.

⁹⁷ Root, introduction to *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), xv.

help me feel good.”⁹⁸ Finally, the word “deism” describes God as a “concept to decorate our lives with but not an agent who does anything.”⁹⁹ Andrew Root suggests that “MTD presents the Christian faith as a kind of individualized, consumer spirituality.”¹⁰⁰

MTD is the logical reframing of Christianity in an Age of Authenticity. God is removed as the focal point and replaced by the individual human self. God exists to help one be morally and feel emotionally better. Spirituality continues, but orthodoxy is gone. For those who authentically desire to be moral, limits are placed on the pursuit of carnal desires by MTD. The philosophy of the Age was to feel good while not harming others. The key word is "feel." MTD presents God as a therapist helping a person to do and think in a way that helps them feel better. Morality is tempered trying to find balance between living out one’s free expression of individualism and not being a jerk. Andrew Root says the fusion of Christianity into the form of MTD and the Age of Authenticity causes “faith formation...” to be “doomed to serve the master of youthfulness” because youth and authenticity are synonymous.¹⁰¹

The idea of absolute truth in spirituality has been abandoned by millennials and Gen-Z, and most probably in each successive generation emerging into adulthood. Traditional values prioritized what was best for the other within the understanding of common sense and biblical wisdom. The youth today have a "seeking" spirituality. Penny

⁹⁸ Root, introduction to *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017), xv.

⁹⁹ Root, introduction to *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, xv.

¹⁰⁰ Root, introduction to *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, xv.

¹⁰¹ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 12.

Egdell writes: “Seekers have a critical orientation toward religious institutions and religious authority, believing that what matters is finding a religious institution that is a good fit with one’s own needs and that expresses one’s values.”¹⁰² The search for truth becomes the quest to find a spirituality that aligns with one’s own authentic desires. This religious attitude is seen within the makeup of MTD and the Age of Authenticity. Egdell continues, “Seekers may drop out of the traditional religious organizations altogether or they may switch from one to another over the course of their lives. Seekers often combine elements of traditional religiosity with other forms of spiritual expression, including Eastern-influenced spiritual practices such as yoga or chanting, or feminist spiritual practices such as those expressed by Wiccan and other feminist religious groups.”¹⁰³ This turn has become much more prevalent since the 1960s and has become, according to Egdell, a bedrock of that generation’s spirituality.¹⁰⁴

The Age of Authenticity, Nova Effect, and Malaise of Modernity as described by Taylor have become the new parameters of how Christianity is defined by millennials and Gen-Z. God, then, is redefined according to personal preferences to support one’s own affections and secular goals. Yet, MTD’s deceptive influx into Christianity continues to convince these generations that they know God. They may attend church services or participate in religious activity, but they have altered God into something not described in the Scripture while at the same time claiming to know God though their

¹⁰² Penny Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 89.

¹⁰³ Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society*, 101.

¹⁰⁴ Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society*, 89.

‘knowing’ of God is more of a personally constructed spirituality. The Nova Effect may be not only a modern phenomenon, but is also present within Christianity as each person can morph God based on personal affections. When a plethora of definitions are given to the same God, the true identity of this God is obscured by the multiplicity of characteristics. Yet, those immersed in the Age of Authenticity who either have been raised as Christians or converted as adults truly believe they know God but they fail to realize that a God who can be remade by each person is not a god at all. There is an accepted belief that God can be known on one’s own terms. According to Root, to open the immanent frame, to restore transcendence to its place outside of exclusive humanism where fulfillment is found outside of self through communion with God, there must be an acknowledgment that we cannot truly know God fully and this is “the first step in seeking the God who is God.”¹⁰⁵ He says the immanent frame retains the concept of God while disconnecting it from God.¹⁰⁶ The spiritual condition of young people today is summed up well by Kenda Creasy Dean, who writes: “American young people are unwittingly being formed into an imposter faith that poses as Christianity, but that lacks the holy desire and missional clarity necessary for Christian discipleship.”¹⁰⁷

Decadent

The philosophical goal of the Age of Authenticity is for each person to fully self-actualize. However, this actualization is not according to an external set of principles but

¹⁰⁵ Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline: A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age*. Ministry in a Secular Age Book #4. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2022), 76.

¹⁰⁶ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 79.

¹⁰⁷ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 5.

in living out one's idea of the good life. However, this actually leads to a decadent lifestyle. To be authentic is to live out who one feels they are in combination with great effort to avoid hurt at all costs. This transforms any quest for actualization into a grasping for temporary pleasure, comfort, and ease. Anything difficult is to be avoided in the Age of Authenticity unless it works toward a goal eventually bringing ease, comfort, or adoration—but only if the discomfort is anticipated to be relatively short-lived. The logical progression is a pursuit of pleasure. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton write: “Moreover, moral duties, pain, and suffering are not seen, as they traditionally often were, as an inevitable part of life to be endured or perhaps through which one should grow in personal character and spiritual depth. Rather, these are largely avoidable displeasures to be escaped in order to realize a pleasurable life of happiness and positive self-esteem.”¹⁰⁸

Intoxication

Emerging adults trapped within both the immanent frame (where all fulfillment is found in what can be seen and touched) and the Age of Authenticity (where traditional values are seen as archaic and without empathy toward the self), pursue freedom of expression and rebellion. The natural destination of this path has often proved to be alcohol and drug abuse. There have been vast numbers of programs, both public and private, developed to curb the trend. However, in generation after generation, the number of youth who participate in such a lifestyle continues to escalate.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 173.

¹⁰⁹ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 110–112.

This is not to suggest that each generation has sought a destructive lifestyle. They are embedded in a system of authenticity so the pursuit of fulfillment is attached to the embedded social pressure to dive deep into the free expression of youthfulness. And this has come to incorporate the use and abuse of alcohol. According to Christian Smith, the individual decision to participate in the such a lifestyle must not “miss the influence of the larger institutional and cultural contexts that in fact powerfully shape those choices.”¹¹⁰ There are an array of cultural pressures born out of the social imaginary that press emerging adults into a pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of discomfort. Smith references the “normative culture” of the social imaginary that “tell[s] people who are playing specific social roles, how they should think, desire, feel, and behave.”¹¹¹ These pressures work within the individual to form an image of who they should be according to the social imaginary’s ideal for their role. Confusion occurs because the social imaginary permeates the individual’s idea of who they are to become. The individual assumes a lifestyle that reflects what the culture prescribes to them. This happens without any conscious sense of being influenced by the culture.

Taylor posited that when America was coming out of the World Wars, moral atrocities, and years of financial stress, institutional thought led the nation into a moralistic consumer society. He says, “This is a view which sees our highest goal in terms of a certain kind of human flourishing, in a context of mutuality, pursuing each his/her own happiness on the basis of assured life and liberty, in a society of mutual

¹¹⁰ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 141.

¹¹¹ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 141.

benefit.”¹¹² However, there would soon be a shift. After World War II, two underlying threats faced the world. First, there was fear of further economic disaster after the traumatic experience of the Great Depression. Second, there was the threat of renewed war and its associated atrocities. The Keynesian view of economics appeared during this time, according to which the hope was to avoid both of these threats through a consumer society.¹¹³ However, producers realized the only way to ensure the viability of a consumer society was through planned obsolescence. In other areas such as fashion and automobiles, the need to perpetuate consumerism led to new fashions and models being released annually that created a desire in consumers to buy new even though what they had still functioned.¹¹⁴ George Walker, the head of styling at Ford as saying, “We design a car to make a man unhappy with his 1957 Ford ‘long about the end of 1958.’” The head of General Motors said, “In 1934, the average car ownership was 5 years; now it is 2 years. When it is 1 year, we will have a perfect score.”¹¹⁵ This worked well until it became widely known what companies were doing. At the same time, the popular game show called *The \$64,000 Question* was discovered to be fixed since contestants were given the answers.¹¹⁶ This scandal became symbolic of the whole system of a society of moral consumers. Until then, Americans had valued duty and patriotism and trusted the system of institutions forming them into a moral consumer society. Subsequently, however, trust

¹¹² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 429.

¹¹³ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 17.

¹¹⁴ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 33.

¹¹⁵ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, First Paperback Edition. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2003), 294.

¹¹⁶ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 33.

was lost. On university campuses where free-thinking is encouraged, this news prompted skepticism of all institutions of societal formation. Andrew Root captures their sentiment, “Particularly, the segment of young people now roaming university campuses began to wonder if conformity was actually just another word for manipulation. And when manipulation was attached to conformity, the fear of a repressed nightmare raced to consciousness.”¹¹⁷

The downfall of Nazi Germany set the backdrop for this rejection of conformity as well. It was Nazi Germany where cultured, intelligent people had been manipulated into following Adolf Hitler. This generation saw German propaganda and how it persuaded a mainly Christian society to support Nazism. The collective response was to rebel against institutions attempting to conform the society writ large. The rebellion against conformity was to set themselves apart by individual expression.¹¹⁸ Expression maintained the young generation as consumers. They protested through expressivist fashion and vehicles. Therefore, the greater rebellion was against traditional morality. The social imaginary of emerging adults was that “they need to exercise their new freedom by partying, acting wild and crazy, perhaps idiotically, particularly by consuming large amounts of alcohol and maybe some drugs.”¹¹⁹ The same social paradigm informed young adults to leave the party scene and grow up some time in their late 20’s or early 30’s.¹²⁰ The Age of Authenticity affected by these factors joined the

¹¹⁷ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 33.

¹¹⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

¹¹⁹ Smith et al., *Lost in Transition*, 142.

¹²⁰ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 141.

pursuit of hedonistic pleasure as authentic. This has continued with each generation of emerging adults. Feeding the rebellion encouraged by the social imaginary of an ideal emerging adult was a vicious cycle “reinforced by mainstream society.”¹²¹ Along this vein, Taylor writes: “The present youth culture is defined, both by the way advertising is pitched at it, and to a great degree autonomously, as expressivist.”¹²² He uses the example of the young people in the 60s who directed their revolt against “a ‘system’ which smothered creativity, individuality, and imagination.”¹²³ This combined with the post-war consumer society produced by the Keynesian economic theory to create a blitzkrieg of products that allowed for profit-making and the expression of authenticity. The social movement toward an expressivist consumerism opened the door for advertising companies to push alcohol, especially since it was legal. Pop culture glorified drug use. Advertisers, in an attempt to reach their largest customer base of those seeking authenticity, infused the general population with the desire to live a youthful existence. Andrew Root writes: “According to Pepsi, as well as many other advertisers who used youth appeals during the 1960s, youth was an attitude toward living—and particularly toward consuming—rather than a specific age group.”¹²⁴ There was thus a greater consumption and acceptance of the youth lifestyle which contributed further, along with advertising, to permit young people to live out their whims. Christian Smith notes that amid high levels of consumer intoxication, the alcohol industry spends “billions of

¹²¹ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 147.

¹²² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 474.

¹²³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.

¹²⁴ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 71.

dollars to advertise and promote [its] consumption, the majority of which targets emerging adults, and some of which targets underage drinkers, including teenagers.”¹²⁵ He also points out that “self-interested corporate leaders would not waste billions of dollars this way” unless the advertising worked.¹²⁶ This is a barrage of subtle messages designed to encourage modes of authentic living that are focused on experiencing pleasure and avoiding pain.

The Sexual Revolution

The rejection of conformity and traditional morality also led to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Andrew Root describes this "revolution's" progress from that time saying, “What were once daring and rebellious acts of ‘love’ outside of committed relationships have now for many emerging adults become routine, almost pedestrian.”¹²⁷ One of life's main themes among millennials and Gen Z is to live without any regret, which encourages boldness in experiencing all they want according to their individual views of the authentic self. The result we now see as ‘hooking up’ is normative for emerging adults.¹²⁸ The natural result of aggressive sexuality without commitment leads to emotionally difficult breakups and a great deal of emotional trauma.¹²⁹ At this point, the cycle becomes self-perpetuating. Authenticity presses against conformity and

¹²⁵ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 142.

¹²⁶ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 142.

¹²⁷ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 148.

¹²⁸ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 151.

¹²⁹ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 153.

into rebellion, especially against morality, leading to the destructive consequences of sex without parameters. And in generations that have also rejected the church and its traditional morality, the general path to relief is through the immanent frame closed to transcendence with God. This leads to greater egocentric behavior, self-destruction, and the push to numb the pain with pleasure.

The move away from morality toward beneficence created a new transcendence through civility. Taylor writes of this phenomenon, which "not only shuts out God, it attributes this great power of benevolence or altruism to humans."¹³⁰ This leads into charity, according to Taylor, which means that "good social order must involve taking care of all members of society; and the proper inward dispositions of a decent man [include] charitable ones."¹³¹ The humanist movement began positing that people had the intrinsic ability to live in this beneficent and charitable way. The collision of this anthropocentric movement with authenticity set the stage for a sexual revolution that continues today.

According to Taylor, we are in a third type of secularism where there is still a pursuit of transcendence however, the way of transcendence is enclosed in exclusive humanism.¹³² Taylor posits that the transcendence achieved through exclusive humanism can be attributed to pride. This is not the selfish pridefulness we usually think of but rather thinking too highly of oneself. Selfish pridefulness may lead to offensive behavior

¹³⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 246.

¹³¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 248.

¹³² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19.

such as aggrandizement, but the pride Taylor describes does not play out in behavior, but a belief that humans can achieve transcendence without help, without God. Taylor describes this pride as “the positive force which was central to the warrior-aristocratic ethic, whereby one is moved by the sense of one’s own dignity to live up to the demands of one’s estate.”¹³³ Transcendence within exclusive humanism is to fully self-actualize.

The Age of Authenticity brought about an escape from the perceived shackles of conformity with something pressed upon human beings by authoritarian institutions such as in government and religion. Revolting against the repression of natural inclinations, society transitioned from emphasizing conformity toward valuing rebellion. As these two social movements crossed paths, a pursuit of transcendence was created through the free expression of self. The Age of Authenticity affirmed the sensuality of a person in their individual pursuit of pleasure.¹³⁴ This was to defy the forces previously attempting to stifle sexuality for the sake of civility. Searching for transcendence within the immanent frame while rebelling against the institutional prohibition of free expression opened the door to the sexual revolution. Exclusive humanism posited transcendence within the human experience. Resisting conformity in sexuality, the Age of Authenticity propped up the possibility of human transcendence in the free expression of sexuality. The sexual revolution became one effect of the perfect storm overwhelming traditional norms of morality.

¹³³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 248.

¹³⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 480.

The sexual revolution, however, went deeper in its effect on society through the abandonment of family structure. Traditional values and morality supported the traditional family unit. Taylor writes: "...the positive image of the nuclear family was questioned by feminism, and the new expressive culture and sexual revolution of the 1960s."¹³⁵ The loss of this structure and support continued the trend which led to more parents abandoning their religion. Christian Smith explains:

"Historically, human societies and cultures have known that sex is both powerful and potentially destructive. So, everyone has devised ways to regulate sex. Typically, the social regulation of sex throughout human history has involved the exercise of patriarchy, repression, domination, coercion, and exploitation. The social control of sexuality has not always or even often benefitted the individuals involved. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s was in part an attempt to remedy some of those problems, to lift former restrictions on sexual expression and leave more up to the individual choice and happiness. The sexual revolution has been facilitated by and promoted the growth of liberal individualism, technological change, and other institutional transformations that have reduced the authority of family elders and increased individual autonomy."¹³⁶

Andrew Root writes about a group of New York bohemian writers "inspired by jazz, drugs, and ... free sexual expression" who, though recipients of consumeristic society also rejected it.¹³⁷ These writers were known as The Beats and they had great influence at the time moving society, especially the youth, toward a desire for "sexual adventure, untethered to the values of monogamy and heterosexuality that had reigned supreme in the Western world since the dawn of Christianity."¹³⁸ Not only did this affect the youth of the 1960s and '70s, but the culture interpreted it as a way of defining

¹³⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 506.

¹³⁶ Smith, et. al., *Lost in Transition*, 193.

¹³⁷ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 52.

¹³⁸ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 53.

youthfulness. Each generation within exclusive humanism and the Age of Authenticity "[sought] a mysticism without a personal God. This was a spirituality bound in never growing up but forever remaining youthful."¹³⁹ The result is generations that put off adulthood for as long as possible. Kenda Creasy Dean states it well:

“We have learned to accept twenty-one as the ‘new sixteen.’ Today, adolescence functions as a lifestyle as well as a life stage, a state of consciousness as well as a period of life that young people can and often do prolong, with the full cooperation of American culture.”¹⁴⁰

Not only did embracing hedonism increase with each generation, but the result of such (wrapped up in authenticity and freedom of expression) allowed the advertiser to “target youth as a ‘market.’”¹⁴¹ American consumer society feeds off the Age of Authenticity by developing and selling products designed to stimulate a person’s desire to express themselves freely and live out youthfulness. And these products use sex to sell or sell sex as an exciting lifestyle. They perpetuate the idea that fulfillment comes from finding transcendence within the human experience. Books, magazines, commercials, social media, and the plethora of digital advertising have scooped up the young generations and whisked them off with the promise of pleasure, fun, and euphoric hedonism as a means to finding transcendence.

Co-Dependent

From the beginning, God said in the Scriptures that "it is not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18, KJV)." Also, God’s nature is communal in the Father, Son, and Spirit

¹³⁹ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 53.

¹⁴⁰ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 8.

¹⁴¹ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 8.

existing as one entity (Deut 6:4, John 10:30, KJV). Created in God's image, human beings seek community. A sense of belonging versus a feeling of loneliness is a basic human need. The Age of Authenticity categorizes community into "good" and "bad" community. Types of belonging which require repressing the natural human spirit is to participate in bad community according to the Age of Authenticity. Good community, according to Scripture, is where there is mutual love for one another and the encouragement to avoid destructive behavior and submit to the teachings of Christ (Romans 12:10, Hebrews 10:24-25, KJV). The church is to be a community of belonging for those who follow Christ, but the Age of Authenticity and its redefining of spirituality changed how young people interact with their faith. Dean writes that “teenagers do not think religion influences their decisions, choice of friends, or behaviors. It does not help them obey God, work toward a common good, compose an identity, or belong to a distinctive community.”¹⁴² Religion including Christianity has been morphed into MTD, according to the Age of Authenticity. Millennials and Gen-Z who consider themselves as Christians see their faith as supporting what they feel about who they are. In the Age of Authenticity, Christianity is seen as personal, not communal. They do not consider themselves part of a community, but rather as having a belief system reinforcing what they already feel about themselves to assist them in becoming a better version of who they feel they should be.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Dean, *Almost Christian*, 28.

¹⁴³ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 28.

Despite the individualization of Christianity for young believers, there is still a need for community. However, the community they choose is not always seen as relevant to their faith. When Christianity becomes a source of help that “offers comfort, boosts self-esteem, helps solve problems, and lubricates interpersonal relationships by encouraging people to do good, feel good, and keep God at arm’s length,” it becomes a “self-emolliating spirituality.”¹⁴⁴ According to Dean, this shift in the youth is not happening despite what they have been taught, but as a result of the churches' teaching. With each generation, the church is infected by this social imaginary and Christianity itself has been transformed to fit this mindset.

Thus, the church has become a bad community by continuing to teach the repression of natural desires as the Secular Age teaches fulfillment through expressing what one feels. Because Christianity has already shifted in an individualistic direction separate from community life, as well as focusing on feeling good rather than conforming to God's love and holiness as defined in Scripture, there is no need to tie oneself to the organized church. Younger generations are less likely to see the church as a community worth belonging to. However, the essential need for community remains. Being disconnected from the perceived ‘bad’ community of the church, they therefore find community outside the traditional, evangelical church. This has not been a quick shift, but most have gradually left for reasons ranging from ineffective socialization to disagreement with church teachings or political positions.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 29.

¹⁴⁵ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 83.

James Heft and Jan Stets make note of the identity change happening in America parallel to the increased exodus of younger generations from the evangelical church: “In self-categorization, an individual sees themselves as similar to members of a particular group, with the result that group members come to think and act alike; in social comparison, group members draw distinctions between themselves (the in-group) and those who differ from themselves (the out-group) and correspondingly view the in-group more positively than the out-group.”¹⁴⁶ Christianity and religion have become individual tools where God is more of a therapist than a Savior leading people to salvation. In addition, the Age of Authenticity has redefined what a good human is and thus what a good Christian should be. To be good is to help others feel better about themselves by celebrating such feelings. This active participation in the celebration of another’s authenticity creates community while at the same time distinguishing this new secular community from that of traditional evangelicalism (which is viewed as unwelcoming, without compassion, and repressive).

The new community, as defined by the Age of Authenticity, resulted in the unintended consequence of narcissism. Though the 1950s are criticized as being overly concerned with production and concrete results along with the suppression of feeling and creativity, the 1960s became the ‘hinge’ moment according to Charles Taylor where these produced a new social imaginary so that anything that denied a person what they felt or their creativity was considered repressive and waste. Taylor writes about the Age of Authenticity's effect as creating an echo chamber of individualistic focus: “The 60s

¹⁴⁶ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 16.

provide perhaps the hinge moment, at least symbolically. It is on one hand an individuating revolution, which may sound strange, because our modern age was already based on a certain individualism. But this shifted on to a new axis, without deserting the others. As well as moral/spiritual and instrumental individualism, we now have a widespread “expressive” individualism.”¹⁴⁷ This new age highly values the individual’s ability to express who he or she is. Taylor describes the consumer environment as “this newly individuated space, [where] the customer was encouraged more and more to express her taste, furnishing her space according to her own needs and affinities, as only the rich had been able to do in previous eras.”¹⁴⁸

The result of such hyper-individuation produces a culture that pursues materialism that reinforces their “importance of personal development and self-expression.”¹⁴⁹ Taylor explains this new materialism as one pursuing the economic and material American dream, but all of it must be self edifying at the same time. A person does not simply get a job, but they must earn a living doing something with a higher good, something more than a paycheck.¹⁵⁰

As this new social imaginary continues emerging, the population is obsessed with what they want. There is indeed value placed on not inhibiting others from what they want or desire to be, but focus is on the self. Even in therapy, the focus expressed to

¹⁴⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

¹⁴⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.

¹⁴⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 477.

¹⁵⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 477.

individuals is to "find yourself, realize yourself, release your true self, and so on."¹⁵¹ This feeds into the narcissism of each younger generation. As Taylor writes: "The sin which is not tolerated is intolerance."¹⁵² For any institution—whether it be family, politics, religion, or commerce—to take a stance that would infringe on anyone becoming their true self is wicked, sinful, and not tolerated.

The narcissistic circle of community becomes the trap that not only fosters unhealthy relationships but continues to bring decay to the individual. What society values is also that which steals our ability to love others because of the egocentric culture in which we are embedded. Yet at the same time, the focus on self demands affirmation from others. All seek such affirmation but the focus on self has diminished society's ability to approve of others except when to do so is also self-affirming because of shared values. This is true even if those values are destructive to our ability to love others. It is not that society is without the ability to have compassion but when one is so focused on securing affirmation, there is little focus on affirming others. At the same time, the Age of Authenticity celebrates what has no intrinsic value outside of individual desires and self-expression. So, to celebrate and affirm others, one's own personal values must be abandoned. One must also celebrate a behavior, lifestyle, or form of expression that might be offensive to others. This progression breaks down traditional stability. Because the evangelical church still holds to these set values, those who have embraced community outside are leaving these churches in droves. The need for affirmation rings

¹⁵¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.

¹⁵² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 483.

empty because it is often achieved only the values of others are forfeited in the approval. This creates a need for continual endorsement because of the absence of any set definition of what is good. A person has no way to determine outside of their own feelings what is worthy of acceptance. This leaves them without self confidence leaving them in need of more recognition. And the depth of this need stirs emotional unrest when the commendation is not granted.

The Effect of Secularism on the Evangelical Church

Numbers, Buildings, and Money

Charles Taylor marks the 1960's as the hinge point of the transition into the Age of Authenticity. Before this time, conformity was the rule. To escape the atrocities of economic depression and war, the West engaged in a culture driven by Keynesian economics which focused on consumerism. This economic theory called on the use government spending to create an economy would that would grow and produce wealth for the individual and the nation. The nation could then use this wealth to provide greater national defense systems to avoid war by a show of strength. The greatest value for citizens in this social imaginary was their duty to God, country, and family which resulted in their allegiance to their place of work as well. Consumerism created a need to appear successful and put together all the time. This duty, it was believed would bring about the good life.¹⁵³

Duty continued the cycle of consumerism. When those coming of age in the 1960s rejected this economic theory, the Age of Authenticity was born and there was a

¹⁵³ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 10.

shift from what was considered to bring about the good life. Duty and conformity to this consumer society were both rejected. Conformity became the enemy.¹⁵⁴ It was realized that there was more to life than consumerism and material accumulation. The good life was to be found in the intangibles of the imagination and living out what one considered to be his or her authentic self in opposition to society's attempts to coerce conformity. All institutional authority working synchronously to form the citizen into a duty-bound consumer was rejected—this included corporations, government, and religion (mainly Christianity in the US)—since these were considered repressive to human flourishing. Such coercion and repression was considered intolerant and wicked. However, the unintended consequence was vocational, social, and spiritual uncertainty. No longer would young boys go into the same industry, working at the same factory, where their father worked. No longer was it simply assumed a woman would become a stay-at-home mother. There was freedom to pursue one's desires, but the uncertainty of what one would become created new stress and new pressure.¹⁵⁵

Such pressure evolved from a need to discover oneself and one's own desires, to create a path for oneself. Andrew Root describes it well: "In the West, the sources of religion, family, clan, and even country could no longer tell you who you are. You decide. But once you decide, to truly have chosen, you can't just sit on your hands, resting quietly in the glow of your chosen identity. That's not how this 'freedom' works. This 'freedom' calls for constant motion."¹⁵⁶ Rather than people being told by society

¹⁵⁴ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 10.

¹⁵⁵ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 10.

¹⁵⁶ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 10.

who they would become, they would now have to decide who they would become with the added pressure of bringing this identity to fruition. James K.A. Smith points out that in this new social imaginary, the greatest value is choice.¹⁵⁷ As noted earlier, this transition to the Age of Authenticity did not end consumerism in the West but transformed it from an instrument of wealth and national defense to one of limitless individual expressivism in pursuit of individual fulfillment.¹⁵⁸

This created an ecclesiological shift as well. Before the Age of Authenticity, a person would join the church of their choice but they would conform to that church or denomination. However, the social revolution rejected any institution's attempt to impose a model of behavior on society. The Age of Authenticity transformed the sacred from something that imposed change upon the individual to something that assisted the individual in becoming his authentic self. While the pursuit of authenticity with added hedonism separated many from the church, authenticity also affected the church and those who remained tethered to it. However, everything has now changed. According to Taylor, "The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this."¹⁵⁹ And James K.A. Smith adds that during this time, God and Christ were defined according to personal constructs of one's desired spirituality.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 85.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 86.

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 88.

Pastors, teachers, and church leaders are not immune to the Age of Authenticity since these tend to choose their positions. Leading a church embedded in a culture of consumer expressivism redirects the mission of the church from connecting people to a transcendent God to meeting the felt needs of those who choose to form an identity within Christianity. In the same way that individuals were now faced with the pressure of becoming so did church leaders and pastors. But what did it mean ‘to become’ within church leadership?

In a consumer-driven society, people have been conditioned to use the exteriors, such as fashion and cars, to express who they have chosen to become. It made sense that this would play a major role in how the church transitioned as well. Attempting to balance the Great Commission in a consumer society, church leaders became their chosen identity by leading churches that attract consumers. Rather than church leaders offering the Christian way for people to become part of, to become their chosen identity, it was necessary to go beyond the offer of the Gospel to the enticement of personal fulfillment through consumer-driven ministry. Andrew Root notes that in this new imaginary “The vehicle for identity to meet the speed of late modernity is performance.”¹⁶¹

One evil of a consumer society occurs in the need for continual enticement which becomes planned obsolescence. Before the Age of Authenticity, the consumption lifestyle was an acceptable duty until “its moral integrity was questioned” because of planned obsolescence.¹⁶² This is the practice of making older products undesirable prompting the

¹⁶¹ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 11.

¹⁶² Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 32.

purchase and consumption of newer products—either by purposely producing items with shorter periods of functionality or by presenting the newest model as essential for one’s best life. Even though the duty to conform was rejected, the Age of Authenticity maintained the consumer mindset as a way of personal expression along with planned obsolescence where there is continually something new to awe, entertain, or fulfill until the next new thing rolled off the line. But these habits of thinking and behavior also affected the church.

The Age of Authenticity saw many reject Christianity. Churches scrambled to regain their losses while embedded in a society of consumerism. The church continually needed to be new. Andrew Root lays out the new church strategy:

“Living beyond direct frontal critique, a congregation in America could win reach. To win this reach, the church would have to innovate, accelerating the pace of life to match the new timekeeper. These small denominational and nondenominational churches were more ready for this innovation, but they would need to match the good life that was being molded by the timekeeping of the consumer corporations”¹⁶³

Church leaders stopped considering how to facilitate God's breaking into the human experience, and focused more on how they could attract more consumers without completely letting go of the Gospel. The ecclesial priority, like the individual priority, was for the church to become the highest version of itself with the highest value being attractional and therapeutic. The ministry and church were morphed into a corporate model and the church focused on building programs, and new facilities with innovative ministry practices. This, of course, required attention to obtaining and maintaining

¹⁶³ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 142.

financial resources. The move away from the institution of denominationalism that dominated before the Age of Authenticity presented church leaders with the opportunity of forging their own way of becoming in the church. To become was to grow and growth was garnered by becoming a resource.¹⁶⁴

As people rejected institutional religion, they did not reject spirituality. Rather, they invented new ways of achieving their own experiences and expressions of faith. According to Root, this meant that “The pastor needed to now become an entrepreneur because the religious market was far too crowded (due to the nova) to assume people had any loyalty to any religious function or form that didn’t help them in their own seeking. The new pastor being forged from [Rick] Warren’s genius would no longer bemoan the nova effect and the crowded market but would engage it, providing the church as a key resource in helping all searchers find the purpose they individually were seeking.”¹⁶⁵ The consequence was that churches needed to raise large amounts of money to construct buildings and create the type of church that could provide the resources necessary for people to pursue their own spiritual path. It is not that Christ was not the center, but the strategy changed drastically to meet the need of a consumer-driven society. The problem is that now a pastor “needed to be able to run a Walmart-style congregation...”¹⁶⁶

Rick Warren’s approach and impact on the American pastor's role are both significant. This is not to suggest that a great deal of Kingdom work was not done. Many

¹⁶⁴ Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God*. Ministry in a Secular Age Book #2. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2019), 139.

¹⁶⁵ Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 142.

¹⁶⁶ Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 146.

lives have been changed under his ministry.¹⁶⁷ However, the evangelical church became more of a corporate resource center for spirituality than a house of prayer.

Though much good has come from a strategic switch toward being a seeker-sensitive church, one possible negative has been an evident turning away from the divine. According to Henri Nouwen: “In a society that overvalues progress, development, and personal achievement, the spiritual life becomes quite easily performance-oriented: ‘On what level am I now, and how do I move to the next one?’—‘When will I reach union with God?’—‘When will I experience illumination or enlightenment?’”¹⁶⁸

Christian Smith identifies two distinct definitions applied by teenagers to the phrase “spiritual, but not religious.” One is that a teenager has a sense of the divine, but lacks certainty about its actual presence in organized religion. Others would define the phrase as being “real” with God in prayer and spirituality but without organized religion for the same reasons.¹⁶⁹ The teenagers surveyed expressed skepticism that traditional, organized religious services were anything more than “empty, habitual, and ritualistic.”¹⁷⁰ At the same time, Smith and Denton characterizes the religion of the American teenager as Moral Therapeutic Deism, and has compiled a sort of creed for American teenage religion.

¹⁶⁷ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 146.

¹⁶⁸ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit*, Reprint edition. (San Francisco, California: HarperOne, 2010). 9.

¹⁶⁹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 80.

¹⁷⁰ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 18.

1. “A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.”¹⁷¹

The influence on teenage religion of the Age of Authenticity is apparent in this so-called creed. The individualistic, personal religion with a goal of self-fulfillment that came about with the emergence of this age is clear. The rejection of conformity and duty permitted people to become who they decided to be without judgment, but this brought about the anxiety of trying to become what one chooses to be. Thus, God serves as a type of therapist to help people feel better about life and themselves. The seeker-sensitive strategy forged by Rick Warren fits this narrative, as the intention is to reach people within the social imaginary of the Age of Authenticity. However, in the pursuit of becoming, churches focused on growth, money, facilities, innovation, and self-help have pushed all things divine to the edge. Younger generations now define God through the prism of the Age of Authenticity and so have many churches. Organized religion has lost any meaning beyond the therapeutic for many millennials and Gen Z. The result has been a search for true spirituality, but this does not happen in the church. These young people

¹⁷¹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162.

choose their own path. Their idea of religion has little to do with liturgy and transcendence but merely feeling good about oneself.¹⁷²

Politics

The history of American politics is full of Christian rhetoric. From the beginning, government established in America was conjoined with Christian morality and ethics. The revolutionary Protestant leader Benjamin Rush believed Christianity and democracy needed one another. Both required “moral discipline and respect for individual liberty.”¹⁷³ The heart of the issue is freedom, which (as delineated in the US Constitution) required morality and respect for individual liberty in order to maintain itself. The view was that there had to be ethical behavior in government, family, and the economy. Without this, freedom allowed immoral citizens to enact immoral laws that would break down the basic tenets of the new nation. Early American Christians believed these virtues of civilization came from their faith making America uniquely Christian.¹⁷⁴ However, in the twentieth century, some Christian groups had begun to sever this link. During the 1960s, the hinge point of the Age of Authenticity, other religious groups began to appear (per the nova effect of spiritualities) that critiqued Christian republicanism for its embrace of “capitalism, the cultural status quo, and the Cold War militarism.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163.

¹⁷³ Matthew Bowman, *Christian: The Politics of a Word in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020), 4.

¹⁷⁴ Bowman, *Christian*, 5.

¹⁷⁵ Bowman, *Christian*, 7.

The churches sought to create, maintain, and promulgate the idea of a Christian nation which meant Christianity and American politics were inseparable. However, Christianity was split politically. On one side, liberal Christians led by those such as Victoria Hull fought for an “effortlessly egalitarian utopia” that functioned primarily in “free love.”¹⁷⁶ These were referred to as spiritualists who believed that human beings were made to live freely and follow the ways of Christ without the social constructs of orthodoxy. Christianity for spiritualists was found in the nature and character of Christ without the morality of Christ. This caused them to see conservative Christianity in a Pharasaical light.¹⁷⁷ For spiritualists, the attempt to legislate morality was unconscionable whereas conservative Christians believed morality must be legislated to preserve the nation. The belief stemming from early Puritans and Universalists was that morality fostered by self-discipline was required to keep people from becoming victims of their passions thus clouding their ability to know the good.¹⁷⁸ Spiritualist Christians believed in humanity's intrinsic goodness and that if all restraints were lifted, the evils of racism, war, dictatorship, and “other forms of inequality” would inevitably fade.¹⁷⁹ On the other hand, republican Christians believed that human beings required laws to maintain morality even to the point that after the Civil War, the South needed to repent, reform, and do good works before it could be fully forgiven and reunited with the Union.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ Bowman, *Christian*, 15.

¹⁷⁷ Bowman, *Christian*, 16.

¹⁷⁸ Bowman, *Christian*, 19.

¹⁷⁹ Bowman, *Christian*, 22.

¹⁸⁰ Bowman, *Christian*, 20.

As we fast-forward to the 1970s, the influence of the Christian right continued to increase into the 80s, 90s, and beyond. It played a major role in the election of Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump. The Christian Right was constituted by evangelicals who functioned as ideological descendants of the early American Christian republicans, seeing a need to legislate morality while preserving capitalism and nationalism.¹⁸¹ The Age of Authenticity created a social imaginary of an egalitarian utopia. Associated with liberal Christianity and non-Christians, the Age of Authenticity brought about the sexual revolution, the pursuit of fulfillment by forging one's own way, and the sin of intolerance. The Christian Right remains outspoken against same-sex marriage and transgender issues, favors nationalism while rejecting the notion of institutional racism pitting itself against the cultural movement ushered in by the Age of Authenticity. Whereas liberal Christianity (which is more mainline than evangelical though some evangelicals are progressive) and the political left continue to believe that if all restraints are removed, there would necessarily be a utopian society where all behavior setting itself against the social imaginary of the Age of Authenticity would diminish. The Christian Right works to legislate orthodoxy while liberal Christianity does not attempt to force morality with a belief that freedom will naturally create a moral society by choice.

Because the Christian Right has become all but synonymous with the Republican Party, those embedded in the Age of Authenticity reject evangelicalism. The social imaginary of the Age of Authenticity has rubbed up against traditional Christian values

¹⁸¹ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 172.

creating a break between conservative and liberal Christians and further, a break from evangelicalism by millennials and Gen-Z.

The goal and fervor of the Christian Right are to “save evangelicalism” according to Heft and Stets.¹⁸² In essence, this is to legislate morality while protecting nationalism and capitalism. The issue with this political position is how the Age of Authenticity would view each of these.

Liberal Christianity holds that democracy requires that all receive sufficient support or a “living wage.”¹⁸³ Economic justice is a Marxist view held by some liberal Christians. It requires a redistribution of wealth and financial independence for every citizen. This aligns with the social imaginary of the Age of Authenticity which would be to eliminate all that prohibits anyone from his or her individual self-fulfillment. Capitalism, from the prism of Authenticity, works repressively because of the concentration of economic power at the top. When right-leaning evangelicals strongly defend capitalism as a system they believe gives everyone equal opportunity, this is seen as hypocritical to marginal populations stifled from lack of opportunity, ignoring that the power structure inhibits equal opportunity. It is seen as more pagan than Christian, reducing conservative evangelicals to hypocrisy in the eyes of younger generations embracing the social imaginary of the Age of Authenticity.

The Christian left, especially non-evangelicals, suggest that capitalism does not allow the nation to be Christian by caring for the least of these. Strangely both capitalism

¹⁸² Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 183.

¹⁸³ Bowman, *Christian*, 94.

and communism are seen as wicked in this social imaginary because each violates human rights for the sake of “mechanical efficiency.”¹⁸⁴ Evangelicals endorse capitalism as a means of producing wealth but desire to curb the potential abuses through legislative morality.¹⁸⁵ A greater divide occurs between the Christian right and those whose thinking aligns better with the Age of Authenticity when the Christian Right defends Republican capitalism when there is no attempt to legislate economic justice.¹⁸⁶

Nationalism was a key component in Donald Trump’s platform in 2016 and 81% of white conservative evangelicals supported him.¹⁸⁷ For those who view evangelicals through the social imaginary of the Age of Authenticity, this too appears hypocritical. Nationalism precludes other nations. To build a wall as Trump began is considered heartless to the plight of many of the world’s poor. Steve King, a member of Congress from Iowa and a Trump advocate argued that “Western civilization itself” was defined as “every place where the footprint of Christianity settled the world,” then later defended Trump’s restrictive immigration policy saying, “We can’t restore our civilization with somebody else’s babies.”¹⁸⁸ These policies along with the willingness of some evangelical Christians to defend or minimize Trump’s non-Christian behavior caused

¹⁸⁴ Bowman, *Christian*, 88.

¹⁸⁵ Bowman, *Christian*, 104.

¹⁸⁶ Bowman, *Christian*, 15.

¹⁸⁷ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 172.

¹⁸⁸ Bowman, *Christian*, 2.

many millennials and Gen Z who had been raised evangelical to turn away from the faith.¹⁸⁹

Not only has the merging of the Republican party and the politically active Religious Right put off the non-religious, but it has also caused evangelicals to disaffiliate. Of those adults who grew up in evangelical churches, 39% no longer identify this way.¹⁹⁰ Robert Jones and Daniel Cox argue that “the nostalgic politics of the Christian Right is leading evangelicalism farther and farther ‘away, politically and culturally, from the American mainstream’ when it comes to matters of sexuality...”¹⁹¹ They note a 2014 Pew study, which found that former white evangelicals are far more likely to support same-sex marriage than those currently identifying this way at a rate of 60% compared to 24%.¹⁹² This is a clear consequence of the emergence of the Age of Authenticity with its acceptance of individual freedom to pursue fulfillment without judgment or orthodoxy. The evangelical church is aging as a result and losing young people at an alarming rate because of the social imaginary that came out of the 1960s. The intense participation of evangelicals in politics does not attract younger generations.

Youthfulness

After World War II, America was seen as heroic and an object of fear by other nations due to its possession of atomic technology. America had come into its own. As

¹⁸⁹ Bowman, *Christian*, 5.

¹⁹⁰ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 183.

¹⁹¹ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 184.

¹⁹² Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 184.

already discussed, the Keynesian economic theory also erupted at this time and America dove headfirst into this theory creating a consumer society and great wealth. Duty was the prime value of society: to God, country, family, job, and consumption. American wealth exploded. More bombs were built: partly to keep all other nations in check, but also for the government to spend money according to Keynesian economics. Babies born after the war created a large college population by the 1960s as the nation needed more white-collar workers to further grease the economic machine of America.¹⁹³

For the first time, children were not needed to work in the fields or factories with their parents. Families had extra income. Manufacturing companies exploded in profit and size. Children grew up and went to college where they were challenged to think creatively. The values of duty and conformity created an economy that facilitated higher levels of thinking. This phenomenon radically transformed the social imaginary of the nation when the production strategy of planned obsolescence became widely known. As companies devised ways to maintain consumption through products made to not last or to be seen as antiquated quickly, youth began to feel manipulated. And “when manipulation was attached to conformity, the fear of a repressed nightmare raced to a consciousness.”¹⁹⁴

The horrific progression of World War II Germany, a Christian nation, as the instigator of a world war and author of the Holocaust because of "duty and conformity" still occupied Western minds, especially the youth who grew up in an atmosphere of war,

¹⁹³ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 32.

¹⁹⁴ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 33.

whether the aftermath of World War II or Cold War. An examination of Germany's transition from a cultured and philosophical nation into a people following Hitler in the senseless murder of millions revealed the power of government propaganda. People simply believed the lie.¹⁹⁵ American youth culture embedded in authenticity was not going to fall for the same trick. So when it became clear the government and corporate America were in cahoots to manipulate people into buying what they did not even need, a generation felt the sting of betrayal heightened by the fear of becoming the new Germany.¹⁹⁶

During this time, the civil rights movement began. People in the South, led by Martin Luther King, Jr. began to reject conformity with Jim Crow laws. This moved young people, both black and white, to question their loyalty to a nation that treated people of color with severe discrimination. Protests, beatings, riots, and clashes with police were normalized and celebrated. After Nazi Germany in the milieu of institutional racism, American young people "saw fascism in the shadows, calling anyone who opposed individual freedom and sought conformity 'a fascist.'"¹⁹⁷

About the same time, another movement was found in psychiatry. Sigmund Freud and his protégé, Erik Erickson, have brought attention to two important theories that fed into this revolution. Erikson popularized the theory that children needed to play and it was important for parents and society as a whole to make room for "recreation,

¹⁹⁵ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 34.

¹⁹⁶ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 34.

¹⁹⁷ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 36.

enjoyment, and education.”¹⁹⁸ At the same time, Freud propagated his theory of the id, ego, and superego. The id, according to Freud, was the only part of the personality present at birth. It is also the part that operates on what he called the Pleasure Principle, meaning that the id desires what is pleasurable. The ego regulates this id on the realistic side while the superego regulates it on the moralistic side. But for Freud, our most authentic self was the id which sought pleasure. To deny the id too much would squash a person’s self.¹⁹⁹ These theories paved the way for the new social imaginary of The Age of Authenticity. While affecting the culture in general, this phenomenon caught on most with the younger generation. Freud’s most extreme position was that if the superego (the morality of the personality) had too large of a space, it would create neurosis. He believed an entire society could experience neurosis if the societal superego was too heavy-handed against its id. These psychological theories impressed upon the social imaginary, consumerism embedded in authentic individuality, and the exposure of Nazi Germany being birthed out of mindless conformity created a logical shift toward the Age of Authenticity.²⁰⁰ According to Root: “Through the lens of Freud and their teachers’ fear of fascism, the youth began to believe that the conformation push of the mass society was nothing more than the neurotic impulse of a societal superego.”²⁰¹ The response among youth was an all-out embracing of the authenticity of their collective id, while at the same

¹⁹⁸ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 37.

¹⁹⁹ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 38–40.

²⁰⁰ Matthaiei, *Formation in Faith*, 37–43.

²⁰¹ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 44.

time rejecting conformity to any institution that worked to repress the it. This contributed to an exodus from the church by the young.²⁰²

The youth of this age pursued pleasure through illicit drugs and sexual adventure. Both drug use and free sexual expression provided a sense of spirituality for this generation. This was a spirituality seeking “mysticism without a personal God.”²⁰³

James K.A. Smith explains that people do not act first based on facts. Rather, there is a perception that elicits a feeling before thought and reason ever appear. These emotions then form a pathway of logic based on one’s perception.²⁰⁴ For the younger generation, perception mattered more than factual information. They perceived the current system of morality as repressive and the pursuit of pleasure as righteously upholding their own authenticity. For anyone who attempts to evaluate The Age of Authenticity today, it could seem as if up is down and right is wrong. But for the young generation of the 1960s, their emotions had been trained by the narrative of institutional betrayal that sought to repress individual liberty, experiencing feelings of angst and being defrauded. Freud’s psychoanalytical theory paved a new way to the good life through worship of self, pleasure, and individual expression. Because the Age of Authenticity took form in sex, drugs, rock ‘n roll, bell-bottom jeans, and uninhibited sex within the younger generation, authenticity became inseparable from the lifestyle of youthfulness.²⁰⁵

²⁰² Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 44.

²⁰³ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 54.

²⁰⁴ James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 35.

²⁰⁵ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 54.

Prior to the 1960s, evangelicalism had run countercultural to mainline denominations by emphasizing personal experience. Many times, this was a personal and emotive experience with God. With the arrival of the '60's, the evangelical model of Christianity best met the Age of Authenticity because of emphasis on the individual. Evangelicals along with the entirety of The Age of Authenticity regarded mainline Christianity as lacking personal conviction and authenticity.²⁰⁶ “The Holiness movement, similar to bohemianism, had been asserting for nearly a century that individuals needed to embrace the personal, experiential element of Christianity, that authentic religious experience was our objective.”²⁰⁷ The counterculture of hedonism and the Holiness movement of evangelicals were working against one another; however, what they had in common was authenticity. The evangelical push to reach young people at the same point of authenticity was enormously successful. Andrew Root characterizes this moment: “These charismatic evangelicals told these countercultural youth to continue to seek the fullness of authenticity, but instead of tripping on LSD, trip on the Bible; instead of getting high on marijuana, get high on Jesus; instead of using rock and roll for political resistance, use it to resist sinful society by genuinely worshipping God.”²⁰⁸ This began to form the authentic strategy of the church as it embraced youthfulness.

In the 1970s, churches and denominations began to include a staff pastor specific to youth ministry, and reaching the young became the focus of a strategy for building a church. However, youthfulness and authenticity created fertile ground for Moral

²⁰⁶ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 77.

²⁰⁷ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 78.

²⁰⁸ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 79.

Therapeutic Deism. Though evangelicals reached the youth with emotive and expressive individual faith, transcendence was being pushed aside. Salvation was not an act of faith as much as a lifestyle in pursuit of authenticity within the morality of Scripture.²⁰⁹ The new spirituality, however, within evangelicalism was a quest for spirituality and meaning through ideas of “self-help and therapeutic insights.”²¹⁰

Church leaders built churches as a way of the church self-actualizing. They built beautiful buildings appealing to the consumer side of authenticity while at the same time offering a uniquely personal experience through worship services, and in particular worship music, in a building and church that felt ‘cool.’²¹¹ However, the church was more influenced by authenticity than Scripture. Evangelicalism became a quest for fulfillment within the immanent frame. The worship is not transcendent as much as cultural. God is not encountered as much as talked about, analyzed, and mimicked within evangelical subculture. This is indicative of Charles Taylor’s *Secular 3* where the immanent frame is “a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes transcendence.”²¹²

The loss of transcendence contributes to the exodus of millennials and Gen Z who are looking for just that: transcendence and meaning. The push toward youthfulness created a seeming revival of young people in the '70's and '80's, but in the end,

²⁰⁹ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 89.

²¹⁰ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 92.

²¹¹ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 92.

²¹² Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 19.

authenticity had redefined transcendence as evangelical culture choosing to believe what an evangelical was supposed to believe. In essence, the journey—though cloaked in a spiritual vernacular—circumscribed participation in the divine nature of God. It was empty. The church’s attempt to remedy the issue has been nothing more than attempts to regain those who have left evangelicalism back to church culture without any prominence placed on transcendent transformation.²¹³

Christian Smith reveal how most adults in America see Christianity, not as something transcendent, but as instrumental in forging a better life through improved decisions and high morals: “This instrumental image of religion is not the invention of teenagers. It seems to be a dominating image of a religion embraced by many adults in the United States.”²¹⁴ Many of these parents are themselves children of authenticity and adhere to the church’s conforming to the deism of authenticity. Most American teenagers see religion as a tool for people to get what they want, rather than oriented toward a transcendent experience that reorders their will and purpose to an authoritative God.²¹⁵

On the contrary, the deistic form of Christianity uses religion to assist a person in making good decisions and being happy. This leads teenagers to posit that one does not need to go to church to know right from wrong or be happy. Therefore, church participation and Christianity are there when needed. It is therapeutic and not essential.²¹⁶

²¹³ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 111.

²¹⁴ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 148.

²¹⁵ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 148.

²¹⁶ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 154.

Church, then competes with other priorities and activities that seem essential or that peek the interest more such as sports, school, friends, and work.²¹⁷ Dean explains what teenagers feel about the church now as it is invaded by Moral Therapeutic Deism: they do not accept this watered-down version of Christianity as faith. They buy into it instrumentally to facilitate success in American culture, but nothing more.”²¹⁸ The experiment of churches placing their focus on youth has allowed MTD to permeate evangelicalism, leaving these younger generations still hungering for transcendence. It is reminiscent of Taylor’s malaise of modernity. Their experience with American Christianity has left them wanting more, and this is positive. They leave the church, but they are still searching and recognize that what most American Christianity has become is not truly transcendent.

The Effect of Secularism on the Historical Evangelical Family

Busyness as Fulfillment

The secularization of society also had a dramatic effect on the family. For example, according to the General Social Survey data from 1972-1990, a family is affected by the employment status of each parent. When a husband and father have a full-time job, the religious participation of the family increases. However, if the man’s wife also goes into full-time employment, the religious participation rate goes down.²¹⁹ The Age of Authenticity threw off the shackles of the traditional family as repressive to the

²¹⁷ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 161.

²¹⁸ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 191.

²¹⁹ Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society*, 30.

societal id.²²⁰ Thrusting off the institutional patriarchy, “a belief in egalitarian gender roles for men and women, understood as a rejection of the idea that women ought to specialize in homemaking and family and that men ought to specialize in paid employment as breadwinners” was discarded.²²¹ While belief in traditional roles connects to higher religious participation, non-traditional roles indicate less religious participation.²²² This falls into the social imaginary of the Age of Authenticity as all institutions seen as forcing conformity were rejected, including the traditional family.

Egdel posits that there is a “religious market, complete with consumers and entrepreneurs”²²³ and operates within the rational-choice theory and classical organizational theory in sociology. People choose to be part of religion based on the benefits and costs of being involved in church activity. And because we are exposed to many different schemas, there is not a hard and fast rule, but if the family schema includes church-going, then for the children of this family, the costs of church participation are lowered and the benefits increase.²²⁴ As family operational nature of families change, the churches that adapt to make it easier for a family to remain engaged do well to keep them.²²⁵ The Age of Authenticity changed how many churches offered ministry, especially to teenagers, and there was an explosion of evangelical church

²²⁰ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 44.

²²¹ Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society*, 30.

²²² Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society*, 30.

²²³ Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society*, 33.

²²⁴ Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society*, 33.

²²⁵ Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society*, 33.

attendance in the '70s and '80s. However, many churches did not adapt, especially the mainline denominations, which saw decline while evangelical churches grew.²²⁶ The consumer mentality can be seen in this trend as families weighed out the benefits and costs of their chosen level of religious participation.

The Age of Authenticity also created a thrust to be busy. Taylor writes of a malaise that comes from the attempt to find fulfillment in the immanent frame. Seeking fulfillment only within the material can give rise to a feeling “that we are missing something, cut off from something, that we are living behind a screen.”²²⁷ Lack of fulfillment creates desire for transcendence, but within the immanent frame, the culture sought transcendence and meaning in the material by working toward earthly justice, prosperity, family relations, and so on.²²⁸ As the Age of Authenticity broke free from the chains of tradition, people no longer continued in their fathers' footsteps. They lived to be their authentic selves, not the person their father, mother, or priest wanted them to be. Without spiritual transcendence, the search for transcendence within the immanent frame was relegated to accomplishment. This created pressure to become one's authentic self through achievement. According to Root, “The good I violate is my own authenticity. In a secular age, sin is my inability to optimize myself. (The despondency that meets the congregation is its sense that it must optimize itself or bear the guilt of not doing so.)”²²⁹ He further contends that most people do not have a direct sense of guilt for not becoming

²²⁶ Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society*, 33.

²²⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 301.

²²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 310.

²²⁹ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 23.

the best version of their authenticity. The pursuit of fulfillment through success required a person to be busy. Busyness and achievement become conjoined so that eventually, busyness produces a feeling of accomplishment. We move from the guilt of sin in the hands of an authoritative God to self-condemned guilt because of not doing enough. The apparent solution is to simply increase one's level of "busyness".²³⁰

The churches' pursuit to reach lost generations in the Age of Authenticity also began to move quicker with increased busyness. According to Taylor, before this new secularity, the sacred was grounded in overtly religious space such as cathedral. Churches worked hard to regain the youth (who fell away due to the effect of Moral Therapeutic Deism) by providing more activities and ministries, creating an understanding that to be in the sacred was to be very busy at church. It was an attempt to bring young generations back to the sacred space of the church building. A busy church is considered to be a relevant church, but the "congregation, like the late-modern individual, starts running, seeking speed, to go nowhere in particular."²³¹ Churches had to match the speed of fulfillment by offering more activity to create the busyness that felt like fulfillment. To be considered relevant in the Age of Authenticity, churches must be busy with "programs, activities, groups, and a full schedule...even if such busy people don't have the time to partake themselves, they feel good knowing the church is busy, full of activities."²³²

²³⁰ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 25.

²³¹ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 37.

²³² Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 39.

The busyness of the church develops simply to match the busyness of Authenticity and that has a direct effect on the family. Families become busy and churches must offer more to increase benefit over cost to keep families engaged. But the church is not the only pull on the family schedule. The ideology of family is affected by the social structure of “work-family management and by assumptions about the family rooted in middle-class professional lifestyles.”²³³ Another caveat to family involvement in church in the Age of Authenticity is children. Single men and women are more concerned about living out their own authenticity and this has led to much lower percentages who attend church or consider religion very important. But once a man and woman marry and if they have children, there is great concern about the other within the immediate family about becoming good, productive citizens and church attendance increases.²³⁴ This growth remains within the framework of MTD where the church is an instrument for being a good, moral person. However, when those children come of age, they are single and living out their authenticity only to return to MTD-type church participation later, but as we have already discussed, the MTD makes church participation non-essential. Because of this, the number of those with strong church attendance and conviction continues to fall with each generation. Those born in the first quarter of the twentieth century were the most religious in American history and this trend has fallen with each generation.²³⁵

²³³ Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society*, 44.

²³⁴ Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society*, 47.

²³⁵ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 3.

However, children also add a sense of busyness. To be a good parent, one must provide as many activities for their children as possible. The "religious marketplace" competes with school, sports, and other extracurriculars as society continues equating busyness with meaning and fulfillment. All of the activities begin to compete with one another. One mother reported in a survey that "Sports take place on Sunday mornings sometimes. So you have conflicts and then it's just harder to pull them along."²³⁶ Another mother responded that church "doesn't fit my lifestyle all the time and because of how busy my daughter is with sports. It's so hard because she travels, she does travel softball and travel volleyball and we're gone every weekend."²³⁷ Since the 1960's, activities for children have increased exponentially, causing many parents to limit their involvement in church participation.²³⁸

Millennials and Gen-Z have a dim view of life before Authenticity. Social media creates the same pressure to be their authentic self which results in the same need to be busy. The culture of social media and the social settings of schools allow every child and teenager to know the activities of every other contributing to pressure to be just as active and they experience despondency otherwise. Adults and teens rush everywhere. Children likewise want to be rushed everywhere. Because MTD has made the church feel quite optional, other activities and interests will often take priority. In the end, everyone is tired. The cycle of finding fulfillment in busyness along with the optional MTD

²³⁶ Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation* (New York, NY, United States of America: Oxford University Press, 2021), 211.

²³⁷ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 210.

²³⁸ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 211.

Christian-ish faith not only keeps people out of the church experience but physically, mentally, and emotionally fatigued when they do attempt to come to church.²³⁹ They are burned out and fall away.

Religious Tolerance

Taylor who noted that in the Age of Authenticity, the only sin was to be intolerant.²⁴⁰ Each person was to live out their authentic self; to deprive them of their journey was primitive and barbaric in attitude. This tolerance has affected the evangelical family as America has seen a greater number of immigrants of other religions in addition to the nova effect producing numerous individual spiritual paths for people to explore in their quest for authenticity. The path taken is irrelevant so long as it is lived out in one's authentic self. We have already seen how the Age of Authenticity produced Moral Therapeutic Deism; but also, every faith including Christianity, has been watered-down as each religious path is deemed good for the simple fact that it is pursued authentically. Christian Smith reports from the National Study of Youth and Religion survey that only 9% of American teenagers believe there is little truth in religion while 60% believe many religions are true.²⁴¹

This is not happening because American teenagers have become religion scholars, studying the many facets of every religion while they conclude that many are true rather than one. Religious pluralism is the effect of the Age of Authenticity. Additionally,

²³⁹ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 40.

²⁴⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 483.

²⁴¹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 73.

because authenticity is choosing your own path without being forced to conform, nearly half of all teenagers believe it is acceptable to combine the teachings of many different religions to form your own. We also see the effect of Authenticity and MTD decreasing the perceived benefit of being part of a congregation. 67% of American teenagers disagree that for someone to be truly religious and spiritual, they need to be involved in a religious congregation.²⁴² The large majority of American teenagers, even those raised in the most fundamentalist denominations, are liberal, relativistic, affirming pluralism, inclusivity, and individual authority in their attitudes toward all religions. These are all marks of the effect of The Age of Authenticity.²⁴³

Parental Transmission

The Age of Authenticity manages to hem in Christianity to Moral Therapeutic Deism so that most parents see the church, God, and religion as instrumentally less than transformative. “When parents think about religion, the primary focus is its practical value, how it helps people, what makes it important to this life.”²⁴⁴ The individual pursuit of authenticity, meaning, and fulfillment for those who still value Christianity is not the primary source of the good life. It is one of many different voices offering an path toward flourishing. The particular religion one chooses is irrelevant; it is believed that all religions help people become "good."²⁴⁵ This is “largely because what matters about

²⁴² Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 73.

²⁴³ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 115.

²⁴⁴ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 50.

²⁴⁵ Christian Smith, Bridget Ritz, and Michael Rotolo, *Religious Parenting: Transmitting Faith and Values in Contemporary America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2019), 53.

religion is not its particular theological or metaphysical claims, which are considered secondary, but rather its values and moral teachings.”²⁴⁶ The attitude of most parents is that all religions offer help for one to feel more at peace and happy. It is therapeutic and also helps you live a moral life. It is not about a transcendental experience that transforms the person from the inside out. To view one religion as superior to another is considered “bad, dangerous, and must be avoided.”²⁴⁷ For this reason, fewer parents teach their children a particular faith as truth. Even those who attend church regularly in a denomination that claims to be the truth compared to all other religions struggle to communicate this to their children.²⁴⁸ In the Age of Authenticity, one must never force another to conform to anything they do not choose and this includes parents and their religious views. More parents encourage their children to find their own path, to discover what they believe. The worst thing a parent can do in the Age of Authenticity is to somehow hinder their child from becoming their “best selves.”²⁴⁹

In the Age of Authenticity, the choices made by a person carry greater weight because fulfillment is assumed to derive from becoming one’s best self . Society in the pursuit of authenticity has created so many choices in every area of life to give as many potential paths to fulfillment as possible. However, within the immanent frame, each choice can eventually lead to the malaise of unfulfillment since human beings are

²⁴⁶ Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, *Religious Parenting*, 56.

²⁴⁷ Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, *Religious Parenting*, 88.

²⁴⁸ Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, *Religious Parenting*, 90.

²⁴⁹ Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, *Religious Parenting*, 105.

ultimately spiritual creatures. A fish cannot find fulfillment on the sidewalk and neither can a person find fulfillment by avoiding spiritual transcendence.

The sheer number of possibilities could easily outlast several lifetimes. But the decisions of the parents matter: perhaps the generational decline from evangelicalism has more to do with parents than the culture. In the Age of Authenticity, parents and their young adult children and grandchildren are embedded in an individualistic culture seeking their own path to fulfillment. But how each generation navigates their own path within Authenticity plays a larger role in the transmission of religious beliefs than forces outside the family. Smith and Denton write: “Contrary to misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misperceptions, we believe that the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents.”²⁵⁰

Parental Conviction

Social forces embedded in American culture have great influence over millennials and Gen Z. This has been true for every teenager since the 1960s. However, Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk reveal that the most influential force upon the faith of children as they become adults is the parents' faith.²⁵¹ According to these authors, when parents consider their religion very important, their children are much more likely, even ten years later, to also say that their religion is very important to them.²⁵² This is

²⁵⁰ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 261.

²⁵¹ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 37.

²⁵² Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 38.

measured by many factors, but two stand out in particular. When religion is spoken of daily, there is an increase in the importance of religion to children when they become adults compared to religion just being spoken of weekly.²⁵³ This reveals that the way parents' pursuit of spiritual or Christian authenticity becomes a major factor in the religious development of children even into their adulthood. The data does not necessarily measure this, however, the combination of religion being very important and religious talk occurring daily in the home could reveal a deeper conviction for the parents.

Another key aspect of the Age of Authenticity is choice. To succeed in the parameters of Authenticity, one must decide who they are and then fully develop themselves in this direction. In other words, a wholehearted commitment to who one desires to be would be considered a success within the social imaginary of Authenticity. Of course, a choice to be religious may not be acceptable considering that religion would be perceived by those outside of its influence as forced conformity. Nevertheless, the pursuit of fulfillment based on one's desires would allow one to dive deep into their religious beliefs. Secular society judges this person differently if they attempt to proselytize others. This indicates a belief within the religious person that their way is the right way at the exclusion of others. This is understood as intolerance. By contrast, adult children of parents who displayed duplicity in their faith also caused difficulty for adult children attempting to pass down their faith to their children. In other words, the religious conviction of parents and grandparents somewhat predicts the religion of the children and grandchildren.²⁵⁴

²⁵³ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 38.

²⁵⁴ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 172.

Along with daily religious speech, parental attendance at organized religious services also indicates the level of religious engagement of their children as adults.²⁵⁵ When parents attended organized religious services and/or activities weekly, their adult children were much more likely to do the same as adults compared to those parents who only attended such services monthly.²⁵⁶ These elements would also reveal greater conviction in belief along with a more consistent lifestyle that aligns with them. However, another important factor is parenting style.

Parenting Style

Smith and Adamczyk take four types of parenting styles and compare these to generational religious transmission. These four parenting styles are authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and less engaged.²⁵⁷ The authoritative style is characterized by parents who hold their children to high expectations combined with a great deal of warmth and communication. There is effort to help their children adjust to life at each age in healthy ways by modifying rules to fit situations and age.²⁵⁸ This would align most of the four parenting styles with biblical parenting. Christian Smith, Bridget Ritz, and Michael Rotolo note that black and white Protestant parents tend more often to see the importance of grounding their children in biblical teaching.²⁵⁹ High standards in every

²⁵⁵ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 37–38.

²⁵⁶ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 38.

²⁵⁷ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 39.

²⁵⁸ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 40.

²⁵⁹ Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, *Religious Parenting*, 162.

area of life to reflect one's honor to God along with discipline, love, and patience characterize such biblical teachings as found in parables such as the Prodigal Son.²⁶⁰ Religious parents who parent with an authoritative style see the greatest levels of transmission of their Christian faith in adult offspring. Some studies suggest the greatest indicator of transmission is the parents' level of affiliation.²⁶¹ Smith and Adamczyk also found a correlation between authoritative parenting and the importance of religion in a family. Those parents who believed religion was "very important" were more likely to use an authoritative style of parenting resulting in the greatest level of transmission.²⁶² The parenting style alone did not guarantee a high level of transmission. Authoritative parenting showed the closest correlation to adult children having the same level of importance on their religion as their parents.²⁶³ So then, when parents have a high level of religious importance combined with an authoritative style, they are more likely to also have a greater participation rate in their religious services, talk more freely daily in the home about religion, and are more likely to be of Mormon or Protestant faith.²⁶⁴ From this, we can deduce that when personal lifestyle conforms closely with the teachings of Christ, parental transmission of faith is highest. This is when the faith is at its most authentic.

²⁶⁰ Smith, Ritz, and Rotolo, *Religious Parenting*, 162.

²⁶¹ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 44.

²⁶² Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 47.

²⁶³ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 50.

²⁶⁴ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 50.

Parents cannot control the culture. Regardless of what parents do, they cannot follow their children around everywhere they go. They cannot insulate them from those cultural trends that distract from godliness. But they do have control over their own behavior. If parents are not solid in their own beliefs in a way that is seen in action, neither will their children be. But if parents consistently live what they say they believe despite the cultural distractions, there is a greater chance their faith will be passed down to their children and grandchildren.²⁶⁵ The Scripture says God is love. When parents' religious activity is done in the love described by Scripture, it produces a warm and close relationship. Bengtson, Putney, and Harris point out the high rate of faith transmission when children perceive closeness in their relationship with their parents. They go on to say, "It is thus likely that when a child feels close to a parent, he or she is more likely to imitate or model that parent, for example being highly involved in church."²⁶⁶ For authoritative parents who also feel their faith to be "very important," their children are twice as likely to follow them in their religious intensity and participation. The same principle works, however, for those who do not consider faith "very important." For parents who are loving and authoritative (but do not behaviorally participate in their spirituality), their children are twice as likely to not be spiritual as adults.²⁶⁷

From this, we can deduce a trend. As Christianity continues to take on forms of Moral Therapeutic Deism, religion and church participation are seen only as an

²⁶⁵ Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations*, Reprint edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 73.

²⁶⁶ Bengtson, Putney, and Harris, *Families and Faith*, 73.

²⁶⁷ Bengtson, Putney, and Harris, *Families and Faith*, 76.

instrument to assist in becoming good instead of a gathering of those seeking transcendence in worship, prayer, and meditation. As a result, church participation wanes. It is not seen as essential. Authoritative parents whose Christianity has essentially become MTD will successfully reproduce an MTD version of Christianity in their children. If the perceived goal of church participation is goodness and this can be attained without church, then what is the church's purpose? The result is an unfamiliarity with doctrine and spiritual practices. Without these, the only transformation is to moral and ethical goodness, not holiness from a transcendent communion with God.

Dean called the mentality of MTD as the “cult of nice.”²⁶⁸ However, niceness, morality, and being a good person are all realized within Taylor's immanent frame. James K.A. Smith says, “The immanent sphere—the this-worldly plane—swells in importance just to the extent that the eternal and the transcendent are eclipsed.”²⁶⁹ It is a pursuit of the transcendent within the natural without any real transcendence. Andrew Root describes MTD as a “form of faith where the actuality of a personal (ontologically other) God is unbelievable and transcendence is impossible.”²⁷⁰ The pursuit of transcendence within the immanent frame pushes us to ‘become,’ rushing to do more to find fulfillment. This leaves us feeling as if we are missing something. The malaise rolls in. Searching for something more within the immanent frame will produce depressed behaviors. Searching for something more in the beyond but without Christ will lead to false spiritualities used to prop up one’s self but also lead to emptiness and depression. This is the malaise.

²⁶⁸ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 25.

²⁶⁹ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 55.

²⁷⁰ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 111.

Andrew Root shares the effect of the Age of Authenticity and the depression that comes from the dutiful pursuit to optimize one's self through busyness leading to fatigue and emptiness: "Depression is the shadow side of authenticity."²⁷¹ The Age of Authenticity has paved a way to an individualized pursuit of fulfillment through self-actualization, but the busier we are trying to become our best selves, the less time we spend actually being. The result is loneliness, burnout, and depression²⁷²

The generational downturn of evangelicalism is not a simple forfeiture of faith as much as being diverted by the Age of Authenticity. Though many desire to pursue Christ, MTD has embedded itself into evangelicalism in a social imaginary that seeks fulfillment without transcendence. And this leaves evangelical feeling lost, feeling as if life as a Christian should be more than what it seems to be. However, parents are not powerless. They continue to wield a great amount of influence with their children. When they consistently adhere to Scripture in the mode of love through authoritative parenting, the faith is more likely to be passed down. But they must be aware of the influence the Age of Authenticity has on their own faith.

Millennials, Gen Z, and Political Polarization in the Age of Authenticity

The Age of Authenticity has transformed the pursuit of human flourishing. Living for others in one's community in order to improve it is no longer the social imaginary. Now, society is pressed into an individualistic pursuit of "the good life." This way of thinking plays a huge role in politics. Because of the rise of the Religious Right as a

²⁷¹ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 10.

²⁷² Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 289.

significant player, religion and politics operate with each bleeding profusely into the other. It is not possible to separate the two.

Heft and Stets identify some beliefs held by the Religious Right that have deeply affected society and how millennials and Gen Z perceive evangelicalism, including:

- Opposition to same-sex marriage:
- Opposition to open borders
- Commitment to white America while denying institutional racism (though this item is quite nuanced)
- Commitment to Christian nationalism²⁷³

It is important to look deeper into each of these issues. The Christian right holds to the definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman in congruence with Bible teaching stemming from the union of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.²⁷⁴ At the same time, the Christian Right holds to the Biblical belief declaring homosexuality to be a sinful practice.²⁷⁵ Finally, they hold to the Biblical belief that God will judge harshly those nations whose laws do not conform with Scripture.²⁷⁶ These views are the political motivation of the Christian Right. These stances on their own are incongruent with the Age of Authenticity. Laws that prohibit absolute freedom are considered repressive. However, in addition to the political views of the Christian Right, it is the

²⁷³ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, p. 178.

²⁷⁴ Gen 2:21-24 (NIV).

²⁷⁵ 1 Tim 1:9-10.

²⁷⁶ Ps 33:12-19.

intensity of their efforts and vehement rhetoric that creates distance between evangelicalism and the Age of Authenticity. Leading evangelical efforts against same-sex marriage “verges on obsession.”²⁷⁷

In the area of open borders, the stance has a similar foundation which is the desire to legislate Christian morality for the purpose of maintaining a Christian nation.²⁷⁸ The Christian Right views the influx of immigrants from other cultures and nations are a threat to the American way.²⁷⁹ Because of the amalgamation of capitalism, consumerism, and Christianity in Republicanism, immigrants are seen as a threat. Immigrants coming to America for asylum need financial aid which is offered by the government. The possibility of immigrants maintain their cultures and religion that are not grounded in individualistic Christianity poses a threat according to the Christian Right.

The Christian Right, in its individualist, capitalist view of Christianity opposes social programs for marginalized communities.²⁸⁰ In the Age of Authenticity that hinders comfort of anyone is seen as repressive. The result of this political stance is an image of racism determined to maintain white America more than the image of Christ loving the poor and marginalized.

Christian nationalism is weaved in each of these issues. It is the development of Christianity embedded in capitalism and the desire to keep alive the American Way that

²⁷⁷ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 178.

²⁷⁸ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 178.

²⁷⁹ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 178.

²⁸⁰ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 178.

is seen as unloving and racist. But it is the determination of this voting bloc to hold on to these things even while touting a leader who in his personal life exhibits wordly behavior that sets the Christian Right in opposition to the population influenced by the Age of Authenticity.²⁸¹

Each of these is directly affected by the Age of Authenticity. The consumer-minded, individualistic pursuit of fulfillment within the immanent frame while not subjecting oneself to any authority affects both sides of the political aisle. The discrepancy between the two parties can be characterized as a difference in where individual autonomy should fall along the continuum. The Age of Authenticity has also relegated Christianity, in large form, to MTD.

For evangelicals, the pursuit of fulfillment continues to embrace the morality of Scripture while, the morality of the Age of Authenticity has become civility for the rest of America. Taylor refers to this morality as the “modern moral order” and James K.A. Smith adds that this is “unhooked from the specifics of Christian doctrine and tethered to a more generic deistic god.”²⁸² The modern moral order is essentially the idealization of civic politeness.²⁸³ This polite society becomes “a new mode of self-sufficient sociality that becomes an end in itself.”²⁸⁴ Politeness or civility is a standard of interaction, not a standard of morality. There is conflict when Christianity attempts to establish those

²⁸¹ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 178.

²⁸² Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 53.

²⁸³ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 53.

²⁸⁴ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 53.

morals legislatively or to resist the normalization of behavior perceived to be without morals by evangelicals. This conflict determines how many among millennials and Gen Z assess evangelicalism.

Conservatives, by definition, want to conserve the nation as it was in the past. For evangelicals, the change in how morality has been redefined is not acceptable. For many evangelicals, there is a direct connection between Christianity and western civilization.²⁸⁵ Evangelicals then operate as if a change in civilization is an attack on Christianity itself.²⁸⁶ To remove biblical morals from society defines life as mechanical and without deeper meaning.²⁸⁷ For example, without standards of sexual morality, sex loses its biblical significance: it is just something that people do. Without morality and the legislation of morality, evangelicalism fears the nation will lose a sense of meaning and transcendence.²⁸⁸ Evangelicals based their morality on Scripture.²⁸⁹ For evangelicals, Biblical morality often conflates with their sense of democracy. The greatness of America is the freedom that comes with democracy, but the democracy must be held together with Biblical morality. Without it, America will elect lawmakers who will pass laws ignoring Christian standards. This would have a spiritual implication. The nation

²⁸⁵ Bowman, *Christian*, 2.

²⁸⁶ Bowman, *Christian*, 9.

²⁸⁷ Bowman, *Christian*, 9.

²⁸⁸ Bowman, *Christian*, 9.

²⁸⁹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 155.

would be subject to God's judgment. However, outside of evangelical thought, morality has been defined differently in The Age of Authenticity.

If "the good life," defined in terms of success, is the highest of human ideals and this is defined in terms of success, then morality is determined by what promotes or hinders material prosperity.²⁹⁰ Compared to biblical morality (which emphasizes what is good for the soul), authenticity promotes what contributes toward success. Smith and Denton refer to this as a "consequentialist morality."²⁹¹ To an extreme, the Age of Authenticity that prizes pleasure would also deem anything that hinders pleasure as immoral so that there is no objective moral standard, but all is relative. The only standard is not to cause harm to oneself or others. However, the harm in this case is irrelevant to a person's spiritual health, and is only important for their bodily, mental, emotional, or material well-being.²⁹²

Two different priorities can be seen within the two distinct approaches to morality. Evangelicalism, by definition, desires to extend its belief to others. The non-evangelical approach to morality is kept within the context of success, pleasure, and civility. Because evangelicalism has tied the health of the nation to legislative laws that mirror biblical morality with the belief that these laws are best for the nation and the individual, their political pursuits have been heightened fervidly. Because it is an issue of morality, those who oppose such laws or push for a non-Biblical morality, it can create a

²⁹⁰ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 155.

²⁹¹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 155.

²⁹² Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 155.

sense of arrogance leaving those on the other political side judged. And in the Age of Authenticity, to judge another's beliefs or behaviors as immoral is itself considered immoral. In the 2016 election, Donald Trump was helped by receiving 81% of the vote from white conservative evangelicals. The Religious Right's presence intensified around their feelings that the government was moving away from Christianity in what they believed to be an assault on their religious liberties and growing secularism.²⁹³

After World War II, a narrative developed that Germany had gone awry and become a totalitarian dictatorship culminating in the attempted extermination of an entire race. According to this narrative, it happened as a result of the nation falling away from its Christian beliefs. Therefore, the values of Christianity were re-emphasized. The military created an educational system to reinforce these values to ensure both the victory over Germany and to guard against America's fall from Christianity. The program was going to be led by the YMCA.²⁹⁴ The US military asked John Eskine, head of the English department at Columbia University, to be the *de facto* president because of his staunch beliefs (which it was thought aligned with historical Christianity in America).²⁹⁵ He was charged with instilling these values into the soldiers. This reveals one connection made between Christianity and the health of the nation. Matthew Bowman describes this connection:

“A central trait of early twentieth-century white liberal Protestants was optimism. Like Erskine, they had great faith in the soul's capacity for moral progress given sufficient autonomy, great faith that education would lead to moral refinement

²⁹³ Bowman, *Christian*, 1.

²⁹⁴ Bowman, *Christian*, 32.

²⁹⁵ Bowman, *Christian*, 33.

and hence a healthier civilization, and great faith that this process, more central to their version of Christianity than what they believed to be the dogmatics of traditional theology, was the moral bedrock of American democracy. Indeed, for many liberal Protestants the distinction between Christianity and democracy or religion and civilization were invisible; liberal Protestantism seemed to them simply what a democratic society was.”²⁹⁶

When this philosophy took into consideration what happened in Germany, Christianity and the freedom it touted took on a new political meaning of individual rights.²⁹⁷ The result was a Christianity aligned with the Age of Authenticity where individual freedom was treasured, and civilization was the goal. The fall of Germany left many with the belief that the abandoned Christian value of freedom, replaced by “science, empiricism, bureaucracy, and institution,” would be the destruction of a nation stemming from unhealthy social behavior.²⁹⁸ The Age of Authenticity was brewing within this new individualized Christianity in pursuit of a healthy civilization more than spiritual transformation. Bowman writes: “...what liberal civilization achieved was to blend the moral imperative of Christianity with the Enlightenment’s confidence in an individual capacity.” Christianity in American politics was not going away. It was seen as the essential “moral individualism that sustained an electoral government.”²⁹⁹

The politics of maintaining a "Christian nation" continue for the modern Religious Right. Tony Keddie writes: “Trump’s success in 2016 signaled how much more a candidate’s Small Government, conservative politics matter to the Christian Right

²⁹⁶ Bowman, *Christian*, 34.

²⁹⁷ Bowman, *Christian*, 41.

²⁹⁸ Bowman, *Christian*, 48.

²⁹⁹ Bowman, *Christian*, 51.

than any semblance of a sincere commitment to Christ.”³⁰⁰ It was not the faith of Donald Trump, but it was his pushback against what evangelicals saw as pervasive secularism in society that attracted evangelicals to his voting bloc.³⁰¹ The pushback included locking down the borders and strict entrance policies from Muslim countries, moving the American Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and the possibility of Supreme Court justices that would overthrow *Roe v. Wade*.³⁰² In addition, there was a sense of self-sufficiency. Christianity formed from the early days of American history was amalgamated into the spirit of both individualism and national optimism.³⁰³ Trump’s slogan of “Make America Great Again” encapsulated for evangelicals a return to Christianity through government control and legislation and thus to a more powerful nation. Mike Pence, Trump’s vice president, said that same-sex couples will be the cause of “societal collapse.”³⁰⁴ To the non-evangelical, however, it was seen very differently.

Trump’s stances on lowering taxes, strong immigration restrictions, opposition to collective bargaining, abortion, homosexuality, and same-sex marriage were seen as legislative assaults on authenticity. The politicians responsible were seen as xenophobic, nationalistic, homophobic, and bigoted.³⁰⁵ For non-evangelical Christians, all of this

³⁰⁰ Tony Keddie, *Republican Jesus: How the Right Has Rewritten the Gospels*, First edition. (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021), 129.

³⁰¹ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 71.

³⁰² Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 72.

³⁰³ Keddie, *Republican Jesus*, 157.

³⁰⁴ Keddie, *Republican Jesus*, 182.

³⁰⁵ Keddie, *Republican Jesus*, 179.

seemed hypocritical. Non-evangelical Christianity was founded in tolerance with a standard of morality formed in authenticity where immorality was anything that seemed to be hurtful to others attempting to prohibit them from being their authentic self. The zeal of the Christian right in its pursuit of individualism, freedom, and nationalism was characterized by zeal and at times, anger stemming from the belief that if these values are abandoned, the death of the nation was immanent. But this zeal was not civil. So for all who disagreed with the Christian right the values espoused were seen as sinful in their attempt to restrict pleasure and success. How this repression was executed was viewed to be just as wicked. As the Christian Right attempts to force legislation to conserve a Christian nation, the Evangelical left sees this behavior as an assault on evangelicalism itself and stands in opposition to the right with a political posture grounded in social justice more closely aligned with the social imaginary of the Age of Authenticity. Heft and Stets write:

“This argument is an excellent reminder that the Christian Right is not simply pushing non-evangelicals into religious non-affiliation. The Christian Right is also causing great turmoil within white evangelicalism itself. Over the past five decades, there has existed a small but persistent ‘evangelical left.’” “But as the contemporary Christian Right has tightened its grip on white evangelicalism, the evangelical left has become increasingly active in its efforts to ‘save’ evangelicalism.”³⁰⁶

For millennials and Gen Z raised in Authenticity without reference to the Christianity formed out of World War II, evangelicalism is less appealing. Polarization between the Christian left and right repels young adults from evangelicalism because of apparent hypocrisy. Also, the basis of the Christian Right is moral superiority and

³⁰⁶ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 183.

millennials “do not wish to be defined by membership in any partisan team that demonizes its opponents. Instead, they seem to yearn to live in a more civil society.”³⁰⁷ Not only are they put off by alleged "demonization," they disagree with the politics of pro-life, strict borders, anti-marijuana, and anti-LGBTQ+ policy. Hertzke, Olson, Dulk, and Fowler write that millennials are “rejecting organized religion because they see it to be too conservative, particularly on gay rights.”³⁰⁸

Race and Politics

Willie James Jennings argues “against white self-sufficient masculinity.”³⁰⁹ Jennings' premise is not based on overt racism, but is rather a critique of American Evangelicalism. The most familiar forms of American Christianity developed out of the Second World War when America stood repulsed by Nazi Germany and the German citizen’s departure from Protestantism. The result was a culturally-focused American Christianity that emphasized the individual and freedom. This mirrored the American culture of whiteness. After the war, America embarked upon Keynesian consumerism, but black America remained impoverished. The model of self-sufficiency did not fit Black America since their destiny was out of their hands and in the hands of the white political power structure.

³⁰⁷ Allen D. Hertzke et al., *Religion and Politics in America: Faith, Culture, and Strategic Choices*, 6th edition. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 363.

³⁰⁸ Hertzke et al., *Religion and Politics in America*, 61.

³⁰⁹ Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*, Illustrated edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2020), 14.

During slavery, clergy who wished to see slaves come to Christ to curb the concern of slave owners encouraged colonial legislatures to declare that “slaves remained slaves even when baptized and going even further by asking Anglican Bishop George Berkely to solicit a letter from Britain’s attorney general that supported this notion.”³¹⁰ They also began to teach that “Christian liberty in no way changed temporal bondage.”³¹¹ The clergymen also reassured slaveowners that Christianity would not give rise to revolt, but would instead teach slaves to be quiet and submissive. Here is an example of Francis LeJau’s baptismal vow for slaves read in part:

“You declare in the presence of God and before this congregation that you do not ask for the holy baptism out of any design to free yourself from the Duty and Obedience you owe to your Master while you live, but merely for the good of your soul and to partake of the Graces and Blessings promised to the Members of the Church of Jesus Christ.”³¹²

The result of this appeasement for the sake of evangelism not only justified slavery but enshrined it into Christian America. Even as white Christian abolitionists pushed against slavery, they did not push against racialization so that when slaves were freed, they were viewed as incapable of self-sufficiency.³¹³ A good example of how Christianity and politics merged can be seen by the urging of evangelicals to abolish slavery. It came from the spread of postmillennialism with its tenet that Christians needed to create a near perfect, Christlike society to prepare for Christ’s return. However, not all were united and

³¹⁰ Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 23.

³¹¹ Smith and Emerson, *Divided by Faith*, 23.

³¹² Smith and Emerson, *Divided by Faith*, 23.

³¹³ Smith and Emerson, *Divided by Faith*, 28.

the cause of division was slavery.³¹⁴ Some evangelicals believed slavery was sinful, however, they did not engage in the politics of abolition due to fear of becoming distracted from the Great Commission and seeing souls saved. They openly opposed slavery but did not prioritize freedom for slaves nor did they speak out much against racial prejudice and segregation as the new century dawned.³¹⁵ Even as free citizens, Black Americans were seen as not self-sufficient. Yet, the Christian values melded into the political values of a nation where market principles that made room for wealth, advancement, and the pursuit of fulfillment, just not for everyone.³¹⁶

Michael Emerson and Christian Smith use the term "racialized" to mean "a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships."³¹⁷ This definition captures the idea that "racism is not merely individual overt prejudice or the free-floating irrational driver of race problems, but the collective misuse of power that results in diminished life opportunities."³¹⁸ Emerson and Smith note that some of those who perpetuate these systems are the first ones to say they disagree with the system's results. These who perpetuate these systems are unaware these systems are producing the opposite of what they say they want. For example, well-educated whites are unlikely to say they are uncomfortable with black neighbors, but live in a neighborhood predominantly white

³¹⁴ Smith and Emerson, *Divided by Faith*, 30.

³¹⁵ Smith and Emerson, *Divided by Faith*, 1.

³¹⁶ Smith and Emerson, *Divided by Faith*, 1.

³¹⁷ Smith and Emerson, *Divided by Faith*, 7.

³¹⁸ Smith and Emerson, *Divided by Faith*, 9.

more often than not. Although this same group would say they are most open to integrated schools, they are most likely to have their children in predominantly white private schools.³¹⁹

Jennings comments that Europeans originally imagined they could “see the peoples of the world better than the peoples of the world could see themselves.”³²⁰ Consequently, they believed they knew what was best to create and maintain the highest civilization. They formed a process of institutionalization without realizing its effect on opportunities for minorities. These institutions guided by an economic theory based in individualism formed the European social structure.³²¹ Even as America continued to develop into the 1900s, the disparagement in the black-white divide remained significant. Even though slavery was abolished, racial tension moved people to create communities based on commodities and profit from their own races. They did not want to be near those who might dislike or hate them.³²² These profit arrangements between whites, excluding blacks, continued overtly (even through the Civil Rights Movement and still exists today covertly). Generational profiteering in the white community along with an educational system benefitting the white community more than the black community lasting centuries have created power structures hindering the black community, even if unwittingly.³²³ White evangelicalism based on self-sufficiency was a foreign thought to

³¹⁹ Smith and Emerson, *Divided by Faith*, 10.

³²⁰ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 129.

³²¹ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 136.

³²² Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 136.

³²³ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 136.

minorities excluded from power structures in education and commerce since arriving in this land. This has an effect on religion and politics within evangelicalism.

Because American Christianity has been framed in self-sufficient masculinity, it is at odds even with non-white evangelicals. Though most white conservative evangelicals would not have realized, when they stumped for some of these policies, they set themselves up against other issues aimed at helping or mitigating the historical racialization of America making them an easy target to be accused of racism. For example, though black Americans are much more likely to identify as evangelical, their history with America creates a liberal lean in financial areas of policy so there is a greater support for items such as government job programs, healthcare, civil rights, and affirmative action.³²⁴ The link between politics and religion was destined to affect race relations and vice versa.

In 2017, a black Southern Baptist pastor named Dwight McKissic, introduced a resolution “condemning white supremacy and the ‘racial bigotries of the so-called “alt-right.””³²⁵ The resolution was not received at first, because it combined the racial divide with quasi-conservative politics. Eventually, however, it passed. Even though it was about the alt-right, many who considered themselves mainstream conservatives felt they, too, were being demonized as extreme because of Trump’s election in 2016.³²⁶ At the same time, Emerson and Smith note that “black churches have traditionally served as a

³²⁴ Hertzke et al., *Religion and Politics in America*, 191.

³²⁵ Hertzke et al., *Religion and Politics in America*, 117.

³²⁶ Keddie, *Republican Jesus*, 132.

refuge from the impacts of race in the United States, and a place where institutionalized, systemic factors are discussed and critiqued.”³²⁷ A great example is seen in that the Civil Rights movement was spearheaded by black clergy speaking to black congregations.³²⁸

Historically, white evangelicals pressed for the spiritual salvation of slaves, while at the same time reinforcing the horrors of slavery or ignoring it altogether for the sake of evangelism. As America continued after abolition into the modern era of civil rights, Christianity entrenched in American politics was based on self-sufficiency ignoring the systemic development in American institutions stripped black Americans from the opportunities afforded most white persons that ability to be self-sufficient. This divided them politically. Not only did it divide them politically as a result of their faith (Smith and Emerson's entire premise), but it also produced animosity between conservative evangelicals, being overwhelmingly white, and more liberal evangelicals. To white conservative evangelicals, the programs supported by liberal evangelicals, which includes a majority of black evangelicals, seemed anti-American, socialist, communist, and anti-Christian. According to Tony Keddie:

“In reaction to FDR’s Big Government, the corporate-sponsored Christian Right sold a Republican brand of Jesus by appealing to American’s patriotic love of freedom and fear of communism. This Republican Jesus didn’t look the same to every consumer, but he was always a promoter of free enterprise, limited government, traditional family values, and individual freedoms. And his worst enemies were the communists, whether crypto-communists among the labor organizers, socialists, and left-wing Democrats in America or the fascist communists abroad. As the heir of Protestantism and classical liberalism, Republican Jesus didn’t suffer Pharisaic legalists like FDR’s people and the rulers of totalitarian states. He called individuals to faith in free enterprise, by the grace

³²⁷ Smith and Emerson, *Divided by Faith*, 125.

³²⁸ Smith and Emerson, *Divided by Faith*, 125.

of God and government, letting the poor and marginalized fade into the background.”³²⁹

To black evangelicals, conservative politics regarding small government and the free enterprise system supported by white conservative evangelicals seemed to harbor hatred for homosexuals, antipathy for immigrants, racism, xenophobia, and sexism.³³⁰

In the Age of Authenticity there is little patience with evangelicals due to a large part the conflation of evangelicalism and conservatism and the seeming hypocrisy of supporting politicians who seem to have little authentic Christianity but support the policies of white self-sufficiency. For millennials and Gen Z, this hypocrisy was seen in The Christian Right’s endorsement of Donald Trump. The trend began when white, mainly white evangelicals elected Ronald Reagan over Jimmy Carter. This was despite the common knowledge of the personal piety of Jimmy Carter compared to a lack of faithful Christian practices such as church attendance in the life of Ronald Reagan. However, as politics heated up during the Trump campaign, the divide between evangelicals and authenticity dramatically increased.³³¹

³²⁹ Keddie, *Republican Jesus*, 126.

³³⁰ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 178.

³³¹ Keddie, *Republican Jesus*, 124.

CHAPTER 3

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR ASSIMILATION INTO THE THE BODY OF CHRIST

Introduction

James K.A. Smith describes Charles Taylor's idea of how Secular² distinguishes between secular and sacred spaces.³³² Chapter 2 analyzed the evangelical response to the young adult exodus of the 1960s. This response was anchored in Secular², although a new social imaginary of secularism emerged. The goal of evangelicals was to retrieve this lost population back to the church (a sacred space). The attempts to get young adults back to church was born out of the social imaginary that fulfillment could be achieved through the immanent frame and the Age of Authenticity. The attempts were not to connect these generations with transcendence, but only to get them back into the sacred space. It was a goal to entice the young to return using strategies such as busyness with a plea to them as consumers of a product, namely church. Though there was for the the souls of these young people the strategy was misguided and reduced to location and activity more than communion with God.³³³

The approach of recapturing youth into sacred space is ineffective in the Age of Authenticity because MTD downgrades the perceived need for church participation by promoting the view that God's purpose for our lives is to help us become moral people with a healthy self-esteem. Sacred space is not needed for this. Even if they returned to the space of the church, it was only for a brief time since the existential need of

³³² Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 20.

³³³ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 107.

participation in the Body of Christ was also not being communicated. There needs to be a theological foundation disseminated for assimilation into the Body of Christ. This is true for all ages, but this is essential to recapture the hearts of young generations. The answer must go further than simply declaring that the Bible dictates church participation.

Authenticity is characterized by skepticism: a clear spiritual and theological defense of church participation must be known, understood, and communicated. Otherwise, what is the point of evangelistic efforts to bring people to the sacred space of the church? The following section illustrates a theological foundation for why Christianity must be immersed in the community that is the Body of Christ.

Christianity is Community in the Body of Christ

The ontology of Christianity is community. It is a community of faith so tightly knit that the Scriptural analogy is that of a single human body.³³⁴ This chapter contends that transformation can only occur within the spiritual community that is the Body of Christ. Transformation cannot work deeply when one is disconnected from the community of believers. John Zizioulas, a Greek Orthodox scholar, as saying, "A person cannot be imagined in himself but only within his relationships."³³⁵ Just as God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone," we must understand that by being made in the image of God, we are communal beings as God is communal within Himself.³³⁶ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the plurality of the singular God. The essence is communal, and man

³³⁴ Rom 12:3-4

³³⁵ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. (Crestwood, N.Y: St Vladimirs Seminary Pr, 1997), 105.

³³⁶ Gen 2:18.

is made in His image, therefore we cannot reach our full potential outside of community. However, this community must be the Body of Christ. Matthaëi argues that “the life of the faith community is itself the curriculum for forming faith.”³³⁷ She references the community of faith, but her point is that it becomes or is the curriculum that forms the spirit. Any community in which one belongs indeed works as a curriculum to teach certain truths, values, and habits. According to James K.A. Smith, “...what we love is a specific vision of the good life, an implicit picture of what we think human flourishing looks like.”³³⁸ As humans, we group ourselves with people we want to be around. We can call this love, but at times, we gather with people who do not necessarily feel or express love toward us. We do this because those who claim to love us actually fail to exhibit the biblical behaviors of love as defined in 1 Corinthians 13. When those who claim to love someone do not do this well, the other looks for community away from such people; however, the lack of love experienced from them subconsciously alters one's concept of love through the narrative in which they live together. Then, as one escapes those who claim to love them but do not exhibit love behaviorly according to 1 Corinthians 13, love is defined or re-defined by the behaviors of others who are loving and accepting even if their imagined flourishing is secular. These behaviorally positive relationships allow for a re-imagining of what love is. These new relationships become the new standard of love. There is positive, mutual benefit with constructive criticism pointing toward real flourishing. Nevertheless, human tendency is to gather around those whose behavior

³³⁷ Matthaëi, *Formation in Faith*, 11.

³³⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Cultural Liturgies. Illustrated Edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 52.

create a sense of value and acceptance. Smith writes that “our love can be aimed at different ends or pointed in different directions, and these differences are what define us as individuals and as communities.”³³⁹ As believers are immersed in a community where love is redefined from a secular perspective within the immanent frame to a 1 Corinthians 13 definition, a new paradigm for relationships is adopted. It is not that these relationships always produce positive feelings. However, they mostly produce positive outcomes in one’s spirit. They create a healthy self-image, an ability to delay gratification and discipline one’s behavior to achieve a higher goal. They create success, emotionally and practically. These relationships become the right path to the good life. Values, ethics, and desires emerge within that align with the group of people who manifest acceptance, love, and flourishing outcomes. A sense of community is not found in isolation, but the community in which one belongs matters for the defining of a flourishing life. In keeping community with others, life is intertwined with one another in the community. Hearts and minds are twisted together to form unity within the community. This principle of community is true regardless of the community one chooses to belong. Stories are exchanged drawing pictures of what life should be. And these have a transformative effect. James K.A. Smith describes the transformation within community as follows:

“The goods and aspects of human flourishing painted by these alluring pictures of the good life begin to seep into the fiber of our (everyday, noncognitive) being (ie., our hearts) and thus govern and shape our decisions, actions, and habits. Thus, we become certain kinds of people; we begin to emulate, mimic, and mirror the particular vision that we desire.”³⁴⁰

³³⁹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 52.

³⁴⁰ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 54.

The community in which a believer chooses to be involved also forms others in the community on a spiritual level. To be formed into Christlikeness, those who desire such transformation must participate in community. However, physical presence in a community does not equally indicate full participation in the community. It is quite possible to be present in a community, yet never experience transformation. Human social existence occurs in multiple communities at once. People gravitate toward those communities that attract their affinity as a result of feeling valued and loved or offering a perceived benefit to make their life good. Whether one participates in a violent gang or Bible study group, that participation was initiated by those nearest to them who appealed to their sense of value and love by offering what seems good. Once participating in this group begins, the community becomes the curriculum by which a lifestyle, worldview, value, and ethics are learned and adopted in a subconscious way. For the sake of discipleship, community is essential, but there must be, full and active participation. This is reflected in the Scriptures. For example, a newly converted person is baptized into the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.³⁴¹ The nature of the Godhead is community, therefore every believer is baptized or immersed into the community. But what is this community?

The community is the Body of Christ with Christ as the Head. The Head dictates to the body what it will or will not do. To be baptized into the community of faith, one is immersed into the body by accepting Christ the God who loves them and will enable them to love as He loves. Christ's mission is to reconcile man with God in Himself. This mission belongs to the church, the Body of Christ. When one is baptized, there is immersion not only into the person of Christ but also His mission as well as His priestly

³⁴¹ Mat 28:18-20.

role between God and man to reconcile them together. Matthaëi writes: “Baptism is more than an individual experience; it incorporates persons into a community of faith formed by God’s grace and called to serve God in the world.”³⁴² According to James K.A. Smith:

“Baptism extends priesthood to the plebs—it is an investiture with Christ, the High Priest who clothes us as a priestly vestment. Recalling that Christ is the exemplary human, the one who finally fulfilled Adam’s vocation to be God’s image bearer, we see that central to that vocation is priesthood. And all of humanity is called to that vocation.”³⁴³

The danger of disconnecting from the Body is that once one is immersed into the Body in salvation by faith, they are no longer a bystander unable to participate. He or she is part of the Body with every opportunity to participate, along with the choice of whether or not to do so. To refuse participation (to use Paul’s analogy) is like one part of the body saying to another that it is not needed. Or worse, it is like one part of the body saying to the rest of the body that it is not needed. It is participation in the community of faith doing God’s priestly work that forms our faith.³⁴⁴ Participation in community facilitates hearing the stories of God’s transformative work in others, seeing it first-hand, and experiencing it to encounter the transformative power of the Holy Spirit.³⁴⁵ Disconnection is not non-participation, but rejection or rebellion against the community of faith. According to James K.A. Smith:

“To reject God’s personhood and agency entailed rejecting an entire fabric of Christianity that revolved around the notion of religion as communion. According to the historic, orthodox Christian faith, ‘salvation is thwarted to the extent that we treat God as an impersonal being, or as merely the creator of an impersonal

³⁴² Matthaëi, *Formation in Faith*, 59.

³⁴³ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 184.

³⁴⁴ Matthaëi, *Formation in Faith*, 45.

³⁴⁵ Matthaëi, *Formation in Faith*, 98.

order to which we have to adjust. Salvation is only affected by, one might say, our being in communion with God through the community of humans in communion, viz., the church.”³⁴⁶

When the nature of Christ is the mystical joining of the Divine and the Human, then to reject the church is to reject the hypostatic union of Christ, or as Smith puts it, it is to reject the personhood of Christ.³⁴⁷ Thus, there is an urgency to discover how to assimilate millennials and Gen Z into a church that is not about being authentically "you" but conforming to "He"—Jesus Christ.

Participation in the community of believers that does the priestly work of God creates messy opportunities for growth. According to Proverbs 14:4, “Without oxen a stable stays clean, but you need a strong ox for a large harvest.” In other words, the ministry makes the stable messy. The priestly role is the work of reconciling souls back to God through encouraging their imitation of Christ as bearers of the image of God. Loving others in word and deed reveals God's kindness in attracting unbelievers to Him.³⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the kindness of God reveals and encourages an alternative way to achieve the good life which requires those outside the community to relinquish other life alternative. This is not always readily received. According to Matthaëi, “every human being is our neighbor—even those we might be reluctant to love.”³⁴⁹ There inherent opposition to Biblical morality makes it difficult to do the work of God from political, religious, and social perspectives. These moments, however, create opportunities for

³⁴⁶ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 58.

³⁴⁷ Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, 141.

³⁴⁸ Rom 2:4.

³⁴⁹ Matthaëi, *Formation in Faith*, 23.

growth in faith and Christlike character. According to Romans, character comes from perseverance.³⁵⁰ But how does one continue in the priestly work when that work is often rejected? This is the strength of the community that encourages, comforts, and teaches truth while doing the work of God. As each one is gifted by the Spirit, the Body works together to remain healthy and strong. This work moves us into deeper communion with God by being increasingly transformed into His likeness as each part of the body supports the other. God's priestly work is a “spiritual partnership of all the people of God bound together in a servant community established at our baptism.”³⁵¹

Transformation through participation in community

The Apostle Paul taught that transformation is the result of a mind being renewed (Romans 12:1-2). It is not a moment of transformation, but a process of gradual renewal. The Holy Spirit gives believers the mind of Christ, yet many lifetimes would not give anyone the time, experience, and wisdom to grasp the fullness of God. The Christian journey is a continual progression toward the God's fullness. Paul's teaching reminds the Christian that the process of maturation requires offering one's body as a living sacrifice.³⁵² The priestly work of God is done in the physical body but counted as a “true and proper worship.”³⁵³ Priestly work done in service to God effectively immerses a person into the hypostatic person of Jesus Christ, into His body, made up of many parts. A person can attempt to isolate themselves from the body in service to God, but a branch

³⁵⁰ Rom 5:3-5.

³⁵¹ Matthaei, *Formation in Faith*, 65.

³⁵² Rom 12:1-2.

³⁵³ Rom 12:1.

separated from the vine begins to die. Just as each part of the body lives life together so that transformation occurs in community as life is lived together. As believers continue to live together, the more they learn to “be guides for those on a pilgrimage of faith, helping others find their way.”³⁵⁴ The community that is the Body of Christ is a shared pilgrimage, a traveling together, a journey, a lifestyle. With participation in the community, there is a renewing of the mind that enables believers to more fully grasp the mind of Christ. The result is a community of people who are at different levels of understanding and practice of Christlikeness. Matthaiei points out that Christ, however, offered a different vision of leadership through serving who like God “gives without expectation of return.”³⁵⁵ He uses the term “faith mentors” to describe those who have been on the journey and serve as role models of priestly work.³⁵⁶ They “participate in the relational, vocational, and spiritual growth of others.”³⁵⁷ The intentional design of the Body of Christ is to allow each person time and experience participating with others but also learning from these mentors which allow for each individual to experience further growth. Such mentoring begins at home in the family and continues in the church.

Transformation Through Family Life Within the Body of Christ

The first human community is found in marriage. Theologically, a husband and wife are to help one another through mutual love, edification, and submission in their

³⁵⁴ Matthaiei, *Formation in Faith*, 68.

³⁵⁵ Matthaiei, *Formation in Faith*, 58.

³⁵⁶ Matthaiei, *Formation in Faith*, 58.

³⁵⁷ Sondra Higgins Matthaiei, *Faith Matters: Faith-Mentoring in the Faith Community* (Valley Forge, Pa: UNKNO, 1996), 14.

priestly work participating in their small community of faith within the broader Body of Christ. Empowered by the Holy Spirit to operate in imitation of the Trinity—each serving, honoring, and loving the other. The Father directs the Son and the Spirit in love by commissioning each of them to love humanity and reconcile human beings to God. We read in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”³⁵⁸ A life of service and sacrifice for another is to experience the fullness of love. The Father loved, honored, and commissioned the Son and the Spirit. And both the Son and the Spirit honored and loved the Father in their obedience to Him. In the same way, the husband is to be the head of the wife but to sacrifice everything for her good in love and she honors, loves, and submits to the husband, but as a partner working for the Lord side by side with her husband. They work together in their commission to love their neighbor. They participate in and are mentored by the broader community that is the Body of Christ. They subsequently become faith mentors to their children.

According to Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk, parents have greater access to their children than any other individual in a traditional family setting.³⁵⁹ However, there has been a breakdown in the family that has upset this access. In this chapter, we are considering the theological foundation for generational transformation needed in evangelical Christianity. Assuming a husband and wife have placed themselves in a

³⁵⁸ John 15:13.

³⁵⁹ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 70.

participatory role within the community of the Body of Christ and have offspring, they have a biblical mandate to teach their children:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”—Deuteronomy 6:5-9

Of all the different people in children’s lives, parents have the most access to shape their development “especially during the early years of socialization when basic reality, identities, and practices are formed.”³⁶⁰ It is the process of living life together that forms and shapes people and, biblically speaking, the family is the place where life should be done together. This design gives parents more influence over the formation of their children than any other. They are the “key agents” in the socialization of their children whether this leads to the development of values that are Christian, religious in some other sense, or worldly in nature.³⁶¹

When parents make their Christian beliefs part of a lifestyle lived with their children, research reveals there is a “very powerful association with the children growing up to be religiously committed and involved—sometimes stronger than even parent religiousness variables.”³⁶² When parents live a Christian lifestyle as faith mentors to their children influencing their socialization toward Christ, it is done in conjunction with

³⁶⁰ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 70.

³⁶¹ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 70.

³⁶² Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 71.

the broader Body of Christ and reflects the importance of the larger church in the immediate family, which causes children to place a high priority on their involvement in the community. This parental mentorship is important, especially in America, because the Christian language is not America's first language. Smith and Adamczyk compare religious transmission to learning a second language that is best learned through dialogue with native speakers.³⁶³ They go on to say, "So when parents regularly talk with children about religious matters in ordinary conversational settings, that provides children with exactly the kind of sustained practice in learning the second language that is necessary for religion to be sensible and possibly interesting."³⁶⁴ Without this native experience of living in the culture of Christianity as a regular part of the home life, even if the children are exposed to their faith an hour or two a week, the transmission will be minimal.³⁶⁵

In today's culture of American Christianity, parents release too much responsibility for their children's spiritual formation to the organized church through clergy and volunteers.. However, this leads to a breakdown in the divinely instituted community of faith that is the Body of Christ. Children are to be socialized by parents in a way that the faith is handed down. However, life consists of multi-layered communities that influence one's formation. James K.A. Smith writes: "The individual is always already embedded in a nexus of social relationships and institutions. And this is already embedded in the schematic picture: the self is always already shaped by practices that are

³⁶³ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 71.

³⁶⁴ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 71.

³⁶⁵ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 71.

themselves tethered to and embodied to concrete social institutions.”³⁶⁶ The hindrance to faith transference to the next generations is the nexus of social relationships outside of the Body of Christ when these have greater influence. Smith and Adamczyk’s point that Christian faith is not America’s first language is well taken. It is similar to how many families migrate to a new country and all but abandon their own culture and language in an effort to help their children assimilate. Christianity is no longer the first language of faith in America as families have abandoned those tenets to presumably facilitate the success of their children’s pursuit of the American dream. When parents do not hold tightly to their faith in the home, the children will assimilate into non-Christian social relationships and institutions.

American Christianity has become an intellectual endeavor where learning Scripture, the commandments, and other prominent biblical precepts are considered to be the path to transformation. However, as we have seen, learning what the Bible says and being transformed in the renewing of the mind by the Holy Spirit requires more than learning facts, laws, Scriptures, or precepts. Christianity is a revealed religion and it must be lived out so that it is engrained in the heart, mind, and spirit. According to James K.A. Smith, we are “first and foremost: loving, desiring, affective, liturgical animals who, for the most part, don’t inhabit the world as thinkers or cognitive machines.”³⁶⁷ To reduce Christianity to cognitive learning is to miss the point completely. Transformation occurs in community where the priestly work of God is lived out, talked about, and taught in

³⁶⁶ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 71.

³⁶⁷ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 34.

everyday situations. It is not that cognitive lessons are without merit, otherwise, what would be the point of Sunday School? But for the most part, there is a feeling component that must be passed down. This phenomenon is emphasized in by Bengtson, Putney, and Harris whose research reveals that “parental warmth is the key to successful transmission.”³⁶⁸ Parents who teach Christian concepts but don’t also model them will hinder their children from assimilation into the Body of Christ. Children assimilate into the spiritual and religious practices of their parents when the latter have a warm, consistent, unconditionally supportive way of parenting. These parents also tend to provide “consistent role modeling of religious practices, and...[do] not force their beliefs or practices on their children.”³⁶⁹ This is easily traced back to the command from Deuteronomy, in which parents are admonished to love God with all their heart, soul, and strength—and to impress, not force the commands upon their children in regular, everyday living. The transformation in the community of faith, especially within the family, occurs when children adopt the imagined good life of their parents because this imagined life is enrooted into them through the consistent modeling of Christian living of their parents. By doing this, parents also assimilate their children into a lifestyle within the broader community of saints, in which transformation continues through the faith mentoring of others in the Body of Christ as they live out their faith.

Of course, the danger to millennials, Gen Z, and subsequent generations is the breakdown of the family resulting from societal changes discussed earlier and the

³⁶⁸ Bengtson, Putney, and Harris, *Families and Faith*, 185.

³⁶⁹ Bengtson, Putney, and Harris, *Families and Faith*, 186.

transformation seen within evangelical Christianity to a consumer-driven, MTD approach to evangelism. Both of these have created a higher sense of individualization. When individualism invades family structure and organized evangelicalism, the result is less community with each generation. The greatest need is to discover ways to shift the culture in Christian homes where consistency has broken down between what families claim to believe and how they live.

CHAPTER 4

BROADER MOVEMENTS NECESSARY FOR A CULTURAL SHIFT

Space Between the Church and Politics

As we begin exploring potential responses from within evangelicalism, some issues must first be considered. Much of what we see in American Christianity has developed in a reactionary moment because of a felt threat.³⁷⁰ Consumerism was a reaction to the loss of people from church attendance in the early 60s. Busyness responded to the malaise of modernity. Conservative politics and whiteness reacted to the nation's move toward secularism. Considering the loss of millennials and Gen Z from evangelicalism could push evangelicals into another reactionary moment re-emphasizing to an extreme those areas of Christianity perceived to be threatened.³⁷¹ The result would be a staunch religiosity that will not turn anyone to God. It is as if American Christians wrestle with fear of the culture destroying Christianity, but this does not align with the biblical viewpoint. According to Scripture (Matthew 16:18), the church prevails against any other imaginary and has proven itself strong enough to withstand every attack. Such fear is wrapped up in the conflation of Christianity with democracy and the nation: the worry is that if the nation is destroyed, perhaps Christianity is also brought to an end. This belief was openly touted by Sam Bowers, a Ku Klux Klan leader, and secretly discussed by many other Christians during the Cold War.³⁷² Up until the 1960s, many Christians believed in a republican synthesis between Christianity and American

³⁷⁰ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 321.

³⁷¹ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 321.

³⁷² Bowman, *Christian*, 141.

democracy.³⁷³ If these are indeed so tightly linked, then any threat to the nation also threatened the faith (as if Christianity could be defeated). Scripture teaches, however, that fear and love oppose one another (1 John 4:18 NIV). To learn the lesson of the Age of Authenticity is to fully grasp the world's desire for love, acceptance, and meaning along with secularism's inability to suffice giving Christianity a great opportunity because people continue to seek for love, meaning, and significance.³⁷⁴ The key is to separate Christianity from American politics. Heft and Stets encourage criticism of the Christian Right as a sign of secularism driving many into disaffiliation, as well as a return to a Christianity centered on the Gospel message of loving one's neighbor.³⁷⁵ One important aspect of this is to de-prioritize the goal of America being a Christian nation. The potential danger of focusing more on the Gospel than laws that mirror Christian morality can return Christianity to a time when a blind eye was turned to atrocities, such as slavery, for the sake of evangelism. Christianity must embrace the notion of seeking justice without conflating this notion with the need for legislation. This notion brings about the very things that are turning millennials and Gen Z away from evangelicalism.³⁷⁶ Christianity has been around for two thousand years and continues to exist even in cultures and nations whose governments are hostile to it. An essential response from evangelicals to millennials and Gen Z who have left the church is to reprioritize Christ's

³⁷³ Bowman, *Christian*, 157.

³⁷⁴ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 69.

³⁷⁵ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 190.

³⁷⁶ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 10.

love, including accountability and speaking truth in love, according to 1 Corinthians 13, when discussing politics.

Space between the Church and the Age of Authenticity

A second response of evangelicalism for its own sake must be to separate Christianity from the Age of Authenticity beyond politics. As Willie James Jennings suggests, most American seminaries need to move away from Christian formation within the parameters of self-sufficient whiteness.³⁷⁷ Theological education established to train Christian leaders of the future teaches an imaginary that fits into the philosophy of authenticity. This has re-formed American Christianity into a self-help instrument for each person to accomplish and obtain what they want from life.³⁷⁸ The Christianity of authenticity is the Moral Therapeutic Deism where God is relegated to a parent and therapist forming children with good behavior while helping them cope with the difficulties of life. But this therapeutic way of Christianity is void of transcendence and filled with emptiness.³⁷⁹ Christianity that uses cosmic speech about transcendence, but offers none is not authentic and this is the worst sin in the Age of Authenticity.

Returning to the Word

The evangelical response must be returning to genuinely Gospel-oriented Christianity that exemplifies Christ's love obtained through the erotic mystical union with Him. The erotic nature of this relationship comes from the analogy of marriage to

³⁷⁷ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 13.

³⁷⁸ Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 73.

³⁷⁹ Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 89.

describe a true relationship with Christ. The Apostle Paul uses this analogy to teach us how Christ loves us.³⁸⁰ The analogy may come from the words of John the Baptist who compared the church's relationship with Christ to that of a bride and groom.³⁸¹ The true erotic nature of this relationship is seen in the Song of Songs and its iconic verse, "I am my beloved's and He is mine."³⁸² This is eroticism in the sense of a love producing euphoric thoughts at the idea of being with one's beloved spouse. It is rooted in love and affection so that faithfulness is not characterized by following rules, but honoring the one's beloved. The law was given to make known the boundaries not to be crossed in our worship of God. They were not given by God because He expected that our knowledge of the law would motivate us to keep the law.³⁸³ The law must be written on the heart from love because rules do not keep people faithful.³⁸⁴ When the church loves God as one loves their spouse deeply, there will be greater faithfulness to Him so that earthly issues do not cause Christians to betray Him with their behavior. This will create the cultural shift in the church who too often loves God as one might love a speed limit sign easily betrayed in a hurry. It is an erotic love for God that will return the church to transcendence and transform the ecclesial imaginary of the evangelical church and parental consistency at home.

³⁸⁰ Eph 5:25-27.

³⁸¹ John 3:27-30.

³⁸² Song of Sol 6:3

³⁸³ Rom 5:20.

³⁸⁴ Jer 31:33.

These responses repeated here have been present throughout. The issue isn't that the church doesn't know what to do. The issue is the need for transcendent transformation giving the church the ability to do what is clearly taught in Scripture. Jesus said to "love the Lord with all your heart" because law hangs on our love for God and neighbor.³⁸⁵ Today's Christianity often lacks the eroticism necessary to love God in a way that creates a desire to honor Him with our behavior regardless of the situation or circumstance. The lack of deep love has crept into the church because of the Age of Authenticity's pursuit of fulfillment without transcendence. The church has lost much of the transcendent nature of genuine Christianity. The result has been the emergence of MTD and inconsistency when it comes to honoring God in behavior. This emptiness has given birth to the Christian Right, duplicity in Christian homes, civil religion, and a malaise even in the church. But to simply know that love and transcendence must be reclaimed is not enough.

Heart Transformation

The church and family must return to a Gospel focus that leads to Christlikeness through heart transformation. This theology seems backward to modern American Christianity which interacts with God as if He were the servant expected to do whatever He is asked to do. The escape from authenticity is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, model Him to our children, and re-order Christian worship to foster transformation more than busyness, morality, and euphoric therapy-driven services. It is a change of heart that is necessary. Henry Nouwen speaks of the heart in this way:

³⁸⁵ Mat 22:37-40.

“But the word heart in Jewish-Christian tradition refers to the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional, and moral energies. It is the seat of the will; it makes plans and comes to good decisions. Thus the heart is the central unifying organ of our personal life. Our heart determines our personality, and the place where God dwells, but also the place to which the Evil One directs fierce attacks, causing us to doubt, fear, despair, resent, overconsume, and so on. Thus to live the spiritual life and let God’s presence fill us takes constant prayer, and to move from our illusions and isolation back to that place in the heart where God continues to form us in the likeness of Christ takes time and attention.”³⁸⁶

Parenting Style

Because parenting style matters to such a large degree—and is a reflection of inner growth increasing the capacity to love, discipline, and foster loving relationships—heart transformation is at the core of faith transmission. Religious activity is a strong indicator of faith transmission, however, religious activity with an authoritative parenting style is more effective still.³⁸⁷

With regard to the path to heart transformation, consider early Christianity in the Roman empire where Christians faced severe persecution, and the response that spurred church growth and Gospel expansion against all odds. According to sociologist Rodney Stark, the church would have had to increase by 40% each decade in the first three centuries of its existence within social and cultural animus.³⁸⁸ Early church fathers such as Origen attributed this phenomenon to the patience of God.³⁸⁹ Facing the harshness of a

³⁸⁶ Nouwen, introduction to *Spiritual Formation*.

³⁸⁷ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 100, 37.

³⁸⁸ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2023), 6.

³⁸⁹ Alan Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 9.

pagan society, Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage wrote a treatise of encouragement to Christians in Carthage encouraging them to embrace Christianity in their “bodies and action” to live the message of Christ “visibly and faithfully” so the pagans would see true Christianity and be attracted to it.³⁹⁰

“Beloved brethren, (we) are philosophers not in words but in deeds; we exhibit our wisdom not by our dress, but by truth; we know virtues by their practice rather than through the boasting of them; we do not speak great things but we live them.”³⁹¹

This statement draws us back to Scripture where James reminds readers of his letter that faith without deeds is dead.³⁹² American Christianity formed in authenticity seeks not to exhibit the characteristic of God, but to garner His favor for personal gain. This pseudo-religious imagination does not produce the life-giving fulfillment of Christ and pushes people into the nova of spiritual searching.³⁹³ James K.A. Smith notes that our behavior emerges out of “how we imagine the world.”³⁹⁴ To imagine it differently as in the early church, he also writes: “A nuanced liturgical anthropology will need to displace the functional intellectualism that tends to dominate both philosophical accounts of agency and our everyday ‘folk’ conceptions of choice and action.”³⁹⁵ The secular age and the Age of Authenticity evolved out of an imagined world of self-sufficiency, pleasure,

³⁹⁰ Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 13.

³⁹¹ Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 13.

³⁹² Jam 2:17.

³⁹³ Bowman, *Christian*, 308.

³⁹⁴ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 32.

³⁹⁵ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 32.

and success as the "good life" without transcendence trapped in the immanent frame of intellectualism and performance. According to Taylor, "One could even argue that marking our particular hard-and-fast distinction here is something which we [Westerners, Latin Christians] have done be it to our intellectual glory or stultification."³⁹⁶ Henri Nouwen speaks of Scripture not as a "book of information but of formation."³⁹⁷ Heart transformation does not come about through the knowledge of Scripture. Right behavior that leads to faith transmission is not simple explanation of rules, but rather a heart-training that helps people frame life situations in their mind according to Scripture so they feel with the heart of God. "That, it turns out, requires training their emotions to be primed to take in and evaluate situations well."³⁹⁸

James K.A. Smith's point is that behavior occurs as a result of an emotional response to a situation that is predicated on approximate prototypes previously encountered and the familiar emotions stirred up again in a new, but similar situation.³⁹⁹ An individual's past experiences and later feelings about them will determine how he or she feels in similar situations, and these emotions drive our behavior. To change behavior in order to produce genuine Christianity that is not linked to the deformed Christianity of the Age of Authenticity, we must then transmit our faith narratively not intellectually. "Failing to appreciate this, we have neglected formational resources that are indigenous to the Christian tradition, as it were; as a result, we have too often pursued flawed models

³⁹⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 15.

³⁹⁷ Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*.

³⁹⁸ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 36.

³⁹⁹ Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion*, 1st edition. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 242–243.

of discipleship and Christian formation that have focused on convincing the intellect rather than recruiting the imagination.”⁴⁰⁰ Heart transformation is a narrative, rather than intellectual, exercise.

Smith draws out how the narrative allowed for Christianity to be consumed by individual consumerism in the Age of Authenticity. The liturgies that society participated in each day made them feel good about a narrative depicting materialism as what was good.⁴⁰¹ The rhythms, spaces, habits, and habitations of our daily life are not simply what we determine as our place, but these things are visible to us on a deep level forming us in accordance with their meaning as we understand them based on the emotions stirred in us when engaged with them.⁴⁰²

When parents involve their children in religious activity, the child’s perception of that participation produces an emotion that drives their behavior. For this reason, the way religion is employed in family life carries a great deal of weight. There is a correlation between stronger faith and authoritative parenting from parents with genuine faith. When their children become adults, they view their parents in a positive light along with the religiosity of their parents leading to successful transmission.⁴⁰³ The point, however, is that religious activity alone is not enough for the successful transmission of faith. The positive relationship between child and parent must be lived out and felt in religious life

⁴⁰⁰ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 39.

⁴⁰¹ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 39.

⁴⁰² Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 105.

⁴⁰³ Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*, 225.

as well. A genuine faith in Christ lived out with authoritative parenting will attract a child to a new narrative about Christianity dispelling the consumer-driven narrative of secular America.

Churches in the Age of Authenticity operate in the parameters of consumerism, attempting to offer the best product in order to help people find the good life. Churches offer a different product to a consumer society, but it is not transcendent. Instead, it is an offer of fulfillment through religion lived out in the immanent frame.”⁴⁰⁴ The paradigm of sacredness moved from the transcendent to the immanent frame, so that Jesus becomes a new trend promising fulfillment. Families went to church so that each individual could get what they desired so that even there, little intergenerational interaction existed as ministries were separate based on age and life circumstances. Thus, the narrative was driven more by peers than parents. The consumer narrative was where the church had to meet its congregants' needs, rather than create space for heart transformation. For parents who did not consider religion to be important (or for those whose narrative of the church was predicated by a harsh, judgmental, religious parent), the church's narrative was bloated with guilt. The result would be the transmission of a Christianity based on rules and judgment. Unless there is transformation on the erotic heart level producing love and affection for Christ, religious activity will fall short..

Returning to the early church, heart transformation was achieved through experience rather than the intellect. As early Christians were taught the teachings of Christ, they were then placed under a mentor who would model Christ’s behavior in their

⁴⁰⁴ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 142.

own context and hold them accountable to it.⁴⁰⁵ New converts did not simply learn what to do and not do; they were placed in the middle of a story that was lived out before them as their mentors befriended enemies, modeled financial generosity, made radical choices to follow Christ's teaching, and remained sexually disciplined.⁴⁰⁶ As they observed the behavior and the reactionary change it made in unbelievers when they encountered a Christian, the narrative produced a positive emotion associated with loving one's enemy, sharing with the entire group, forgiving, and caring for one another. From this experiential narrative, their emotions retrained them to see this behavior, though contradictory to secular society, as very positive. In addition, the liturgies were experiential through baptism, communion, the kiss of peace, and confession.⁴⁰⁷

People are left empty if they participate in religious activity without experiencing the embodying purpose of liturgies. Children will imitate their parents' modeled level of participation. When a parent actively engages in the liturgies of the church—whether it be traditional rituals of the eucharist and baptism or contemporary worship music and a sermon—his or her participation matters. When they participate, their children also learn to participate and this elicits emotion around the narrative of the Gospel that allows it to sink in deeply into them. All the traditional practices of the church (such as baptism, prayer, fasting, Scripture reading and meditation, and confession) create an alternate narrative toward heart transformation that displaces the liturgy of Christian consumerism. The early church did not attract people by making them feel welcome and included, but

⁴⁰⁵ Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 142.

⁴⁰⁶ Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 142.

⁴⁰⁷ Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 147.

rather called them to an unconventional way of life that provided meaning, fulfillment, and purpose.⁴⁰⁸ Today's evangelical church does no wrong in making people feel welcome, but they miss out because the call to transformation is eclipsed by an effort to help people feel better about themselves.

Liturgies

James K.A. Smith writes: "The sanctifying Spirit condescends to meet us as narrative, imaginative, ritual animals, giving us practices and liturgies for our sanctification."⁴⁰⁹ Smith defines liturgies as "communal, embodied, rhythms, rituals, and routines that over time quietly and unconsciously prime and shape our desires and most fundamental longings."⁴¹⁰ Religious and secular liturgies do not simply form around what we love, but these are formational of what we love. Our environment and "attendant practices" within that environment work on a level of emotion forming what we love since "we are what we love."⁴¹¹ The battle we fight is deeper than intellectual. If it were a simple decision that was necessary for change, anyone who comes to the end of themselves would simply be different with one choice made. They would decide to stop drinking. They would decide to stop sleeping around, getting high, being judgmental, and being lazy. Bad behavior would end in a decision, but this is not the human condition. We cannot say to millennials and Gen Z, "Just make a decision and go back to church,

⁴⁰⁸ Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, 149.

⁴⁰⁹ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 33.

⁴¹⁰ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 3.

⁴¹¹ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 9, 4.

get right with God." Smith wonders, "What if we are actors before we are thinkers? What if our action is driven and generated less by what we think and more by what we love."⁴¹² If this is the case, our entire discipleship methodology of teaching correct knowledge and making right decisions must be rethought.

Secularism and modernity hold Christians captive to the Enlightenment where knowledge is king. Today, there is more knowledge than ever, but this has done very little to change behavior. In the culture of millennials and Gen Z, the movement has been from doing what is known to be right to reject all knowledge in favor of what one feels. The current societal state of mind on gender is the perfect example. The trend is to ignore biological knowledge of sex even to the point of eliminating the existence of men and women relegating each human creature to be whatever they feel to be. It is freedom from knowledge. What Smith suggests is currently being proven in secular liturgies. Smith defines worship as participation in the Christian narrative to capture the imagination through liturgy.⁴¹³ This is absent to a large degree in American evangelicalism, but it is "the ancient Christian sacramental wisdom carried in the historic practices of Christian worship and the embodiment legacies of spiritual and monastic disciplines."⁴¹⁴

Smith's point is not that we are simple robots responding to our environment, but we are also not immune to it. Our context determines what we live and this plays a huge role in what we think or supposedly know. What we know does not run as deeply as what

⁴¹² Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 32.

⁴¹³ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 37.

⁴¹⁴ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 39.

we live through. According to Smith, this is a lesson we have missed in our discipleship models and we need a return to a narrative embodiment: “Our bodies are not just vehicles for our minds but ‘our means of communication’ with the world.”⁴¹⁵

Smith frames Christianity in terms of “construal training...a divine encounter that should, over time, effect ‘background’ transformation by reshaping my horizons of constitution.”⁴¹⁶ Education and knowledge fall short in the process of transformation. It may seem obvious, but modern secularism has caused the prioritization of knowledge over experience. The Age of Authenticity, however, has been transmitted through experience despite knowledge. People did not reject the institutions attempting to form them into a monolithic consumer society because of what they knew about the institutions exerting pressure on them to conform, but because of what they felt about these institutions. Then, to transmit genuine Christianity in the Age of Authenticity, education will fall short. Knowing the tenets of Christianity will never bring about transformation. It must be experienced through transcendent worship.

Worship is the habitual embodied rituals that slowly change how we perceive the world. According to Smith: “The rhythms and routines of an environment shape my habitual orientation toward and perception of the world in no small part because they form the neural maps that govern that perception of the world.”⁴¹⁷ We make meaning based on aesthetics unknowingly applied to habitual experiences. Experiencing the

⁴¹⁵ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 49.

⁴¹⁶ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 51.

⁴¹⁷ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 115.

beauty of something habitually reorients one's posture toward it as beautiful, then it changes one's perception of the world (transformation).

Smith refers back to the liturgies of the church but emphasizes that “form matters” when it comes to liturgy.⁴¹⁸ The form of liturgies is an important place to focus. The Age of Authenticity called for busyness, and so (as Andrew Root put it), “Who has time for long confessions, wordy liturgies, and exegetical sermons? We’re looking to work on the self, to run fast to harvest the experience the self needs to be unique, happy, and satisfied.⁴¹⁹ The pursuit of significance led to the busyness that feigned accomplishment in the Age of Authenticity and this worked its way into the church, resulting in the church’s lost sense of its own purpose.⁴²⁰ The Moral Therapeutic Deistic form of Christianity that developed in the Age of Authenticity conjoined the mission of the church to the societal mission of becoming (and optimizing) one’s self. The church lost sight of history, forgot its liturgy, kept people busy, and abandoned its purpose of inviting people to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. The liturgies were intended to tell and allow participation in the story in ways that that move the emotion, transform the heart, and deepen one’s love for Christ in the pursuit of being reoriented in His likeness, not the other way around. Henri Nouwen said of the Eucharist:

“The Eucharist, for me, is the most tangible and physical way of celebrating God’s inclusive love in the Body of Christ. When Jesus said to his disciples, ‘This is my body broken for you,’ he was speaking quite literally about his physical death as well as our embodied spiritual life. In our flesh and blood, in our bodies, we discover the real presence of the living Christ among us. Together, we ‘taste

⁴¹⁸ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 167.

⁴¹⁹ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 39.

⁴²⁰ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 39.

and see that the Lord is good.’ Through the spiritual act of eating simple bread and drinking hearty wine, we experience the mystery of the Incarnation. In the human touch, in the physical eating and drinking, and even in the dancing, we are made new.”⁴²¹

It is this type of bodily worship within the narrative of which James K.A. Smith writes that produces a desire for Christ and Christlikeness. The call to take up one's cross and follow Him is felt. The emotions are trained for suffering in the likeness of Christ. Believers who partake of the Eucharist in the assembly of saints “become the Body of Christ.”⁴²² The Age of Authenticity hijacked the sacred, treating “the historical, received forms of Christian worship as a kind of disposable husk.”⁴²³ This fails to appreciate that we are “liturgical animals shaped by the practices that work on our cognitive unconscious.”⁴²⁴ The form matters. When the forms are seen as less than formative, they become expendable. If the forms are expendable, it is easy to replace the form with another type that appeals more to the consumer Christian of the secular age, to match the personal preferences of the Age of Authenticity. Church becomes a quasi-spiritual mall rather than holy ground where the Spirit consumes whatever is not from Him. There is no relevance to empty worship. There is no significance. There is no transcendence. There is no purpose. Those raised in the Age of Authenticity are trained to question every authority and pursue personal fulfillment according to their preferences within the immanent frame. So then, why would they ever see the church as essential? Why would

⁴²¹ Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*, 97.

⁴²² Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*, 97.

⁴²³ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 167.

⁴²⁴ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 168.

they believe the church could be any different since this has been the church since the 1970s? Worship must not be “something we do, but something in which God does something in us.”⁴²⁵

Proposed Solutions for a Cultural Shift

Seeking fulfillment through religion reaching no higher than human activity may seem right since worship requires bodily participation. However, the bodily participation must lead to spiritual transcendence enveloped in the love of God. The same liberal theology that Karl Barth rejected still exists if not purposely, then covertly unnoticed by even those who live by it.⁴²⁶ Andrew Root argues that we have inherited the cultural framework of what Taylor calls “the immanent frame.”⁴²⁷ Root says the immanent frame “buffers us from assuming that a transcendent force directs and orders our relations in and to the world. The source of life is imagined as relations without transcendence.”⁴²⁸ The pursuit of fulfillment without transcendence leaves humanity, made in the image of God for communion with God, feeling as if something is missing. The modern evangelical church responded to the decline of each generation through the secular strategies of the Age of Authenticity. Andrew Root says it well:

“Nevertheless, as the church started to feel losses toward the end of the twentieth century, all the answers to beat decline were borrowed from hypercapitalism. For example, congregational life turned not to prayer, confession, sacramental ontologies, and discernment of the Spirit as much as to direct marketing, business structuring, customer focus groups, efficacy budgets, and spaces that felt like

⁴²⁵ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 184.

⁴²⁶ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 41–50.

⁴²⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.

⁴²⁸ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 12.

malls. These hypercapitalist perspectives function as closed-world (immanent frame) structures.”⁴²⁹

The problem and the context have been laid before us by Taylor, Root, Smith, and others. But in effect, the immanent frame, the Age of Authenticity, and the nova effect of spiritual choices that have emerged in what Taylor refers to as Secular³ have seen transcendence extracted from evangelicalism in America. The replacement is two-fold: hypercapitalism and *de facto* liberal theology that masquerade behind contemporary worship music, spiritual lingo, and the intellectual pursuit of biblical knowledge shrouded in religious activity that produces a positive, affirming feeling in participants. Each generation sees greater numerical loss from Christianity, not to mention the loss of belief in God. The challenge is to reintroduce transcendence into an evangelicalism that continues to operate blindly in the framework of the immanent frame while claiming transcendence, but lives as if God does not actively participate or intervene in human experience. In this chapter, I will suggest some movements that would benefit our local ministry context, and perhaps some may apply to evangelicalism as a whole. Though we were one of the first churches in our area to re-open and Texas was one of the first to re-open nationally, Covid did not only bring booster shots to our arms but a boost to Secular³ within the evangelical context including the local ministry of CrossRoads Community Church.

Considering the proposed solutions and methodologies, I will approach the problem from a two-pronged perspective. The extraction of transcendence cannot be met with the simple insertion of transcendence without consideration of the immanent frame

⁴²⁹ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 18.

which is a reality in every local American Christian context. I propose a reform toward transcendence that accounts for Secular3, bringing the supernatural into the physical. It is the church assuming the nature of Christ who embodies the union of the divine and human within Himself. It is the Body of Christ being in the world, but not of it. Refocusing on transcendence operationally would increase the chasm between dogma and practical Christianity.⁴³⁰ Dogmatic declaration of the immanent transcendence of God will reaffirm those who are entrenched still in the evangelical church. However, it may never reach the ears of those fully immersed in evangelicalism who are not even aware of their bias against transcendence because of the ontological effect Secular3 has had on prior generations.

Focusing on practical Christianity as a community will potentially attract millennials and Gen Z to keep those who have not left the church and perhaps those who have already left the church. The solution must join the divine and the human together addressing how transcendent experience has been extracted and community lost. These should be applied both to the immediate family of evangelical homes and the church family.

It is necessary to consider the nature of what is needed. Historically, the evangelical church has attempted to address the exodus of younger generations with specific programs or ministries. We saw this earlier as churches focused on youthfulness by developing Youth Ministries and adopting new styles of worship music to appeal to that age group. This did not work and it would not work now. What is needed is a

⁴³⁰ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 16.

complete culture shift. New ministries or programs will only feed into the individualism of the Christian version of the Age of Authenticity, but what is needed is for people to understand they are missing something they may have never realized was absent. They must acknowledge themselves to be lost and be open to God finding them where they are.⁴³¹ This requires a movement of God in His people that moves them to be used in reaching the hearts of others. Root condemns solutions or ministries and programs locked into the immanent frame that try forcing God's response to mechanics or formulaic strategies as “nefarious”, claiming they will “eventually attack life.”⁴³²

New Practices

Secular3 has had many negative spiritual effects on millennials and Gen Z. A general shift to the immanent frame has allowed for an accepted separation of the body from the spirit that justifies moral decadence without any threat to spiritual well-being. However, as Taylor points out, modernity did not remove humanity’s quest for spirituality. Living in the immanent frame caused what he referred to as “malaises of immanence.”⁴³³ These come from an emptiness felt because of the “modern anthropocentric shift to an immanent order.”⁴³⁴ Although this creates “new forms of religion, but also different readings of immanence,” it does not eclipse humanity’s hunger for meaning through transcendence.⁴³⁵ According to James K.A. Smith, even exclusive

⁴³¹ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 241.

⁴³² Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 248.

⁴³³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 309.

⁴³⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 309.

⁴³⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 309.

humanism seeks “modes of fullness” that respond to a “transcendent reality” that is misrecognized.⁴³⁶ This is hope for the evangelical church. Those who have exited still seek fullness and meaning which cannot be attained ultimately through immanence hence Taylor’s “malaises of modernity.”⁴³⁷ They still crave God, but just fail to realize it. Heft and Stets share that “the good news is that some young adults, though non-affiliated, are searching for a deeper meaning for their lives; moreover, they continue to believe in God and to pray.”⁴³⁸ If the church is going to be ready for those who tire of the malaise, there must first be a paradigm shift in how the church worships and this starts in the pulpit.

A Cultural Shift in the Pulpit

The culture shift should begin with the spiritual leader of the congregation. The American evangelical church may have an church event called a worship service where nothing pierces through the immanent frame of Secular3. We need divine intervention in human hearts, beginning with the pastor. Pastors must realize they too have been embedded in the Age of Authenticity. This is not to say that pastors are not saved, but there needs to be a realization from pastors that much of the modern contemporary ‘worship’ service operates to force God to respond to mechanical formulas where the same elements of a service are repeated in an almost identical way but with different songs and a different message. The ‘worship formula’ locks the Christian faith into the immanent frame by expecting God to move because of our effort as if God is an object

⁴³⁶ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 137.

⁴³⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

⁴³⁸ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 333.

we pick up or set down at will. This formula and its various adaptations, using different time limits, styles of music, and new technologies will not bring about a return of transcendence.

It is not that what happens in the modern evangelical "worship" service should be discarded completely. The issue is the heart behind it. Underneath the activity, there must be a crying out for God, a waiting for God to enter. Rather than a heart expecting God to arrive because of human effort, a pastor's heart must seek and wait for the presence of God to arrive in His time. When a pastor expects God to arrive because a certain song has been chosen, an invitation has been given, or just the right phrase has been crafted in a sermon is an attempt to lock God in the immanent frame. The pastor's attention is on the visible effect of the congregation. But when a pastor can choose songs, give an invitation, or craft phrases to best communicate the Good News of the Gospel as activities of waiting, seeking, and hoping God will arrive, the heart is attentive upward to God. It is moving from a posture of manipulating God to waiting for Him.

The actual visible difference in a "worship service" between one mindset or the other may not be detectable at each service. However, one is the attitude of worship of God while the other is the attitude of attempted ownership of God. The former will exalt God while the latter exalts man. The former springs from humility while the latter oozes from pride setting the congregation in opposition to God even as their movements present a desire to encounter God. Pride in the immanent frame will not wait on God but attempts to force God's presence and activity through bigger buildings, new staff, and more money. An attitude of humility pursues transcendent interaction first and continually even if bigger buildings and new staff are added in recognition that none of these human

endeavors can force God to do anything. The shift is both subtle and monumental, from the assumption of power over God to a realization of helplessness before Him. Only through church leadership's realization of humanity's spiritual bankruptcy can the door to transcendence be reopened.

One roadblock to this shift in pastoral attitude in worship is the current state of theological education. Andrew Root writes that "...the church will be unable, even with its best desires and efforts, to escape the reductions (and hidden false norms) of late modernity and its immanent frame until it reconceives its own action and does so theologically."⁴³⁹ Willie James Jennings posits that theological education has lost its eroticism, its desire to be in God's presence: "By reframing theological education and Western education more broadly through a formation within the erotic power of God to gather together, I am turning attention to the original trajectory of a God who has ended hostility and has drawn all of creation into a reconciliation that we do not control."⁴⁴⁰

This is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but if Secular3 has captured the evangelical church within the immanent frame in its practice and preparation of ministers, then reform is long overdue. Yet leadership is essential to allow God to intervene in our church culture to shift it away from our effort to His transcendence.

A shift in attitude will invade the mechanics of a worship service. A pastor seeking, waiting, and hoping for God's intervention will communicate to the congregation differently. The intellectualizing of "worship services" where the pastor's

⁴³⁹ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 166.

⁴⁴⁰ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 142.

role is primarily that of a teacher will reset to make him or her a spiritual guide for whom the congregation will and seek an authentic encounter with God. Henri Nouwen writes: “Our lives are not problems to be solved but journeys to be taken with Jesus as our friend and finest guide.”⁴⁴¹ We need to be guided into the openness beyond the immanent frame, but one can only lead others to familiar places. Christ has come in the flesh to be our guide. As both divine and human, working within the immanent frame of physical creation, He introduces us to communion with God through friendship with Him. Our location ceases to be limited to the physical and opens to include the divine. Yet this is not a finite relationship, but an infinite one where familiarity and communion are as unlimited as the depth of God's love. When Christ said that He would not take the fruit of the vine again until Heaven, He reminds Christians that their seeking and longing for the transcendence of God is ongoing. A pastor with a heart that longs for the presence of God will lead others into that longing for the presence. Rather than being seen as an intellectual with all the answers, the congregation begins to see the pastor as a fellow pilgrim who has journeyed longer and farther but remains on the way. Again, Henri Nouwen frames how a pastor with this longing in his heart might speak to his or her congregation: “You seek answers to what cannot be fully known. I don't know either, but I will help you search. I offer no solutions, no final answers. I am weak and limited as you are. But we are not alone. Where there is charity and love, God is there. Together, we form community. Together we continue the spiritual search.”⁴⁴²

⁴⁴¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*, Reprint edition. (San Francisco, California: HarperOne, 2015), 6.

⁴⁴² Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction*, 11.

A Cultural Shift in the Sacraments

Heft and Stets observe decline in the church's communal practices. "The gradual deinstitutionalization, the increased individual autonomy, and the privatization of religion weaken people's commitment to communal practices of religion."⁴⁴³ Christian Smith, James K.A. Smith, and Andrew Root have already noted the shift in the church toward immanence resulting in busyness, hyper-capitalism, and the loss of liturgy in the evangelical church. But James K.A. Smith also gives the helpful reminder that the Spirit comes to believers as narrative, imaginative, and ritualistic animals to sanctify them.⁴⁴⁴ Experiencing and participating in God's story through the sacraments works to form one's love for God. This love is erotic as Willie James Jennings said.⁴⁴⁵ It works in the soul the mystical union between Christ and His church. James K.A. Smith's point is that the sacraments form the believer's affection through hearing and appreciating God's kindness as told in narrative form through the sacraments, but he goes on to say about these sacraments that "form matters."⁴⁴⁶

The obsession with youthfulness transformed the church into a self-help, feel-good, quick, light, easy, intellectual, immanent experience. The Eucharist lost its meaning in the hurry to move on to contemporary worship and TED talk-style sermons. It was given and received in the immanent frame as part of the formula attempting to force

⁴⁴³ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 324.

⁴⁴⁴ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 33.

⁴⁴⁵ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 142.

⁴⁴⁶ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 167.

God to move. Rather than being moved to participate in the story out of affection for Christ, such Christians fulfilled an obligation to ensure God's favor. The sacraments must be celebrated thoroughly enough to present the narrative behind the symbolism. Without exposure to the narrative, people will not participate in the story. It is the spiritual encounter with the narrative and placing oneself into the narrative that works to create an affection for God. Out of that affection comes a desire not only for the Eucharist in ritual but to live a Eucharist lifestyle in form being fed by the communion with Jesus Christ, His body and blood. The sacraments should create affection within the participant for Christ and a desire to do for Him out of affection rather than obligation.⁴⁴⁷ Without narrative opening participants to transcendency, “the Spirit is strangled.”⁴⁴⁸

Therefore, I propose a shift toward thoroughly narrative sacramental experiences. Millennials and Gen Z crave meaning. Narrative sacramental experiences can give meaning. Sacraments offer an alternate narrative contrasting the Age of Authenticity. The story of a loving God who gave everything for others, when there is personal participation, can lead to the fulness of God. This is greater than the narrative of egocentrism and self-gratification pushed in the Age of Authenticity. They have already witnessed and possibly experienced that narrative and are left empty in malaises of modernity.

Sacraments also involve the physical body from the Eucharist, to baptism, to the act of anointing. This sacramental narrative not only enters the mind intellectually and

⁴⁴⁷ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 167.

⁴⁴⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 739.

emotionally, but also touches believers' actual bodies. The narrative is embodied in the physical senses of touch, smell, sight, and hearing. Taylor describes how immanence and the Age of Authenticity removed meaning from the sacraments making them impersonal through a shift he calls “excarnation.”⁴⁴⁹ James K.A Smith then reveals the contrast “to the central conviction of Christian faith—that the transcendent God became incarnate, enfleshed, in Jesus of Nazareth—excarnation is a move of disembodiment and abstraction” that is consequently purified of emotion.⁴⁵⁰

The shift to a narrative experience would require a great deal more time in the evangelical worship service. A good narrative is unlike journalism. It is more than simple facts. Evangelical Christian eucharist culture gives the facts and moves on. To create an experience, a good narrative draws the listener into the story, which takes time. Through narrative, music, imagination, and art, an invitation to put oneself into the scene must be given. A good narrative draws a picture. It allows the listener to consider the story and its application, along with its relevance. It is to search for God in the Eucharist through the telling of the narrative to ask questions: Where is God? Where is He in this sacrament? Where is He as one’s bread and blood? The sacraments appeal to the narrative, imaginative, bodily nature of humanity and allow for a transcendent experience through a mystical union.

It would be easy to restate what has been said by Christian Smith and others that sacraments and liturgy need to be re-introduced into the evangelical church More than

⁴⁴⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 288.

⁴⁵⁰ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 58.

this, however, we must remember that “form matters.”⁴⁵¹ The form of liturgy must fight back against the acceleration of the Age of Authenticity so that the sacraments are not rushed through as one part of a worship service. Instead, pause is given and the service is constructed around the narrative of the sacrament for personal reflection and participation to give the mind, heart, body, skin, and spirit to drink deep the story of Christ’s crucifixion. Constructing a worship service with the highest priority to experience transcendence around a particular sacrament would be a complete shift from the current evangelical approach. Slowly, this new approach will bring meaning and transcendency to the forefront of the church working steadily to tear back the ceiling of the immanent frame.

A Cultural Shift in Prayer

Andrew Root discusses how the immanent frame can masquerade as true spirituality. However, when this happens, the product is a desire for spirituality without a crisis moment of conviction. It is the Christian life lived out in the theology of authenticity where ease and euphoria is the primary goal. Root says this: “And this crisis cannot—and should not—be avoided. In an immanent frame, centered on commerce and consumption, avoiding all crises is a high good. But the faithful church cannot affirm this good. To lose, avoid, and disdain crisis is to wish again for the fleshpots of Egypt. It is to want religion more than an encounter with the living God.”⁴⁵² The crisis effect in Christianity creates and sustains a sense of dependence upon the Lord. Without authentic

⁴⁵¹ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 167.

⁴⁵² Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 104.

dependence upon the Lord, prayer is sealed off in the immanent frame. The spiritual terminology is diminished as religious activity is framed in self-sufficiency. We say the right words but lack any urgency born out of dependence. Root references Karl Barth's wrestling with the statement that "God is God."⁴⁵³ God is not an intellectual notion within the logic of the immanent frame but rather something outside of this frame that can enter it in order to act. Fervent prayer stands on this belief that God is God. He is not of this world but has entered into it and will enter again to act upon it. Prayer is the desperate call to a God outside to enter in, move mountains, and shake that which needs to be shaken. It is only in this claim that God is God "do the pastor and church have a purpose that can escape the flattening of modernity and its immanent frame."⁴⁵⁴ But what moves prayer from the immanent to the transcendent? Prayer seems to be a logical activity striving for the absurdity of a God outside of the human frame for the purpose of accessing communion of God to then be harnessed back within the human experience to live life communing with God. However, prayer can happen without a person ever moving outside of their humanness. Something must move prayer beyond the frame. It is the notion that the God who exists outside the frame can be encountered within it. Transcendence is not "otherworldly"; it is a force that pierces physical reality with unfathomable power.⁴⁵⁵ The church must redefine prayer in this way not in words, but in the movements of the spirit within. Prayerful words must cease to be born out of the

⁴⁵³ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 51.

⁴⁵⁴ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 57.

⁴⁵⁵ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 62.

intellect and be reborn out of the depth of man's soul to encounter the God who is still the transcendent God acting upon the finite world with infinite wisdom and power.

The Bible says the fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much (James 5:16). and teaches the difference in transcendence between fervent prayer and dispassionate prayer. The former expects God to enter, move, and act within the immanent frame. The former makes claims that it does not believe. In the Age of Authenticity, dispassionate prayer claiming faith in a God who cannot be explained and expressed is repulsive and fake. When Christians claim to be dependent on God, and use words in prayer to this effect, but have no real expectation that God will intervene in this world, they are locked in the immanent frame without a true transcendent experience. Without a spiritual encounter where the Spirit is manifested in peace, the prayer may seem empty, though not intentionally so. A faith that presents itself outwardly with spiritual words combined with an emotional response, but lacking in authentic dependence will seem suspect to those in the Age of Authenticity. Transcendence is lost in the unintended self-sufficiency of the immanent frame. To reclaim it, the church must fervently pray in the sincere expectation that God will be nothing less than God entering into the immanent frame to do that which cannot be explained. Root points to the historical response of the exodus of people from the church “not to prayer, confession, sacramental ontologies, and discernment of the Spirit as much as to direct marketing, business structuring, customer focus groups, efficacy budgets, and spaces that feel like malls.”⁴⁵⁶ It is not that prayer has been absent from the church, but fervency has been discarded for commercialism.

⁴⁵⁶ Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline*, 18.

Fervency is easily manufactured outside of dependence on God. Such reliance is based on our calling to be Christlike. Remembering the standard of living and the Great Commission given to the church refreshes knowledge of human insufficiency to fulfill God's expectation of who we are and how we live. The sacrament of confession brings both the call of God and the insufficiency of man back to the surface of our souls. James K.A. Smith writes: "And as Christian worship over time rehearses the breadth of God's normative vision for human flourishing in its concrete aspects, we are regularly confronted by the various facets of our failure."⁴⁵⁷

Modern evangelical ecclesiology brims with the encouragement of God's sufficiency but lacks the sacramental movements that create desperation for this sufficiency. The claim is an impotent one that God is sufficient while being stuck in the social imaginary of human self-sufficiency. Confession places our insufficiency at the forefront and emphasizes God is God, and human beings are not. This renewed revelation reinstated in Protestant worship works against the effect of modernity that has robbed the church of transcendence, thus rendering it unauthentic. Fervency in prayer for forgiveness of sin along with fervent prayers of thankfulness for such will burst through the immanent frame. Confession is a sacrament discarded by the new evangelical church that seeks to avoid unpleasant feelings. Confession places the soul in an unpleasant place through intentional awareness of the insufficiency to rescue oneself from sin, to make oneself holy, or to break free from sin. It is the holding in tension, both the crisis of

⁴⁵⁷ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 177.

insufficiency and God's call to a higher standard that stirs fervency for genuine prayer and worship.

Intercession

The immanent frame fills humanity with the belief that we can explain, survive, and overcome all things. However, it cannot claim the ability to do this for others. Both the construct of the immanent frame and the Age of Authenticity push a sense of self-sufficiency. The church needs to reincorporate the sacrament of confession even if not to a priest, but corporately to God to remember the truth of our insufficiency. But even the self-sufficiency of this age does not allow us to claim the ability to do for others what we believe we can do for ourselves.

The Age of Authenticity combined with capitalistic consumerism has rendered Christianity as an individual endeavor where the power of God is proclaimed on the backdrop of self-sufficiency. It is the practice of intercessory prayer that works to break self-sufficiency down further to create a renewed sense of dependence upon God to be God in this world prompting fervent prayer that encounters God in His transcendency.

Individualism reigned in the Age of Authenticity and this has bled into the church. We seek our own healing, our own inspiration, and our solutions. However, intercessory prayer calls us "outside of ourselves and our interests to concern for the other."⁴⁵⁸ James K.A. Smith writes that intercessory prayer reminds believers that "[they] are called, even

⁴⁵⁸ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 193.

chosen, as a people not for [their] own sake[s] but the for the sake of the world...to be God's image bearers in and to the world..to be the people of God to and for the world.”⁴⁵⁹

Intercessory prayer reminds the soul of the humanity's insufficiency striking at the heart of the immanent frame. Bearing one another's burdens will not allow us to rely upon our own intellect, charisma, gifting, or resources. Some earthly needs might be met, but intercessory prayer mostly acknowledges the need for God's intervention on behalf of others. The practice of intercessory prayer creates compassion for the other, focusing on his or her pain, struggles, and needs. It draws one near to God out of love for the one lifted in prayer. James K.A. Smith notes that for the ancient Christian faith, the way to “clothe oneself in the virtues of Christ was to be immersed in the practices of prayer and worship.”⁴⁶⁰ Intercessory prayer forms the spirit by calling upon God to enter and act in the lives of those in need around us. When we pray for those we love who need God in a painful moment, the potential for fervent prayer encountering transcendence is maximized.

A Culture Shift in Community

Root points out that one response of the church to secularity is innovation, which is the product of creativity. “In late modernity, creativity is almost always perceived as an individual, as opposed to a communal, trait.”⁴⁶¹ The Age of Authenticity has created an individualistic consumer society and this has seeped into the church. Christianity has

⁴⁵⁹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 193.

⁴⁶⁰ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 155.

⁴⁶¹ Andrew Root, *The Church after Innovation: Questioning Our Obsession with Work, Creativity, and Entrepreneurship* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2022), 38.

become an individual endeavor. The design of worship services has continued so that the church experience of most who still attend regular church attendance is individualistic. According to Heft and Stets, “about 20% of those raised in the Christian faith eventually will become non-affiliated by adulthood.”⁴⁶² Once these generations lapse in their attendance, only 10% of evangelicals continue to send their children to any kind of religious socialization such as Sunday School.⁴⁶³ They suggest that small groups would provide the community to build relationships to give more meaning to church participation.⁴⁶⁴ The issue is the social imaginary of the evangelical church. It can easily become more intellectual, social, or works-based rather than a spiritual pursuit of the God's presence.

Creating a shift in this mindset will include what many churches are already doing. For example, there is large emphasis placed on small groups. However, another issue as is that busyness has been substituted for fullness.⁴⁶⁵ The Age of Authenticity pressed for a new individual, expressivist pursuit; in this search, a need for busyness appeared. The thought process for adults of this age is that if they are busy attempting to become something, then the busyness feels fulfilling even if it leads to nothing. Root says, “To live the good life is to feel a sense of fullness, which is what all human beings seek. We need to feel ourselves full of, or wrapped in, something good. To be busy is to

⁴⁶² Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 8.

⁴⁶³ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 91.

⁴⁶⁴ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 297.

⁴⁶⁵ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 32–34.

feel like your life is full, or has some version of fullness.”⁴⁶⁶ This way of being works against taking time to build relationships that lack urgency. The church must seek a way to provide community first in the worship service in order to open the possibilities of congregants that community is necessary and essential.

To address this, those who design worship services can look for ways to create community for short segments of worship services. When the minister highlights what is taking place during these moments, it will draw attention to the need for community and a new paradigm may develop. Another way to form community in the church service would be to take time for family or group prayer. Rather than the majority of prayer coming from the stage, prayer happens in community. This can also be done by creating small groups for prayer in the sanctuary by asking people to join hands quickly for those around them. The key is to start slowly by asking people to simply pray quietly for those standing next to them. But then have moments where they are encouraged to ask the person seated behind them or in front of them how they can pray for them. This will create concern for the other that ought to continue in future conversations. Most people at CrossRoads Community sit in the same area until a new family sits there without knowing it is where a regularly attending family usually sits. By creating moments of community in the worship service, people who see each other week after week may begin to talk and care for one another.

Small groups can fall into the trap of seeking knowledge or socialization more than a spiritual community. This must be challenged through continual emphasis on the

⁴⁶⁶ Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 32.

spiritual component to community. To encourage participation in ministry to one another would help to accomplish this much in the way Christ washed the disciples feet.⁴⁶⁷ Otherwise, they may be relegated to mere social organizations or circles of education where Bible knowledge is the main endeavor. Then, what has seemed to occur in many evangelical worship services will occur in the small groups as well. Transcendence will be absent in a place where transcendence is what gives the church its authenticity.

A Culture Shift Around Politics

Politics forces the government to view all issues through the prism of group association. Christianity however, does not group everyone with the same circumstances or characteristics into one body. Jesus did not disregard all Pharisees though some were acting as a “brood of vipers.”⁴⁶⁸ The entirety of Christ’s ministry proved that not everyone in a certain social position or bound within certain social dynamics was the same. He rescued prostitutes, ate with tax collectors, and recruited the uneducated to be theologians. The church’s obsession with rescuing a Christian nation has caused it to do what Christ did not do. And as such, the church continues its image as hypocritical.

The church needs a mentality that "gives to Caesar what is Caesar's" when it comes to politics.⁴⁶⁹ Jesus did not allow Himself to be put into a political category. He focused on the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus at times acted in what could be characterized as liberal because He loved the unloveable and concerned himself with the welfare of the

⁴⁶⁷ John 13:1-17.

⁴⁶⁸ Mat 12:34.

⁴⁶⁹ Mat 22:21.

forgotten of society. At the same time, he did not disparage Zacchaeus from running his tax collecting business; He only required that he do his work with integrity. From a moral standpoint, Jesus was conservative, yet worked to free the woman caught in adultery. Jesus moved in His ministry with a conservative standard, but a liberal compassion.

When Christians prioritize morality over evangelism and discipleship, there is not only an image of hypocrisy but also behavioral hypocrisy. For example, when Christians prioritize politics over discipleship, it manifests like the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who were more concerned with punishment and condemnation than ministering to the “least of these.”⁴⁷⁰

Bowman writes: “...supporters of marriage equality, abortion rights, and other issues of sexual freedom often had, by the mid-2010s, come to identify American Christianity as their primary opponent.”⁴⁷¹ Why does this happen? In politics, the political will assess everyone according to the groups to which they belong. When Christians bring the church into politics arguing in the name of Christ, then all who disagree will see the church as the enemy. How can the church disciple those who are politically opposed to them? The question of what is more important between laws of immorality and the human soul must be decided.

Instead, by focusing on evangelism and discipleship, the church will teach the Scriptures faithfully. This will inform its members of God’s perspective on a nation’s direction so they are guided by God in the voting booth. Rather than the Christian arguing

⁴⁷⁰ Mat 25:40-45.

⁴⁷¹ Bowman, *Christian*, 223.

in the name of Christ, Christ sends him or her to vote in love for a nation that is blessed when it honors God. The difference is the public display. Politics and political rhetoric argue the morality of proposed laws and policies or the character of a politician.

Christians are called to converse always with salt and grace.⁴⁷² Allen Hertzke, Laura Olsen, Kevin Den Dulk, and Robert Fowler in *Religion and Politics in America*, write “Contemporary critics of both the ‘religious right’ and the ‘religious left’ have charged that religious advocates sometimes seem more driven by political ideology than faith and that they too often baptize liberal or conservative positions with unreflective religious justifications.”⁴⁷³

Conservative Christians should focus privately on their abortion vote while openly ministering to those who are suffering as a result of having an abortion. Liberal Christians should focus privately on their vote toward wealth distribution instead of suggesting it is unchristian to not guarantee a living wage for the poor. The Bible teaches there is life at conception and the need for generosity to the poor. But if the conservative Right is going to legislate morality, then their hypocrisy will be evident if they do not fight against all immorality. Some Christians strongly oppose abortion and gay marriage because they are seen as sinful. However, to avoid accusations of hypocrisy in the Age of Authenticity, they would also need to fight with liberals to outlaw cans of soda. They should also push for laws against gluttony and adultery as well as all media that promotes anything but pure biblical principles. However, this is not the case and probably is not

⁴⁷² Col 4:6.

⁴⁷³ Hertzke et al., *Religion and Politics in America*, 362.

even possible to do without also legislating away some good as well. Liberal Christians may fight hard for the redistribution of wealth to help the poor because that is what Jesus would do. However, Jesus called slothfulness a wicked thing. Liberal Christians should fight for the poor without enabling slothfulness. This requires temperance in liberality. It would require accountability even when it doesn't seem compassionate.

The point is that it is not possible to follow Scripture all the time while fully embracing the platform of a political party without exception and not alienating people who need the community of the Body of Christ. Some might ask how the church can pursue justice without becoming political. We first must understand that neither American political party has a monopoly on justice or compassion or prosperity. Christians' involvement in politics must follow prayer and discernment as they test the spirit of each political issue and all those who will be affected by that issue. Rather than a litmus test that is political, Christians can use a spiritual one in which love (not forgetting its complexity) is the highest virtue. Love does what is best for the other at all times. The nature of love looks different for various people. God does not treat all liars the same. He does not treat all adulterers the same. He loves each of them and gives enough consequences to motivate repentance without so much that would exasperate. Every parent knows you cannot respond to the disobedience of every child the same way. Some need a harsh tone and others would be crushed by the same tone. Hertzke, Olsen, Den Dirk, and Fowler suggest that "For those who continue to believe that religious actors can make positive contributions to our polity—those who are not ready to retreat into modern-day cloisters—another response is to engage in politics with eyes wide open. The advice here is to be aware of the pitfalls and snare of political engagement: be humble

and self-critical; resist the temptation to let political elites set the agenda; work in bipartisan fashion; build bridges between people....”⁴⁷⁴

Our present political environment is a fight over what each side thinks is right which leads to arguments, rage, and discord. The people of God are called to live at peace with everyone as much as it concerns them (Romans 12:18). Christian involvement in politics must never cross the line that diminishes the potential of others listening to the Gospel message. Conservative and liberal preachers alike can see their churches grow with like-minded people, but Christ did not call Christians to go only to those who are like-minded. When the politics of Christians create a divide between those who see the world differently and themselves, their political participation will continue to drive away those who are embedded in the Age of Authenticity and already struggling with biblical morality, a Christian worldview, and traditional family values. The Great Commission is not intended to preserve a Christian nation but to go into a non-Christian world and make disciples. It would be a dereliction of Christian duty to avoid voting according to how God blesses a nation. However, when politics are prioritized over love, we will continue to lose more of each new generation.

⁴⁷⁴ Hertzke et al., *Religion and Politics in America*, 363.

CHAPTER 5
NEW PRACTICES IN CONTEXT

Introduction

A cultural shift within the dynamics of worship is needed that appeals to millennials and Gen Z and the next generation to help them remain engaged in the evangelical church. This dissertation identifies those areas where this cultural shift needs to occur. However, it is mere theory without practices to embody a cultural shift. This chapter illustrates practices that are directly tied to the areas of cultural shift identified in the previous chapter.

Though much could be learned to evangelize young generations into the church, this dissertation's focus is the translation or the "'handing on' of lived faith from one generation to the next."⁴⁷⁵ This begins with generations of men and women who are already in the church from their own childhood or youth. Kenda Creasy Dean writes: "if churches practice Moral Therapeutic Deism in the name of Christianity, then getting teenagers to come to church more often is not the solution (conceivably, it could make things worse). A more faithful church is the solution to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism..."⁴⁷⁶ And because teenagers tend to mirror the parents in religious activity.⁴⁷⁶ She goes on to say if this is going to happen, then the church needs to focus on building up the faithfulness of parents.⁴⁷⁷ The practices proposed here are not necessarily new as much as they are old practices applied in a new way.

⁴⁷⁵ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 23.

⁴⁷⁶ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 23.

⁴⁷⁷ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 23.

Starting in the Pulpit

The pastor is the spiritual leader, the shepherd of the flock. He or she has been charged with overseeing the local body of Christ, doing the work of an evangelist and preaching the Word.⁴⁷⁸ Christ is the Chief Shepherd and pastors, the under shepherds charged with shepherding their flock.⁴⁷⁹ If there are going to be culture shifts and new practices, it must start with the pastor.

Spiritual Formation Education for the Pastor

If the cultural shift needed, then educating pastors in spiritual formation is a necessary new practice. This would be a new practice unable to be accomplished within my local congregation. Obviously, not every pastor would have the time or resources to pursue a degree in spiritual formation. However, as Jennings correctly said, something needs to change in the educational system.⁴⁸⁰ Perhaps, as our denomination forms a new version of the Course of Study, more than a few courses on spiritual formation could be added.

Through education, pastors can find the words that elude. They come from the early Christian fathers in narrative form through works such as *Ad Martyras* and *the Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicitas*, or through the teaching of Henry Nouwen's *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*. Pastoral education

⁴⁷⁸ 2 Tim 4:1-5

⁴⁷⁹ 1 Peter 5:2-4

⁴⁸⁰ Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 144.

must touch on a spirituality that has been generally forgotten in the modern American evangelical experience.

The vision of CrossRoads Community Church is to start ten campuses in ten years. They are praying for 150 new ministers. This past year, they awarded nine local licenses and saw two more receive their local license. Next year, one of their congregants will be ordained for the second time. In the area of education, potential ministers are encouraging to attend Nazarene Bible College or go through the Course of Study. However, to increase accountability and ensure spiritual growth, they have started what they call the Ministry Development Group. This is a group for anyone who knows or feels they have a call to ministry. This group meets once a month to teach practical ministry and spiritual formation, which are the two elements missing in the current training of pastors. They are also required to have a spiritual growth plan that includes spiritual formation practices along with a journal of encounters with God. Unlike a journal recounting their days, they are encouraged to document when they experience God's presence in order to help keep focused on transcendent communion. This has been very successful. There are some young adults who have joined this group. The first ordinand from this group was in his 30s and the next one will be 30 when ordained. One result that has been very apparent through this group is an increased ability to handle constructive criticism. This past year, two potential pastors were denied their local license and asked to work on specific factors in their life. They both responded positively, and last month each received their local license. The focus on transcendence born out of the Lead Pastor's education in spiritual formation has helped maintain a focus on transcendence even as these potential ministers pursue the standard seminary education.

New Practices in the Sacraments

Baptism

Growing up in The Church of the Nazarene, baptism was similar to many other denominations. A person entered into the water with their pastor. He asked them if they have accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior. When they responded affirmatively, the pastor leaned them back into the water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each denomination and church has their own way of performing the sacrament of baptism. However, perhaps a change in practice could help focus the congregation on transcendence through community and narrative.

To facilitate community at CrossRoads Community Church, each person who is baptized writes out their testimony. As they enter the water with the baptizing pastor, their testimony is read to the congregation. Time is taken to listen to the narrative of transcendent transformation story. This practice also adds meaning for the one being baptized. They must take the time to remember where they were when Christ found them. They must remember the trajectory on which their lives were headed. They recount how the Lord brought them into the body of Christ. They remember the people God provided to guide and help them along the way. They see God's grace working in their life. Along with their testimony, we ask them to share what they hope to find in their walk with Christ. This becomes very personal. The congregation is led in a call and response "As we are in Christ, so you are in Christ. As we are in you. You are in us. We are brothers and sisters in the family of God and members of the body of Christ, the church, His bride." After each person is baptized, the congregation celebrates with shouts and applause. When all have been baptized, we take time to remind the congregation of

another purpose of baptism as a public testimony to be witnessed for the purpose of remembering who we are in Christ. the altars are opened for prayer and the pastor encourages the people to confess their sins. They are encouraged to do this out loud or in their hearts. This is an open time of prayer with no set amount of time placed upon it. Then, the congregation is encouraged to remember that their sins have been washed away and to give thanks. Again, this is an open time of prayer without a set time limit. The people rise to their feet remembering they are a new creation in Christ. The old has gone so they no longer have to carry the shame and guilt of past sin. Finally, time is taken to remember how Holy Spirit alighted upon Christ that He might be filled with power to fulfill His calling and we invite people to be anointed in prayer.⁴⁸¹ This replaces the message. The focus is on the experience of transcendence.

The young adults at CrossRoads Community Church have responded so positively to this new way of practicing baptism as well as the rest of the congregation. Those to be baptized make greater efforts to invite friends and family to witness their baptism. The evangelistic fervor has intensified as well. The congregation not only witnesses transformation, but experience it in their minds and bodies.

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is a continual celebration of Passover that remains by the command of Christ. and is essential in Christian worship. Henri Nouwen says, "The Eucharist is the most ordinary and the most divine gesture imaginable."⁴⁸² The Lord's

⁴⁸¹ Mat 3:16.

⁴⁸² Henri J. M. Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts: A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life*, Reprint edition. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2016), 497.

supper is symbolic of Christ as our bread who was broken for our sins. It symbolizes His blood shed is wine to our souls that we might prosper as we depend on Him as we do food and drink. The message of the narrative transcends our soul to the cross where He gave His life for ous. The significance of the Lord's Supper should not be diminished. However, very often, the Lord's Supper is felt as obligatory to pass on to the main event, the sermon. I wanted to start a new way of practicing the Lord's Supper to allow it to be the monumental ritual God intended.

The new way of practicing the Lord's Supper at CrossRoads Community Church has been to add the element of Imaginitive Prayer from the Jesuit tradition. According to James Martin, "Some classic works of spirituality are meant to be read contemplatively. The Spiritual Exercises are different. They are meant to be experienced, not read."⁴⁸³ Additionally, David L. Fleming writes about imaginitive prayer: "It is about becoming 'onlooker-participants' giving 'full rein to our imagination' in order 'to place ourselves fully within a story from the Gospels.'⁴⁸⁴ This has brought an entirely new experience to the Lord's Supper.

After passing out the elements (but before we take them), the congregation is led through an imaginitive prayer exercise. For example, at our last Lord's Supper celebration, time is given for people to place themselves into the scene of the woman

⁴⁸³ James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life*. (San Francisco, California: HarperOne, 2012), 20.

⁴⁸⁴ "Pray with Your Imagination - IgnatianSpirituality.Com," *Ignatian Spirituality*, n.d., accessed March 17, 2023, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/pray-with-your-imagination/>.

caught in adultery as a symbolic place of the cross.⁴⁸⁵ The congregation is asked to close their eyes and imagine the scene. It is made personal with phrases such as “You can see Jesus teaching. The sun is still low in the morning. He is in the Temple courts? Who is near Him? What expressions are on their face? How is He looking at them?” Then there is a pause to allow the imagination to create images in each person’s mind. After pausing, the visualization continues: “You hear rumblings of a crowd coming near you. You see the religious leaders almost dragging a woman to Jesus. She has been caught in adultery. The religious leaders are furious and the woman is downtrodden. How are the religious people approaching Jesus? How are they treating the woman? Now look at the woman. See her face as they stop close enough for you to say something. What would you say to her? How does your heart feel seeing her so condemned and ashamed? The religious leaders want Jesus to condemn her to death by stoning. It is the law. But you see Jesus bend down. He is writing something on the ground. Can you see it? What is he writing? He stands and says to the crowd of accusers, ‘Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’ Jesus bends down again and starts to write. What is the crowd doing? What are they saying to one another?” Pause. “You see the people one by one begin to walk away. Who walks away first? Who walks away last? Now, only the woman is there with you and Jesus. He says to her, ‘No one has condemned you. Then neither do I condemn you.’ What does the woman do? What does she say to Jesus?” Pause. “She walks away and now it is just you and Jesus. What do you want to say to Him?”

⁴⁸⁵ John 8:1-11

At this time, they are encouraged to speak to Christ directly. There is no time limit. The pastor afterward will take the congregation's attention back to the elements and continue. But the added element of imaginative prayer has deepened the experience in a significant way. People weep and cry out to God. Young adults emotive deeply. Some have brought their elements to the altar spontaneously. It is a new experience.

A New Practice in Prayer

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun writes that "Prayer is a word that describes a relationship."⁴⁸⁶ Prayer has existed since God initiated a relationship with humanity. When the disciples asked Jesus how to pray, it was an interesting question since these men would pray themselves and heard others pray throughout their life. Perhaps, they considered their prayers rudimentary, but surely they would have heard the prayers of the teachers at the Temple not to mention of the priests. Yet, when they heard Jesus pray, they suddenly realized they were missing something. Is it possible that with all the attention we give to prayer, we are also missing something?

In Leviticus, the sons of Aaron—Nadab and Abihu—are tasked with adding fire to the incense to the second altar leading into the Holy of Holies. The fire was to be taken from the first altar, which was for burnt offerings. We do not know where the fire was taken from; we only know that it was not the fire God prescribed. The Bible uses the term "strange fire" for what they used.⁴⁸⁷ God's anger burned and the fire of God consumed them, but Aaron was not allowed to mourn. This indicates how serious this was for the

⁴⁸⁶ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, Revised edition. (Westmont, Illinois: IVP, 2015), 203.

⁴⁸⁷ Lev 10:1-3.

Lord. These two men were attempting to draw near to God in a way that God had not prescribed. They were using the fire they chose as if it didn't matter. What if the prayer of modern evangelicalism is too often strange fire? What is prayer, though an ancient ritual has been hijacked by the modern Age of Authenticity? It is easy to know the right words, posture, or place, but unless our heart communes with God in transcendence, we may be offering strange fire.

Often prayer occurs but while the heart is stuck in the immanent frame. People pray because they know they should. However, what drives a person to prayer, even in the immanent frame, is a sense of inability to control a situation. There is desperation for God's help. Yet, the social imaginary has been formed in the immanent frame. There is no sense of dependence upon God even though the prayer is directed to God. The Scriptures teach that the fervent prayer of the righteous is full of power and effective.⁴⁸⁸

Transcendence with God in prayer requires the right heart posture of righteousness. This is a life behavior in line with Biblical standards. However, to focus on the practice of prayer, the focus for this section is the fervency of prayer. The church needs a new practice to revive an ancient one. S. A. Carson warns against superficial fervency and that fervent prayer “is the product of his (Paul's) passion for people. His unaffected fervency in prayer is not whipped-up emotionalism but the overflow of his love for brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus.”⁴⁸⁹ Fervent prayer is impossible without love. Much more could be said about this need for spiritual formation, but again, let us

⁴⁸⁸ Jam 5:16.

⁴⁸⁹ D. A. Carson, *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, 2nd edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), 65.

assume spiritual formation and love has been fostered. There is still a need in worship services to foster transcendence. The challenge is to allow ourselves to be pulled out of the thought patterns of the immanent frame impressing upon our prayers so that we do not pray with strange fire, but rather with sincere fervency. Typically, in an evangelic service, there is prayer. It is from the stage and others listen. To be fervent, a love for God and love for others must be fostered in the moment.

Open-Ended and Imaginative Prayer

At CrossRoads Community Church, they have begun open-ended prayer times. These are not the result of what seems to be an emotional high driven by worship in music. Instead, there are purposeful times of prayer intentionally without a set limit. As the time begins, connection and community is encouraged. People are encouraged to take the hands of those they came with or their friends they are sitting with. Kenda Creasy Dean writes that “sacraments and prayer represent the church’s most countercultural (and arguably most liminoid) practices, the practice most commonly associated with minimalism is pilgrimage.”⁴⁹⁰ The open-ended prayer time is seen as a pilgrimage toward God embarked upon with one another through the Lord’s prayer. The Lord’s Prayer is used to re-center the congregation outside of time. The focus is on taking the posture of the children of God whose Father is able to do all things. There is encouraged interaction with the Lord’s prayer spiritually. It is not prayed or recited, but this becomes a guided process with participation and community through the Lord’s prayer. Congregants join hands and meditate on what it means that God is Our Father. The congregation is asked

⁴⁹⁰ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 167.

to imagine God as their Father. Those without earthly fathers or those whose fathers have passed away receive God as their Father. Thanks is given to God while asking the Holy Spirit to fill to bestow the spirit of sonship. Gratitude is expressed to the Father for the families He has given them, both their biological families and friends. Remembrance is made of those in the family of God who have been there right when needed. Prayer is made for brothers and sisters in Christ by calling out their name and praying for them.

Then, the church is given time to meditate on the fact that our Father is in Heaven, that the same God who is in Heaven is our *Abba* loving and caring for His children. Open-ended questions are asked such as “What does it mean that the One who loves you the most and has taken responsibility for you as their child is also the God of Heaven?” Again, the goal is a pilgrimage to God through the Lord’s prayer to foster fervency.

Turning to daily bread, prayer is made asking the Lord to make people aware of where they are not dependent upon Him, where He is not their substance of bread. Listening, repenting and pray for one another. Petition is made for the Lord to reveal sin for confession. Then attention is given to those issues or relationships that are presenting the greatest temptation to abandon obedience to God. There is prayer offered for protection and the protection of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The entire exercise could be characterized as what the church was commanded to do. It is prayer, meditation, and calling upon the Lord. The new practice is that this practice is not part of the service but it is the point of the service. This practice works against the MTD of this age.

A New Practices in Community

Community Groups

Creating community requires an approach on different levels. To create community, there must be a gathering place and a sense of living life together. The gathering place is not the place of worship, but a social gathering place. Community is built upon living life together. There is a great deal of study to be done about creating community in a society as busy as ours. I have already mentioned busyness as a hindrance to community. But when the church provides the place for community where young generations and others might stay to "hang out" together before and after church, community is more easily created. At CrossRoads Community Church, there has been a shift in the practice of small groups.

Before, the small groups were called LifeLines and took place at the church building. They operated very similar to tradition Sunday School classes with the exception of eating together (an element added a few years ago). However, an analysis found that the focus was on curriculum more than community. As a result, small groups have been modified starting with the name, which was changed to Community Groups. A lifeline is needed when a person is in trouble. Names are important and it was felt by church leadership that the name LifeLine lended itself to Moral Therapeutic Deism. By changing it, the hope is to also change the dynamics from MTD to building community. These groups are mostly in homes now. The new strategy is for all new groups to be in homes. This has changed the dynamics so that instead of feeling like attending a class, it is more like going to a friend's home.

The leadership training for these groups has also changed with emphasis being on community more than the curriculum. Leaders now focus on community and transcendence more than curriculum. The group meeting begins with a "check-in" where everyone shares where they are in life. It is very open-ended. Those who wish not to speak experience no pressure to do so. A timer is set for three minutes. This is a general guide; however, if someone shares something difficult or traumatic, then the leader has freedom to let them continue. After all have shared who would like to, there is prayer. During the prayer time, each person is asked to pray for those in the group silently or to themselves, then the leader finishes with a corporate prayer.

When it is time for the Bible teaching, the leader is taught to direct it "loosely," allowing the Spirit to move so long as it is beneficial to the group both spiritually and communally. If a lesson is not completed, this is not important as long as community and transcendence have been present. Some have asked how people will be educated biblically. The answer has been to trust the Spirit to lead in these meetings. However, this new practice of small groups has prompted new strategies for Bible teaching as well.

Community in the Worship Service

Developing community through shared lives is the goal. To pursue this goal in the worship service, there are new practices. There is what is called "hello time." This is an extended period of greeting one another. It is more than turning to the person to the right and left and greeting them, but we also encourage the congregation to leave their seat and move across the sanctuary to greet others in the church. Because we have prioritized community, this is not governed tightly. The struggle is getting congregants to return to their seats. Observing this time, one can easily see from the laughter, smiles, and hugs

that people are connecting with others. Some congregants have come asking prayer for others who sit near them. They are sharing prayer requests with one another during hello time even though that is not the purpose.

We also have started using prayer circles. When we have prayer circles, we encourage people to stand and turn around in the pews to form small circles of 8-10 people. We turn on all the lights. We turn off all the music. This creates interaction. We designate a facilitator. Then the facilitator asks people to share if they are comfortable. It may be open-ended. We might have a sentence starter for them to finish such as “I would like to see God....” At the end, the facilitator asks everyone in the group to "whisper" a prayer for those in the group the Lord prompts them. No one is praying fully out loud, but many do pray and the room fills with the sound of prayer.

It is hard to say at this point the effect of the new practice of prayer circles. It has helped maintain intimacy even with a services of 200 or more I know some have resisted. And these are very difficult for guests at times. Yet at other times, it becomes a powerful moment as someone in the group allows themselves to be very vulnerable and the compassion for the others has a strong spiritual healing effect. Some are uncomfortable and some do not participate. But overall, people do. A survey is planned at some point to gather some reactions. However, the services seem more like a house of prayer than ever before.

A New Practice in Political Rhetoric

Heft and Stets write the following about politics in the evangelical church:

“...From the late 1970s to the present, the evangelicals solidified their position in the Republican Party. The merging of evangelicalism and conservative politics

meant support a social agenda that included such policies as overturning *Roe v. Wade*, opposing same-sex marriage, and resisting immigration by tightening the borders. To identify as Christian thus meant holding these conservative positions. A political backlash then unfolded among Christian liberals, and the young began to disaffiliate because of the conservative political agenda.”⁴⁹¹

For a cultural shift in politics, it is not a practice that is needed in the church, but the negation of a worldly practice of church members when they are not in church services. As previously discussed, the evangelical church (particularly white conservative evangelicals) in an attempt to legislate morality for the purpose of conserving a Christian nation has been conflated with the political right. The political platform of the Christian right flies in the face of authenticity. Rather than embracing one’s natural inclinations, the political and Christian right calls for laws in an attempt to force personal self-discipline especially in the area of sex. Gripping tight the definition of marriage as one man and one woman denies those who practice homosexuality some of the benefits of marriage in areas such as medical information and a legal union recognized by the state. In the Age of Authenticity, these views seem dogmatic, harsh, unloving, and wicked. When the church vehemently fights for legislation that appears to make authenticity illegal in these areas, younger generations struggle to see the love of God. It has been this quandary between biblical doctrine and avoiding an image of hate that has created such division in churches and denominations.

A proposal is for a cultural shift in political rhetoric. There is no practice for this, yet it does require action. The church through Scripture will continue to have the command to speak the truth in love and to address social, moral, and ethical issues. To do

⁴⁹¹ Heft and Stets, *Empty Churches*, 10.

this, the founthead from which these conversations originate must change. Rather than addressing these issues from a political stance, the church must navigate through the mine fields of social issues from the love of Christ. All the law partly hangs on loving our neighbor, then the manner in which something is addressed must be spoken in a loving tone.

The difficult part of negating harsh rhetoric is that the controversial issues of today involve Biblical morality. For example, a couple at CrossRoads recently brought up a significant issue that touches on politics. Both individuals are in training for ministry. They had travelled home to the Northeast and returned with a question they had been asked of someone on their trip. An openly gay woman asked them, “Will your church accept me just as I am?” They sought direction on how to reply to a question such as this. It is in responses to issues such as this, not by avoiding issues like this, that a cultural shift can be made. It must be determined if questions such as this are sincere or intended as a political trap. This calls for discernment and testing of the spirits.⁴⁹² If the question is sincere, the answer should be loving and true. With a sincere question, the answer must be focused on how to love that person in the moment more than national policy. As Jesus often avoided a political discussion, the church needs to do the same⁴⁹³. The new practice is to focus on loving people more than prioritizing legislation, but this must be done outside the church. It must be addressed from the pulpit. The areas outside Christian services where political arguments occur need to be identified. And the greater importance of the Great Commission needs to be stressed more than legislating morality.

⁴⁹² 1 John 4:1.

⁴⁹³ Mark 12:17.

When issues arise that are primed for political debate, the pastor must be honest about a situation and address it from the perspective of loving our neighbor not choosing sides or being trapped to choose sides. Then, members are encouraged to vote politically according to Scripture in the voting booth.

The point is that evangelicals often feel the need to give a political answer to a political question. However, this often forces political answer from a political position and the shift needs to be from a loving position. The church need only to teach the love of Christ and let the Scripture do the work of revealing this love even when the love of God calls for restraint or denial of natural inclinations whether those be affinity for food, sex, religion, or anything else.

When Christians come from a political position, there is a tendency to lump people into groups for the sake of laws. But Christ did not lock Himself into laws. His love doesn't look the same for each person. Christ required of the rich young ruler that he give away all of his wealth.⁴⁹⁴ However, when Zaccheus proclaimed that he would give half of his possessions to the poor and repay those he had stolen from fourfold, Jesus was content with his response.⁴⁹⁵ It might appear that Christ showed favoritism, but God shows no favoritism.⁴⁹⁶ Love is doing what is best for the other all the time. What is best is their spiritual development as followers of Christ. Christ knows what is necessary for each person to be moved to follow Him wholeheartedly. At times, Christ was strict, but

⁴⁹⁴ Mark 10:17-21.

⁴⁹⁵ Luke 19:8-10.

⁴⁹⁶ Rom 2:11.

lenient at other times. He knew who needed mercy or chastisement. Each was good for the soul. Love recognizes every person is different and in need of different action.

As evangelicals, we can support and vote for laws that we believe would be best for the nation, but we must also remember that for every law, there are many exceptions needed to “act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly.”⁴⁹⁷ To fulfill this passage, evangelicals must be cognizant of a balance needed between justice and mercy. There is a need to humbly recognize that rarely are all the facts of an issue present at once so to reserve judgment. When evangelicals, in an attempt to preserve a Christian nation, ignore mercy for the sake of law or ignore justice for the sake of mercy then the prescribed divine balance is lost as their words and actions misalign with Christ's love. Addressing social issues from a political position without the love of Christ will lean too far one way or the other along the ideological spectrum. When this position is held tightly and fought for, the imbalance produces pride that lacks justice or mercy. Evangelicalism can hold its political positions, but love is abandoned when they become more political than Godly.

Concluding Remarks

These proposed practices are more of a paradigm shift in how worship services are designed than new programs or systems. The church must face the reality of the secular age. If more programs and systems were going to reverse the trend of younger generations moving away from Christianity, it would have already happened. There is no lack of new programs, marketing, sermon packaging, signs, parking lots, and even paint.

⁴⁹⁷ Micah 6:8.

Yet all of these fall into the trap of assuming the church can fool this secular age back into the church building without transcendence. With each generation that abandons church participation, there is a greater yearning for spirituality. This allows for the evangelical church to respond with an invitation to return to transcendence. But if the church continues to operate within an ecclesial immanent frame while touting transcendence, authenticity is lost. And in this age, the absence of authenticity is rejected. At its worst, it is perceived as hypocrisy which is where the church sits now. According to Taylor, this is not “Christianity versus exclusive humanism, but rather Christian humanism versus exclusive humanism.”⁴⁹⁸ His point is that we all inhabit the immanent frame, but what must be addressed is how we inhabit this frame. Do we see it as closed or open? Is this life closed to transcendence or open to it? And he speaks extensively about the cross-pressures of transcendence. This is the sense within the human soul that there is something beyond the closed immanent frame. Taylor goes on to suggest that “at the same time, this heavy concentration of the atmosphere of immanence will intensify a sense of living in a ‘wasteland’ for subsequent generations, and many young people will begin again to explore beyond the boundaries.”⁴⁹⁹ This very sad statement is a reminder to the church that people are looking for that which only God can provide. The Age of Authenticity, the age of mobilization, the busy close-framed secular age in which we live is full of seekers of something more than what they can see. The Bible still rings true. The harvest is plentiful.⁵⁰⁰ This is not a time for the church to lament the direction of our

⁴⁹⁸ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 100.

⁴⁹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 770.

⁵⁰⁰ Mat 9:37.

secular age, but an exploding opportunity to reveal real transcendence to generations looking for exactly that.

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