

Educating for Discipleship in Consumer Culture: Promising Practices Rooted in the Pastoral Circle

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Boston College
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**EDUCATING FOR DISCIPLESHIP IN A CONSUMER CULTURE:
PROMISING PRACTICES ROOTED IN THE PASTORAL CIRCLE**

a dissertation

by

TIRRELL M. ELLIOTT-HART

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Abstract

Educating for Discipleship in a Consumer Culture: Promising Practices Rooted in the Pastoral Circle

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American society has been labeled a “consumer culture.” “Consumer culture” is not another term for materialism or a framework to explain one’s relationship to money; it is an evolving ethos shaping our vision of ourselves, of our neighbor and the common good. The breadth and depth of commodification in the contemporary West informs the collective imagination in unprecedented ways. This dissertation brings together social science critique, educational tools and theological resources to create models for effective adult disciple building that are adequate for addressing challenges of a dominant culture’s ideology and practices. Christian formation practices should heighten the Christian community’s awareness of its role in dominant culture, both as inheritors of culture and as agents. This awareness requires transformation in many dimensions of one’s being: a holistic discipleship.

Jesus reminded his followers, “Where your treasure is there your heart will be also.”¹ One of the driving questions of this dissertation is: how can the Christian community wrestle ultimate concerns back from the consumer culture to the heart of God for the world? To address that question the discourse of the dissertation is interdisciplinary while maintaining an ultimate vision for an approach to educating for mature Christian discipleship. The dissertation is structured to include social analysis, a vision of alternatives to the dominant lifestyle promulgated by the consumer culture, and

¹ Luke 12:34, The New Oxford Annotated Bible.

effective pathways toward achieving that vision. The first half of the dissertation analyzes the relationship of contemporary consumer culture and Christian experience. The sociological and historical descriptions of this phenomenon lead toward the question, what are the implications for religious identity and meaning-making in light of the consumerist context? I explore theological resources including the gospel of Luke, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Gustavo Gutierrez for highlighting key dimensions of culturally responsive discipleship. I also present two brief cases of organizations who are attempting to live out promising approaches to Christian community in light of consumer culture patterns.

The second half explores theories that can serve as a framework for Christian education practices effective for countering the influences of consumerism. Transformative learning theory is introduced as a resource for cultivating awareness of underlying assumptions shaped by culture that are operative in adult decision making and worldview. Henriot and Holland's "pastoral circle" is described as a transformative learning tool. The dissertation moves toward a model of adapting the pastoral circle for educating congregations to think theologically about culture for the sake of personal transformation and social action.

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PREFACE

In the late nineteen-nineties I moved with my husband and infant to Jamaica; we each took two suitcases. Our basic needs were provided through our agency so that food, shelter and reasonable medical expenses were covered. Anything else depended on discretionary money that was our salary, about fifty US dollars per month. This experience of forced simplicity in the context of a country where we still had more resources than most of the others around us cultivated many habits for living with far less than the typical North American. While we made the choice to live and work in modest conditions in a cross cultural situation, which we hoped would change our habits, attitudes and shape our spirituality we were not making the daily choices of simplicity out of sheer will power. By North American standards there were not very many goods in the marketplace or opportunities to purchase non-essentials, there were very little material possessions displayed prominently to evoke desire and we had little access to North American media images or messages.

During our return trip after three years of service we visited friends who lived in seminary housing in a quaint suburb. Today, the images I remember tell me that the apartment was small and old, by typical real estate standards, and the family probably felt that it was challenging to live there. But as a reentry point we were overwhelmed by the environment, taken aback at the number of things that they had that were not essential. I remember vividly noticing art hanging on the walls, wall mounted shelves with decorative items, and matching furniture (ironically they were waiting for an even nicer living room set to be delivered the day we were driving through). The two children's

shared bedroom had a playful color scheme, wall to wall shelves with their toys, art supplies, clothing and books. There were also toys in the living room. Kitchen appliances matched. The day is vivid to me because I was in the U.S. for only a few hours and had been thrown into a disorienting situation. What is normal? What will we need for ourselves when we get an apartment? How can they be so indulgent? Did I deprive my children to not have all the stimulation that these girls have? Why does it take this level of décor and beauty, which has to be bought, to enjoy a home? Suddenly my cozy house in Jamaica with “artwork” cut out of magazines and hung in handmade frames seemed empty; and maybe I, too, should now have yard plantings that are in terra cotta pots and not plastic bottles, old tires or tin cans.

After a year or so of living in the U.S. I realized that those friends were not particularly over consuming by North American standards, and they would likely consider themselves mindful and generous and focused on things that matter for eternity. The point is that what is “normal” is shaped relative to what our immediate environment dictates. Taste, style, simplicity and indulgence are relative terms.

Most people who are trying to disentangle themselves from consumerism do not have such helpful boundary lines as I had when we literally left most of our possessions behind. Striving for new practices without a change in environment is very challenging. In many ways my family experienced the conditions for transformative learning perfectly. First, we had the catalyst of disequilibrium, and second we had a community of others asking similar questions and probing theological and sociological wisdom for the strength to embrace the challenges to our preconceived notions and existing lifestyle habits.

My experience of disorientation upon reentry and the ongoing important effect of not fully fitting in the North American context is part of what has fostered my own transformative process. Being open to ongoing disorientation has produced new practices and desires instead of satisfaction with status quo. In my own story living out practices consistent with what I believe about possessions, inequalities, and quality of life in my current context of middle class family life in a major American city is far more challenging than that cultural transition years ago into living with so little in often harsh conditions. My personal discomfort with how hard it is to resist overconsumption, to reject advertising messages, and to say no to American habits like over spending and debt are part of the impetus behind this research project.

INTRODUCTION

“Are you a Panera person?” she asked. We were choosing where to eat and the innocent query about preferences for a lunch restaurant launched us into a reflection on personal association with brands. The kinds of identity questions one might more immediately think of could be: *Am I a kind person? Am I a generous person? Am I defined by my family? Where do I feel most at home? Have I accomplished anything meaningful?* Can someone also be a person “of” a particular retail or restaurant chain, with its characteristic menu, ingredients, ambiance, price range and predominant customer profile? That is a more disquieting question, about an aspect of life that should be trivial yet has become increasingly more constitutive of self-identification. The distinction between, *do you want to go to Panera? And are you a Panera person?* may seem minor but our everyday language can be a sign pointing us to question more complex dynamics.

As preference has become more associated with identity there is cause to pause and ask, do I want to be primarily known by what I consume? As the prominence of brands has grown and choices have proliferated in the course of three or four decades the significance of brand in personal and group identity has become more overt. Brands play a role in status seeking and self-identification— in other words, beyond fit, comfort and price there is an association with items, clothing for example, that would cause a teenager to decry, “I wouldn’t be caught dead in those [X brand] jeans;” because the label has so much symbolic weight in her cultural world.

How do the primary attributes of Christian discipleship challenge the vision and claims of such a culture? How are they influenced by consumerism? Incorporating a critical conversation with dominant culture into regular faith formation practices is essential for building Christian disciples who will act justly and faithfully in the twenty-first century. The relationship between faith and culture is a central concern in the field of practical theology. Because faith is always enculturated the more we understand about the social context of theological questions the more fully we can address them. Many North American congregations seem to be embedded uncritically in the social structures, interpretive categories, and values of the dominant culture. Particularly noticeable is the degree to which Christianity and consumer culture co-mingle.² As Christian communities confront their personal consumer practices they will learn how today's urgent questions fit into the larger framework of Christian history and what needs to be deconstructed, what needs to be retrieved and what reconstruction might then look like. Christian congregations would benefit from understanding the connections between dominant culture and their own vision and practices because as sociologists and practical theologians have suggested the dominant values and habits encouraged by the culture can obfuscate the religious meaning-making capacity of people in faith communities.

American society has been labeled a "consumer culture." "Consumer culture" is not another term for materialism or defining one's relationship to money; it is shaping our vision of ourselves, of our neighbor and the common good. I am interested in bringing

² Ron Sider summarizes some of this important data in his book Ronald Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005). He demonstrates that a lack of care for the poor, for example, can be associated with the drive to accumulate wealth among middle class Christians. See also Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, 20th Anniversary Revision ed. (W Publishing Group, 1997).

together social science critique, educational tools and theological resources to create models for effective adult disciple building that are adequate for addressing challenges of dominant culture value and practices. If Christian conversion can be understood in relation to a transformation of worldview, then Christian education practices should also support the capacity to undergo such transformations. I approach the dissertation with the assumption that Christian formation practices should heighten the Christian community's awareness of their role in dominant culture, both as inheritors of culture and as agents. This awareness requires transformations across many dimensions of one's being. My aims in this dissertation include: to provide an overview of *consumer culture literature*; to recover *discipleship* as primary image of identity for the Christian community; and to *propose an approach to holistic formation* based on the hermeneutical circle that integrates transformative learning with theological reflection for resistance of dominant culture and the creation of alternatives.

I have employed a version of the hermeneutic circle as the method of research and writing for this dissertation. My own faith and personal experiences bring me to begin with wanting to "see" the social context of my work clearly. I then ask questions about the cultural context, and of the scriptures and tradition to understand the relationship of culture to life as a contemporary Christ-follower. Finally, I investigate tools for taking action and propose an approach to Christian discipleship which takes the consumer context seriously.

Chapter 1 sets the parameters of the discussion of consumer culture. I introduce literature on consumer culture and how it relates to the issue of meaning-making and identity. The study of "consumer culture" is a growing academic field today, and the

consumer society is also a frequent topic of conversation in popular media. Researchers name three trends which have prompted this decade's popular critiques.³ First, is a public recognition of the breadth of new domestic and international economic inequalities including a growing conscience about child poverty and hunger. Second, is a growing awareness of the impact of globalization, not only economically but related to awareness of environmental issues: if the world consumed at the rate of the United States it would arguably take four planet earths to sustain that level of consumption of natural resources. Third, is recognition of the relentless commodification of so many spheres of life, marked by the marketing of goods and services that previously were outside of the profit making nexus, even marketing values and religions. The breadth and depth of commodification in the contemporary West informs our collective imagination in ways that are unprecedented. What are some of the implications for religious identity and meaning-making in light of the consumerist context? The second part of the chapter looks at the growing Christian literature by theologians analyzing the conditions of the consumer society.

The complexity of today's North American context demands a more nuanced approach to culture that understands the significance of the enculturation of Christian communities while at the same time requires critical theological reflection on Christian identity and dominant culture. Chapter 2 explores theological resources including the gospel of Luke, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Gustavo Gutierrez for highlighting key dimensions of Christian discipleship for our day. After introducing the concept of disciple in the early Christian communities I ask what it means to cultivate these attitudes and practices specifically in the consumer culture. How does identity as disciples help us

³ Douglas Holt and Juliet Schor, eds., *The Consumer Society Reader* (New York: The New Press, 2000).

understand church as a worshipping community that stands in service and solidarity with neighbor? I begin to answer these questions by introducing two organizations who are attempting to live out consumerism-aware discipleship.

The middle chapters introduce tools for the integration of faith and culture. In Chapter 3 I explore wisdom from the discipline of educational studies. Transformative learning theory serves as a resource for cultivating awareness of underlying assumptions shaped by culture that are operative in adult decision making and worldview. If part of the task of facilitating adult maturity in Christian community is to cultivate the capacity to reflect critically on the presuppositions that drive decision making and problem solving, I suggest we turn to transformative learning from the field of adult education to understand mature adult meaning-making. Adult learning experiences ought to coach adults into more mature thinking patterns when faced with new challenges, instead of operating out of an unconscious set of assumptions. A basic insight of the theory is that critical self-reflection is stimulated by experiences of disorientation when a discrepancy between new insights and a learner's long held beliefs, values, or assumptions becomes obvious. What are the strengths and limits of the theory for use in a Christian context?

Chapter 4 describes Henriot and Holland's "pastoral circle" as a transformative learning tool. This exemplifies how liberation theology and Christian social ethics provide hermeneutical models for understanding the interplay of human experience, particularly social issues, and the Christian message demanding a new way of being that cultivates a new lens for seeing, engaging in reflection again. I move toward a model of adapting the pastoral circle for educating congregations to think theologically about culture for the sake of personal transformation and social action.

Chapter 5 fleshes out an approach based on the tools from education theory and practical theology introduced in the previous chapters. Jesus reminded his followers, “Where your treasure is there your heart will be also.”⁴ How can the Christian community wrestle ultimate concerns back from the consumer culture to the heart of God for the world? The chapter looks at practical attempts to deepen resistance at the identity forming/meaning-making level, so that decision making, quality of relationships, problem solving, goal setting and values reflect a different set of presuppositions than the dominant commodified culture.

⁴ Luke 12:34, The New Oxford Annotated Bible.

Chapter 1

Consumer Culture as Context of the Twenty-first Century American Church: The commodified self, commodified other

The powerful allure of religion and branding is the same. We will be rescued. This act of rescue, be it from the Man from Glad or the Man from Galilee, transports us to the promised land of resolution.⁵

Following a striking turn of events in 2008, the financial world has been in turmoil and North Americans have been living through an economic recession with global reverberations. The failures and fears reflected in this recession illustrate how people's identities, confidence, perhaps even faith, have rested heavily on their ability to amass wealth and consume goods and services without limit. Reading the subtext of the cultural climate of the American recession serves as a helpful introduction to how beliefs and practices engendered by an economic system reflect a deeper meaning-making system.

Temporary Frugality

There was a shift in N. American consumption patterns in light of the fiscal crisis and sudden downturn in personal income and savings. These trends were captured in a *Monterey County Herald* series, "The New Frugality," which ran throughout the spring of 2009 chronicling individual's coping habits during the recession. Other essays from that period declare: "Recession forces people to buy only what they need"; "Saving taking

⁵ James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc., and Museumworld* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

precedence over eating out”; “Consumer’s thriftiness hurting economy”; and “First timers try hand at producing own food.” A *Boston Globe* front page article, titled, “The duct-tape economy,” tells the story of business owners describing the demand for repair businesses, from cars to shoes as a “silver lining” in the weak economy.⁶

The irony in a consumer-capitalist system is that more savings means less unbridled spending, which hurts retailers in the short term. However, many economists have expressed the view that the long term benefits of regaining balance from an unsustainable consumer debt-fueled economy benefits everyone in the long run. One such point of view is expressed in a short piece from *The Wall Street Journal* in April 2009 titled “Frugality Forged in Today’s Recession has Potential to Outlast It.” The WSJ article explains that “US households last year reduced their total debt outstanding for the first time since WWII, according to the Federal Reserve.”⁷ The author analyzes data from a survey of 46 economists who predict that there will be a lasting shift in American saving habits, which had been in steep decline since the 1980s. The article quotes a small business owner and father of three young children who has had no income for six months and consequently sold the family SUV and a vacation house to live debt free “I have completely changed in that regard,” he explains “...I just want to make enough money to enjoy myself and my family. I am not trying to get rich anymore.” This story, while anecdotal, captures the stories of scores of people who are restructuring their lives to live within their means.

In a similar article suggesting that the new spending patterns could become longer term habits for consumers, Tom Abate of the *San Francisco Chronicle* reports on a poll

⁶ Jenn Abelson, "The Duct-Tape Economy," *The Boston Globe*, April 27 2009.

⁷ Kelly Evans, "Frugality Forged in Today's Recession Has Potential to Outlast It," *The Wall Street Journal*, Monday, April 6 2009.

that demonstrates how people are spending less and planning to save more.⁸ People presume that the economy will not recover in the next few years so they have to cut down on discretionary spending such as entertainment and dining out. Those quoted say that they plan to make long term changes in purchasing based on their fears that the economy will not recover any time soon. With confidence eroded, it will be a long while before people spend the way they have in the past decade, not because of a change in values, but simply because people have less capital on hand.

What do people hope for at the resolution of this present “crisis”? For most, it is the restoration of financial security, not a revolution of attitudes or practices regarding what is “enough” economically or a new valuation of human dignity beyond accumulation of wealth and goods. Consider data such as: Americans spend annually on cosmetics, pet supplies, and ice cream more than it would take to immunize all children worldwide.⁹ We Americans also spend at Christmas more that it would take to provide clean drinking water for the entire developing world.¹⁰ So, even in this time of forced frugality, issues of consumption are not any less complex or morally charged.

These snapshots provide an entry point for considering why sociologists and social commentators insist that American society is a consumer culture. This chapter introduces “consumer culture” as a paradigm for understanding the social context of the church in the twenty-first century. After defining consumer culture, I describe the

⁸ Tom Abate, "New Frugality Could Become a Habit for Strapped Shoppers," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 2009.

⁹ Rough estimates of 61 billion dollars on discretionary expenses such as these compared to UN estimates of 1.3 billion dollars for immunization. Data analyzed by economists at Massive Change/ Institute Without Boundaries.

¹⁰ According to Living Water International, a relief and development agency, it would cost roughly 10 billion dollars per year to provide wells and distribution of clean water globally. They contrast this to consumer studies reports that in 2008 American Christmas retail revenues topped 450 billion dollars. See their explanation of UN and World Bank statistics at <http://www.water.cc/water-crisis/related>.

historical relationship of Christianity to facets of consumer culture. What emerges as my greatest concern is commodification: the ubiquitous nature of consumer culture is reflected in the commodification of values, experience and human relationship. I analyze this phenomenon through the lenses of sociology and practical theology.

Why “consumer culture”?

The field of consumer culture encompasses a variety of research areas: with economics, history, anthropology and environmental studies central among the many. There are shared assumptions among scholars, however, about what it means to use the term “consumer culture.” Sociologist Don Slater asserts that framing consumer culture as a contemporary problem is an over simplification; it has evolved over the hundreds of years of modernity since the Enlightenment. He names seven features of consumer culture which are recognized across disciplines:¹¹

- 1) Consumer culture is a culture of consumption. As such, the dominant values of a society are not only organized through consumption practices but also derived from them.
- 2) Consumer culture is the culture of a market society.
- 3) Consumer culture is, in principle, universal and impersonal. All social relations, activities and objects can in principle be exchanged as commodities.
- 4) Consumer culture identifies freedom with private choice and private life. The relation between freedom and privacy has been crucial to the development of the modern person.
- 5) Consumer needs are in principle unlimited and insatiable.
- 6) Consumer culture is the privileged medium for negotiating identity and status within a post-traditional society. In the post-modern society the extreme version of this persists: “society appears as a kind of fancy dress party where

¹¹ Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1997). 24-31.

identities are designed, tried on, worn for the evening then traded in for the next.”¹²

- 7) Consumer culture highlights the increasing importance of culture in the modern exercise of power. In post-modern theory the cultural value of goods pre-empts the economic value whereby symbolic cultural signifiers influence production more than the market does.

Slater’s summary and framing of the consumer culture includes the centrality of individualism and the development of identity within consumer culture that fuel the ethos of universal commodification.

The descriptive term “consumer culture” is warranted because of how pervasive and inescapable a life of consumption is to the American experience. It does not necessarily infer critique, nor does it serve to reduce a description of the American experience to consumption habits and values. Yet, when we start to fixate on living to consume as much as possible as opposed to consuming to live, consumption is no longer merely a neutral descriptor but a cultural ideology.

While I work with the presupposition that the contemporary formative environment of the human person and social communities is consumer culture, it is important to consider that people are both agents in and subjects of a culture. Further, postmodern theorists remind us that “culture” is more fluid and porous than anthropologists once described, and that human socialization should be understood in terms of cultures not culture; most people are simultaneously participating in multiple cultural milieus.¹³ The consumer culture literature generally uses the concept of “culture” to describe a group of people’s way of life and the group-specific social consensus. Slater’s thorough description reflects the anthropological usage of “culture,”

¹² Ibid., 30.

¹³ See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

as the way of living together transmitted from one generation to a next reflecting the whole which includes forms of knowledge, morals and law, customs, and any habits that are acquired as a member of that society.

Although many socializing influences shape identity and make claims on one's allegiances, the effects of consumer culture cut across demographics such as gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity. Everyone lives in relationship to the institutions, practices, and assumptions that constitute the consumer society. Further, to understand how I am using "consumer culture" it should be evident that it is not simply an economic reference. As reflected in Slater's definition, beyond one's relationship to money, the ethos of consumer culture shapes identity, values, relationships and mass imagination. So, while in all societies people consume, economist Neva Goodwin explains that "the things whose consumption characterizes a consumer society are not those that are needed for subsistence but are valued for non-utilitarian reasons, such as status seeking, envy provocation and novelty seeking."¹⁴ Goodwin goes on to say that "in a consumer society individual identity is related to consumption, the judgments that are made about self and others are related to the lifestyle created by consumption activities. In a production oriented society identity is more tied to what one produces than what one consumes."¹⁵ Moving forward, I use the terms consumer culture and consumer society to characterize the processes and ideology of consumption as used by sociologists.

The role of consumption in American life developed under the shadow of many national ideologies. Slater traces the consumer society back to the beginning of modernity in the eighteenth century with its heightened emphasis on the individual and

¹⁴ Neva Goodwin, Frank Ackerman, and David Kiron, eds., *The Consumer Society*, 5 vols., vol. 2, *Frontier Issues in Economic Thought* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1997).3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*,3

personal freedoms. While I will not explore such broad historical precedents, it is important in social analysis to use an historical lens. I do so with regards to the connection between Christianity and the commodification of everyday life and values throughout the last century.

Historical foundations

Contemporary theological responses to the cultural context will be strengthened by an understanding of the religious influences on the cultural roots of commercialism even while we look to the Christian tradition to provide alternatives to the dominant practices of consumption. So, some attention to the historical antecedents of our contemporary culture is called for. Because of an emphasis on values such as happiness, success, and the “good society” in early American Christianity as well as in the emerging philosophy behind the retail economy, it is most helpful to look at pieces of the history of those two systems simultaneously.

The interplay of dominant Protestant values, emerging modern philosophies, and social sciences, along with economic structures allowed for the development of consumer capitalism that we now experience in contemporary American culture. Despite the popular rhetoric suggesting that consumer culture has been reshaping American Christianity, a thorough understanding of consumer culture must include recognition of the ways in which Christian tradition was already embedded in the social systems we have inherited.

John Wanamaker: Man of religious values and retail passions

Historians describe how the dominant values of twentieth century Protestantism impacted the trajectory of modern American business practices. Christian institutions

have been intimately related to the structures and values that support consumer capitalism and the culture of consumption. Of particular impact was the rise of Christian elite urban businessmen and politicians. John Wanamaker, a pioneer in retail and advertising at the turn of the twentieth century is a fascinating example of the kind of person who captures the paradox inherent in the birth of consumer culture particularly as it related to the Protestant tradition. Exploring the ambiguous mix of practices regarding work, saving, spending, and aesthetics apparent in John Wanamaker's story helps to illuminate the key elements of modernity which fostered commercialism.¹⁶

In the period from 1861-1877 there was a dramatic revolution in retail that paralleled changes brought about by industrial revolution and an increase in personal capital. Wanamaker appealed to customers as an honest religious man, even using folksy religious language in his advertising.¹⁷ Generally, merchants were not reputable characters in the cities and retail venues were often avoided by middle class and upper middle class with household staff doing the shopping when possible. Wanamaker developed a different ethos in his company. He was a visible presence among the employees as well as his customers, establishing personal relationships. He empathized with disgruntled customers, writing letters and offering apologies. According to his records, he was being charitable while cultivating a group of loyal customers.¹⁸

¹⁶ The "Protestant work ethic" which Max Weber understands as the root of western capitalism would not have necessarily fostered a cultural consumer orientation, as it is actually associated with values of production. Church historian Mark Noll (*The Search for Christian America*) tells a story of a merchant jailed for selling his wares at six percent profit which was greater than what was allowed by law. It is far too simplistic to suggest that our consumer capitalist system reflects Calvinist piety in the same vein as the Puritans earliest economic patterns. I also draw on Laurence Moore's clarification that when referring to a Protestant history of America it is much more about an ethos than actual doctrine.

¹⁷ Herbert Ershkowitz, *John Wanamaker, Philadelphia Merchant* (Conshocren, PA: Combined Publishing, 1999),.43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*,34-35

Wanamaker was an innovator in many areas such as merchandise diversity, utilizing window displays, building giant showrooms, as well as through creating an image of the merchant as a trustworthy gentleman. As a mercantile pioneer he felt that the retailer also had a great responsibility for the quality of the goods—he developed a lab in his 1890 store basement to check his products. Wanamaker’s pursuit of “quality” translated into shoppers perceiving his merchandise as a necessity, not as the luxury that it may have been to the potential customer.¹⁹

Wanamaker’s personal standards were also reflected in his pioneering activity in advertising. At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a shift toward the professionalization of advertising. In part this meant a turn toward “experts” for cultivating effective marketing. Quickly, an approach to selling items not primarily by their characteristics but by effecting people’s overarching desires took hold. One of the features of a commodified, or consumer-oriented, culture is that the structures of capitalism engender a non-utilitarian approach to consumption and production, relating values such as “happiness” with material goods. Such symbolic meaning of consumption has evolved along with other developments in social and intellectual history of modernity. Advertisers reflected the new psychological landscape such as persons’ “suggestibility” and therapeutically appealing to an ideal of what would make people feel good, by suggesting which products would fit their desires.²⁰ Psychology was influential among upper-middle class Protestants and the values of the Christian businessmen seemed to reinforce this affective approach to advertising.

¹⁹ Americans growing obsession with the bargain and cheap goods would overtake the initial production of high quality goods.

²⁰Lears, "From Salvation to Self Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture 1880-1930."17.

The “benevolent” expert was trusted to tell people what was good for them. The retailer and advertisers believed they had the power to shape people’s tastes and desires.²¹ Wanamaker was determined to call advertisers to honesty: to do away with misrepresentation and exaggeration in advertising. People remarked that his advertising medium contributed to the already theatrical feel of his revolutionary store environment. In Wanamaker’s own understanding he was creating a new world of high moral standing for shoppers and employees. Wanamaker greatly influenced not only the tone of advertisements but the method, as well, by using all forms of print ads, erecting large billboards, and writing editorials about his products in the daily papers. Wanamaker himself not only advertised his goods but even published editorials to celebrate the wonder of the department store: he published a series of articles about his store entitled, “The Garden of Merchandise,” which was a play on the garden of Eden and celebrated the emerging commercial culture and the theatrical elements of his retail practices.²²

For Wanamaker and his peers the combination of religion and commerce exemplified the strength of America.²³ The changing ethos of what has constituted the “common good,” for example, was shifting at the turn of the twentieth century. While the early American leaders had generally regarded religion as the root of happiness and virtue, by the end of the nineteenth century this vision was being transformed to include

²¹ Ibid.,22. Lears gives a fascinating example of changing definitions of happiness and the good in the figure of a writer named Barton who wrote popular books representing Jesus as a vital, young strong man whom people should emulate. This was one of the trends in modernity which influenced the value of self-realization replacing self-sacrifice (32-33).

²²William Leach, "Wanamaker's Simple Life and the Moral Failure of Established Religion," in *The Land of Desire: Merchants Power and the Rise of the New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993)..210-211. Leach has published many of the verses of these editorials which use a combination of language from his religious heritage as well as fairy tales and romantic fiction.

²³ Ibid., 194.

many other avenues to pursue happiness and liberty.²⁴ Such a transition is demonstrated in the late nineteenth century blossoming of the image of America from the “desired land” of the early colonists in their search for freedoms to the “land of desire”.²⁵ There is a related shift during that period reflected in mainline Christian language from self-denial to self-fulfillment, with a reinforcement of growing individualism through the sanctification of choice.²⁶

The early field of modern retail and advertising envisioned a new culture that would eventually come to dominate in America—one that privileged the quest for pleasure, comfort and security. At the same time, the Christian mainstream in the early twentieth century was evolving into a highly privatized, personal belief system, even becoming synonymous with the successful middle class.²⁷ Overall, Christianity did not provide people with critical insight into the nature and character of the newly emerging cultural capitalism nor the moral challenges inherent in the system.²⁸

²⁴ Church historian Mark Noll writes about this in his brief but informative book, Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, and George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989). From a sociological perspective it is also discussed in Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

²⁵ William Leach, "The Land of Desire and the Culture of Consumer Capitalism," in *The Land of Desire: Merchants of Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).3.

²⁶ T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture 1880-1930," in *The Culture of Consumption*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).3.

²⁷ This aspect of American religious history is certainly more complex than then this summary suggests. For the purpose of this analysis, because the power lay with an expanding urban middle class who self-identified with Protestant denominations, the connection between church institutions and the emerging culture was critical. Wanamaker's influence is related to his power network as well as his articulation of a corporate vision based on values that resonated with the both “old story” as well as the new promises of modernity at the turn of the century.

²⁸ T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture 1880-1930," in *The Culture of Consumption*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).221. While there was consistently a small prophetic voice of challenge from primarily roman catholic but also social gospel protestants, contemporary American evangelicalism inherited this blind spot toward social structures which its own members do not readily attribute to its modern, early consumer culture history.

Historians Fox and Leer, in their analysis of America's retail and religious power brokers, ask: how did the Protestant producer-based ethic in the nineteenth century which stressed hard work, sacrifice, and savings, evolve into the dominant twentieth century "consumer ethic"?²⁹ Wanamaker's story begins to answer this question. In Wanamaker's life we see the zeal with which he wanted to be the best kind of merchant he could be: an ethical business person who would treat his employees and customers with respect. He wanted to advertise honestly. He felt that his work was a vocation, his purpose in life. While his critics, then and now, would label Wanamaker's products not as necessities but luxuries, as a devout Presbyterian he must have seen the promotion of high quality goods, his "beautiful fields of necessities,"³⁰ as his contribution to the common good. Participating for the common good would have been a key to his reformed theology, and the conception of the "common good" was evolving. In his context then, Wanamaker was justified in making available high quality, beautiful goods to the public. He also would have understood his business as a service to the good in light of the perceived democratizing value of consumer culture. Presumably, "everyone could desire after the same things," observes Leach, everybody could wish for what they pleased in the marketplace.³¹

Clearly, consumer culture required not only the apparatus of marketing and distribution but also a particular moral climate. The distinct culture of American capitalism reflected a cult of the new,³² and the changing ethos of Protestantism,

²⁹ Richard Wightman Fox and T.J.Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).(x).

³⁰ Leach, "Wanamaker's Simple Life and the Moral Failure of Established Religion."209.

³¹Ibid.,5.

³² Leach points out the connection between the Christian values of rebirth, change, and remaking of self which were highlighted in the revivals and becoming evident in the general embrace of "the new".

encouraged the particularly American individualism, the sanctification of choice, and the pursuit of pleasure.³³ Wanamaker's story helps to illuminate how the interplay of dominant Protestant values, emerging philosophies and social sciences, as well as the economic structure allowed for the development of our distinct form of consumer capitalism.

Commodification and human experience

Following the historical trajectory of the role of consumption in American society, contemporary consumer practices reveal layers of social meaning-making attached to goods and the delivery of services. From a sociological point of view, analysis of consumer culture "emphasizes the social and symbolic meanings of consumption."³⁴ There is a wide breadth of research on the commercialization of culture, including topics such as the impact of marketing on childhood, the social significance of brands, and how race and class are commodified and used in the marketplace of goods and identity. There is also an emerging literature on religious life and commodification; we will explore the theological perspective at the end of this chapter. In this section I focus on the commodification of self and others in the context of a consumer saturated social system.

Anything can be a commodity

Commodities were once confined to episodes of market exchanges, but now products, labels, brands, entertainment venues and popular media are so interwoven that commodities are inserted into all or most of our everyday experience. Even dissenters can be commodified. They become a target audience to be marketed to and there is a subculture to join by virtue of what you don't buy. Items such as environmentally

³³Lears, "From Salvation to Self Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture 1880-1930."4-5.

³⁴ Goodwin, Ackerman, and Kiron, eds., *The Consumer Society*.1.

friendly products, or brand-less products that have become a kind of brand, provide a collective identity for people with a common concern. Health care is considered an industry. Housing, the basic human need for shelter, is a lucrative for-profit market. Romantic relationships are commodified, not only literally through want ads but metaphorically-- people often have a series of relationships, trading in and trading up when it is no longer satisfying. The commodification of experiences can also be seen from tourism, to higher education where schools become brands and admissions work is synonymous with marketing. This degree of commodification, the researchers claim, informs our collective imagination in ways that are unprecedented. Studies in commodification and branding provide examples to tease out the ways in which consumer culture is far more than attending to "materialism." Consumer values and practices are shaping the vision we carry for who we are and how we relate to others.

Harvard Business School professor Douglas Holt in his persuasive work on brands and post modernity describes how marketing is not only about promoting goods but is part of the larger media driven phenomenon of meaning-making and identity.³⁵ Rather than marketing being based primarily along the spectrum of wants and needs advertisers are concerned with a larger matter of creating meaning and identity through connections with products. We become convinced that association with the product is significant for the lifestyle attached to it. Further, we must become convinced that we are not satisfied with what we have, our relative status in regard to our neighbor, and how we

³⁵ Douglas Holt, "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding," *Journal of Consumer Research* 29, no. June (2002).

are perceived by others.³⁶ Consumer culture is driven in part by this manufactured sense of dissatisfaction as well as by our pursuit of the new.

There is a particular advertising campaign that captures the commodification of lifestyle very well. Picture two young adult men sitting at a metropolitan cafe window table, one man has a book in his hand, there is jazz piano music in the background while the following dialogue ensues:

Man #1: So did you hear McDonald's has cappuccinos now? [in a condescending tone]

Man #2: McDonalds? [He scoffs, while swirling his coffee mug...then changes his tone to excitement] That's awesome!

Man #1: Yeah!

Man #2: I can shave this thing off my face [referring to the "soul patch" on his chin]

Man #1: We don't have to call movies "films" anymore. [He triumphantly pulls his cashmere style sweater off over his head]

Man #2: We can talk about football.

Man #1: I like football. I like sitting and watching football.

Man #2: I don't need these glasses, these are fake. [Removing glasses]

Man #1: I do need mine, they're very real.

(A voiceover then announces the special deal on free McCafe coffee and switches to a visual of the steaming lattes in paper coffee cups with the McDonalds logo.)³⁷

Making the launch of a new product, cafe style coffee drinks, a matter of personality not simply taste represents an interesting role for advertising in culture making. This is just one example from the world of advertising that demonstrates how consumer culture is not simply about "materialism." Narrative advertising campaigns such as this function culturally as far more than for the promotion of a piece of clothing, or food or a service. They offer a way of seeing the world and give us fictional sign posts for the journey through identity.

³⁶ In *The Overspent America* Juliet Schor presents the finding on her study of relative status, that is how people understand their own wealth and material comfort, which is most often in comparison to those around them, not to any objective goal. (Juliet B. Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

³⁷ 2008 advertising campaign from the McDonald's corporation, television and radio audiences. Available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cg87E1tjTOE>. Internet; accessed 8 August, 2010.

Marketing agencies are also consciously cultivating a personal connection. “It's about creating super-evolved brands that reach consumer's hearts as well as their minds, creating an intimate, emotional connection that they just can't live without. Think about brands like Cheerios, JCPenney, Pampers, MillerCoors, Pillsbury, I Love New York, Tide, Ameriprise, and Olay. We call those brands Lovemarks.”³⁸ People may feel like we are not persuaded by a given advertisement to buy a product. However, if we calculate the amount of exposure in the physical environment of our daily lives to visual stories about beauty, belonging, what is intelligent, what is peaceful, what is relaxing, or what happiness is, the cumulative effect is a shared interpretive system based on these messages.

One of the aspects of consumer culture that makes advertising so influential is that not only are goods marketed to us through an array of sources, from coffee cups to billboards from cell phone screens to the movies we watch, but often the good or service for sale is secondary to the human experience being advertised, as demonstrated in the McCafe campaign. What once made up the background for print ads and commercials has increasingly moved to the foreground so that a whole way of being comes to be associated with a product. And, for today's marketing agencies the less obvious the persuasive technique, the better. The use of non-actor looking spokespersons, effects that make shots look as though they come from a hidden camera, capturing slices of real life, background music playing that comes from the heart of culture not jingles from Madison Avenue: all of this contributes to the sense of agency of the consumer who is sophisticated enough to spot overt selling points. The postmodern advertisers and

³⁸ “Who we are,” Advertising firm Saatchi and Saatchi New York, Available from <http://www.saatchiny.com>. Internet; accessed March 2009.

television producers contribute to a more overarching commodification of place, values, and experiences.³⁹

Reality as commodity

Fascinating examples of the blurred boundaries of the marketplace are seen in the popularity and financial success of “reality TV,” “infomercials” and related program-embedded product placement. June Deery, writing for the *Journal of Popular Communication* calls the phenomenon a “triumph” of the market in the area of communication by commodifying various aspects of experience, as reality TV provides an exchange of advertising revenue for voyeurism.⁴⁰ Deery explains that these shows offer mediation of experience that is designed to sell. “Reality TV represents among other things, the triumph of the market, the notion that everyone as well as everything has its price and that people will pretty much do anything for money.”⁴¹ What exactly is commodified in Reality TV? What can we learn about consumer culture? According to Deery the industry highlights the “commodification of reality, privacy, diversity, and of the relation between player and viewer.”⁴² Product placement and the self promotion of shows within reality TV shows are only one form of advertising that makes reality TV commercial culture. The selling of “reality” as a packaged product itself is a great example of the blurred lines.

Reality TV, including “advertainment”, is an extraordinary example as what is being mediated by commercial culture. The shows exemplify the way that experiences and people can be commodified on television, including co-opting the authentic or real

³⁹ Holt, "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding."

⁴⁰ June Deery, "Reality T.V. As Advertainment," *Popular Communication* 2, no. 1 (2004).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*,2.

⁴² *Ibid.*,3.

life, itself. Consider the paradox of “authenticity,” when products are placed both in reality shows of excess and luxury, as well as those of the more ascetic/challenge genre. We are presumably watching someone in life as it happens to them, and yet products and experiences are manipulated to suit the profit margin. It is standard practice to blur out the labels on items and in settings which are from companies who do not pay for advertising space. In order for a product to be in someone’s home or on a celebrity judge’s desktop, there is a paid contract. The label “reality TV” is, of course, hyperbolic; audiences desire these shows for the appeal of entering into the narratives of “ordinary” people.⁴³ And yet, the real, by nature, would be unmediated experience. In the context of commodified narratives, however, it is fully produced: mediated and manipulated through visual media for advertising revenue.

“In the worlds of advertising and Reality TV there is a focus on personal therapy and the creation of the self, particularly among young participants who feel their identities are still fluid.”⁴⁴ Beyond the realm of marketing and consumption manipulated by “reality TV” the relationship of identity formation and consumer culture is coming under increasing attention. Sociologist Jon Dovey also suggests that:

‘First person media, in its constant iteration of 'raw' intimate human experience, can be seen as creating a 'balance' or lack of narrative coherence, for the complexity in our own lives in a world where we're left with the politics of the self to keep us ideologically warm’ (p. 26). In this context, an individually experienced subjectivity such as Reality TV appears to offer would come across as inherently more authentic than any grand claims to objectivity or abstract truth.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid.,13

⁴⁴ Ibid., 13. Michael Budd. et al. in *Consuming Environments, Television and Commercial Culture* also deal in depth with the issue of individual psychology and the reality TV culture.

⁴⁵ Deery, "Reality T.V. As Advertainment." Jon Dovey is the author of *Freakshow*. London:Pluto Press. 2000.

Beyond the production reality TV and its connection to the marketplace there are other signs of how identity and relationship are shaped in commercialized culture.

Commodification and identity

According to marketing strategists, identity is a commodity to be bought and sold in the marketplace and media. Personal style is a marketing term, not only for what we buy but even for how people chose to “market” themselves to others. People want to be associated with certain brands because of their aura. While this hyper-attachment to brands is contemporary, a market driven development of personal identity emerged over time. Anthony Giddens, in his work on modernity and identity, identifies the phenomenon of the ever changing self image, or “self reflexive identity project,” as distinctly modern, not a sudden social phenomenon. It is only exacerbated by the current domination of advertising and commodification in “high modernity.”⁴⁶ Identity as self-reflexive refers to a process of continuous revision of personal narratives in a context of multiple choice; people are asked to negotiate their choices among a seemingly boundless arena of possibilities.

Such self creation of identity, as opposed to traditionally bound development of the self, has been evolving to various degrees in all post-traditional cultures. However, market forces have capitalized on the multi-faceted self and identity experimentation in contemporary North America heightened by commodification of values, lifestyles and the increasing symbolic qualities of goods. In modern societies it takes on the role of establishing identity and social position which was once the realm of family or religion.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).1991.

⁴⁷Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*.Anthony Giddens also addresses this thoroughly in his *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

Marketers study behaviors and preferences and have learned that people expect to experience consumption as a site of identity creation and personal development.⁴⁸ As literary critic Larry McCaffrey eloquently states, “This is the postmodern desert inhabited by people who are, in effect, consuming themselves in the form of images and abstractions through which their desires, sense of identity, and memories are replicated and then sold back to them as products.”⁴⁹ How does our self understanding and beliefs about others around us get shaped in a consumer society? Looking at the work on brands and identity is helpful in the conversation about the “chronic revisions” of the modern person. With the sophistication of consumers today, the market does not simply dictate taste and create meanings regarding goods that will be passively believed. Instead, Holt and Schor argue, advertisers *mobilize* meaning.⁵⁰ They mobilize values and meanings already buzzing in the culture, or subcultures, which they observe. For example, “Nike does not aim to attach particular meanings to its product; it just needs to attach the swoosh to any particular person, place or thing, that is granted cultural value in the world of sport.”⁵¹

In terms of identity, this means that by attaching brand logos to something that is already valued in the culture such as youthfulness and authenticity, or promoting brands as synonymous with a certain experience such as the ideal family vacation, or an attitude such as environmental friendliness, a person attaches that value to the item to be purchased for the sake of status or identification with a lifestyle enclave.

⁴⁸ Holt and Schor, eds., *The Consumer Society Reader*.

⁴⁹ McCaffrey, Larry. “Desert of the Real.” *Storming the Reality Studio*. Larry McCaffrey, ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992.)6.

⁵⁰ Holt and Schor, eds., *The Consumer Society Reader*.xx-xxi .

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, xx.

Consider one of Toyota's SUVs, The 4Runner. In an interesting blend of reality TV and blatant product placement there was a short-lived television program (in 2003) called *Global Extremes: 4Runners of Adventure*. The contestants were engaged in various challenges at Mt Everest. And what vehicle was the featured mode of transportation in the show? The 4Runner. The blurring of lines between entertainment and commodities is quite evident in this example, as the show's title makes a play on the car's name while at the same time Toyota's SUV advertisement campaign running in multiple media outlets featured an image of the 4Runner SUV on a rugged, snowy mountainside. The text of the advertising included a description that the SUV is "aspirational, youthful, sporty and, most of all genuine."⁵² While people know that a car cannot, in fact, demonstrate any of these human qualities, the purpose of such qualities that are desirable in our culture is to lead people to associate themselves with those idealized qualities. Consumers are savvy and can step back from advertisements knowing that a car doesn't actually do anything but transport people and yet the qualities associated with a brand or logo can appeal to the shopper's self-image and be very influential in decision making.

Consciously people may not be persuaded by a given advertisement to buy a product. However, if we observe the physical environment of our daily lives and the cumulative effect of the visual stories all around us: about beauty, belonging, what is intelligent, what is peaceful, what is relaxing, what is fun; we cannot help but be influenced by the *definitions* sold to us. The ubiquitous presence of these messages begins to make the popular media version of such values normative.

Even resistance and dissent can be commodified. Counter cultural people become a target audience to be marketed to, and the marketplace helps create the subculture that

⁵² Available at <http://www.Toyota.com/about/news/product/2002>. Internet.

can be joined by virtue of those taboo products that they don't buy.⁵³ Environmentally friendly products for example accomplish a certain good while also offering a collective identity for people with a common concern. In any case, Holt asserts, consumption is the site of identity in postmodern culture whether one accepts the advertiser's messages about taste or one chooses to resist normative pressure through alternative purchasing.⁵⁴

People's relationships with brands can include a pseudo-community formed around the brand. Researchers have looked at sub-cultures around vehicles such as Jeep, or Harley Davidson, and describe how these products have come to symbolize far more than the utilitarian value they may have. Instead they are connected with lifestyle, and social status. Sociologists call this phenomenon "brand tribalism" and have studied how brands are part of social networking, and how people may relate with the brand itself as personified entities.⁵⁵ In post modernity the self-created tribe has taken the place of other forms of naturally occurring community through family lines or geography. In the search for belonging, consumer culture, and brands in particular, play an important role.

Searching for belonging and developing an identity can be understood existentially as questions of faith answered in various ways by religious traditions. The development of the commodified self and the commodification of relating to the other has implications for Christian practices and theology. Where does Christian community fit in as an influence on identity formation and belonging in light of consumer culture?

⁵³ Holt, "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding." On p35-38 he gives examples of the collective identity of those who are market savvy and the advertisements that are meant to appeal to that group. His point is that even though making conscious anti-commercial choices, one is not removed from the marketplace and often are used as heroes in advertising particularly "alternative culture" brands.

⁵⁴ Ibid. It must be noted that there is a strong though small counterculture evident in such magazines as *Adbusters*, produced by Kalle Lasn who is also the author of *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America* (2000) and expose work such as *Fast Food Nation* (2001) by best selling author Eric Schlosser.

⁵⁵ Cleopatra Veloutsou and Luiz Moutinho, "Brand Relationships through Brand Reputations and Brand Tribalism," *Journal of Business Research* 62 (2009).

Commodification and Religious Commitment

Commodification in relation to religious faith

Two important contemporary voices in the discussion of religious life and consumer culture are theologians John Kavanaugh and Vincent Miller.⁵⁶ Kavanaugh began his work in the 1980s, in the midst of the “me-generation” and yet before the great economic boom of the 1990s. Nonetheless his projections of the moral and systemic consequences for the twenty-first century were prescient. He has since updated his work, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, to include a bibliographic essay that reflects current sociological studies and theological analysis, though his foundational critique remains unchanged. Vincent Miller’s postmodern cultural and theological analysis of religious life in light of consumerism extends the work begun by Kavanaugh by distinguishing between the cultural conflicts of ideologies and that of practices.⁵⁷ Miller illuminates the eclipsing of distinctly Christian meaning-making within consumer cultures. Together these works provide important theological insights regarding consumer

⁵⁶ There is a growing literature in this area. Kavanaugh and Miller, foundational to my analysis, are cited in many of the other contemporary works on faith and consumer culture. Two other helpful books that focus on youth and young adult faith formation in consumer culture and have influenced my thinking are Thomas Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2003). And Katherine Turpin, *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith, Youth Ministry Alternatives* (Pilgrim Press, 2006).

A quick scan of popular press books with a pastoral focus yields titles such as: Rodney Clapp’s edited collection *Consuming Passion: Christianity and the Consumer Culture*, Skye Jethani’s *The Divine Commodity*, Eric Sandras’, *Plastic Jesus: Exposing the Hollowness of Comfortable Christianity* and two influential books of the 1990s, Ron Sider’s *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* and Jim Wallace’s *The Call to Conversion: Recovering the Gospel for These Times*. In an online search for books on Christianity and consumerism over two hundred titles are listed; searching for “Christianity and money” yields over two thousand titles. Many of these titles refer to themes such as becoming successful, claiming what is yours, understanding blessing, and there are some titles on debt reduction and financial freedom, with hundreds for teaching youth about financial responsibility, for example. This variety indicates the degree to which the questions raised in this dissertation are being addressed from multiple points of view.

⁵⁷ John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*, 25th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

habits and the culture of commodification. Drawing on their wisdom I seek to illustrate the impact of consumer culture as the formational environment for faith development: in light of the power of commodification what is the interplay between consumer culture and Christian identity as it is lived in practices.

Kavanaugh's aim is to highlight the differences between a worldview created by consumer capitalism in American and a worldview birthed by faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus Christ. He calls these two distinct "forms," asking what form human existence takes under the influence of each of these contrasting authorities. The consumer society is a formation system whereby meaning-making is dictated by a "commodity form." By "formation system" Kavanaugh means that the social structures and cultural norms of modern American life form our behavior, inform identity and tell us our status in the world.⁵⁸ In the commodity form, objects are primary.

The impact of consumer society as commodifying so many aspects of life is clearly articulated in Kavanaugh's description and analysis. He deals with dehumanization in terms of epistemology, identity and relationality. In so far as consumerism is a philosophy, not only a set of practices, it infuses politics, medicine, social relations as well as the economic system by decentering humanity to the margins of the world of objects.⁵⁹ Dehumanization is most evident, he says, in examples such as slavery and systematic injustices that demonstrate the extreme state of humans being relegated to the status of things. However, this is not the only form such depersonalization takes. People know others as commodity, thus the evidence of sex and violence in marketing should not be a surprise, he notes. Further, the discourse around

⁵⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 16.

contemporary sexuality and relationships would indicate that sexual gratification is depersonalized whereby a partner becomes the means to personal gratification or even domination.⁶⁰

Marked by a “loss of interiority” people lose a sense of their own deepest longings and vulnerabilities to the material world of longing for products. When we know and are known as “things” identity is reduced to one’s external value and attributes. We are “replaceable objects whose goals and values are dependent upon how much we market, produce and consume.”⁶¹ Our “fretful dissatisfaction” with self, produced in the consumer environment, leads to insecurities and relational distance.⁶² Kavanaugh describes the impact of such commodification on relationships with other people in terms of depersonalization and dispossession. In a rejection of the glorification of the objectivity and efficiency so celebrated in modernity’s cultural systems, Kavanaugh is gravely concerned about the ways in which people are both lost to the world of things and objectified so that humanity is reduced to the status of thing.⁶³

The personal form, in contrast to the commodity form, is reflected in the high anthropology of Kavanaugh’s Christian tradition that refutes the commodification of personhood. People, reflecting God’s image, are made for covenant with each other and God. Therefore, relating to people as objects is anathema to the Christian model of living for others in “unique self donation.”⁶⁴ The personal form is reflected in the first covenant of God with the people in Israel and the law that provided boundaries for the fulfillment of our truest humanity in community. In the continuing revelation of God self in the

⁶⁰ Ibid., 51-60.

⁶¹ Ibid., 64-65

⁶² Ibid., 62-63.

⁶³ Ibid. See for example pages 4-5, 16, 48.

⁶⁴ Ibid.,122.

humanity of Jesus, following him as a disciple will provide the template for living into our deepest human form. Following the model of Christ who lived for others, who brings us into full relationship with the God of freedom and life, people have the potential to resist the commodity form. People need to make a choice about which god to follow, the gods propped up through commodification or the god revealed through Jesus Christ. In this way, Kavanaugh claims, we seek meaning in the interior life and in true covenant with others, as opposed to the meaning-making that allows others to remain things and allows humans to avoid facing our own vulnerabilities and imperfections that we come to know in light of God's presence.⁶⁵

Kavanaugh's work lays out the anthropological conflicts between these two cultural forms, which he deems "competing forms of perception through which we filter our experience."⁶⁶ While much of the work has to do with agreement with or dissent from these belief systems, the work is also grounded in experience. In the end, Kavanaugh turns to the practices of his tradition for the path toward "fruitful living in resistance to commodified culture."⁶⁷ He recommends such practices as a life grounded in prayer, which allows one to cultivate an "interior poverty." Interior poverty makes room for authentic relationship, such that community is the response to isolation and individualism. Sacramentality, for Kavanaugh, is also a key for forming the life of persons in community, as it appeals to memory and the holiness of persons. Finally, simplicity, an attitude toward possessions as well as the lived expression of human centered commitments and desire should replace object centered desire and commitments. Kavanaugh's emphasis on the response to the dehumanization implicit in

⁶⁵ Ibid., 126-128.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 130.

commodification is very important. His description of the impact of consumer culture on anthropology and ethics provides important foundational critique, however it is his description of the alternative that provides the resource for Christian formation practices. Having a reminder of what the “personal form” is can motivate us to seek that depth of human experience for ourselves despite the context which pushes against it.

Vincent Miller and the consuming of religion

While similarly rooted in the Catholic tradition as a deep source of resistance to commodification, contemporary theologian Vincent Miller discusses the challenges of consumerism *within* the world of religion and the activity of Christians as consumers.⁶⁸ Kavanaugh seems to suggest that while culture influences the church, the two forms can be split into the sacred and the secular. Miller describes religious life and culture differently. He does not paint secular culture and church as completely separate spheres of life. For example, the rise of the emphasis on style and appearance by mid-century in everything from evangelistic preaching to glossy magazine culture continued to develop in the 1960s and 1970s. A culture of spectacle was developing in religious meetings, sports, rock concerts and shopping malls alike. Miller notes that this development of passive observation of a “virtual” world or vicarious experiences pre-dates the current barrage of virtual environments in our contemporary lives and was equally important to religious institutions and corporate America.⁶⁹

Miller wants to broaden theological reflection on the “corrosive impact” of the “triumph” of consumer culture, rather than build a case for a sacred culture versus a

⁶⁸ Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum Press, 2004).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 283.

secular culture.⁷⁰ This aspect of Miller's analysis is a helpful corrective to Kavanaugh's sometimes binary division of the world. Miller describes how consumer culture changes people's relationship with their religious beliefs and narratives, as well as with religious symbols thus impacting everyday practices of faith.

Miller's influential interdisciplinary work provides an important supplement to Kavanaugh's critique in both its sociological astuteness as well as its nuanced theology. As I have suggested, while Miller would not disagree with the description of commodification, there are differences between his analysis of the consumer society and Kavanaugh's. In his theological analysis Miller explains that our Christian conflict with consumer culture is about "more than values."⁷¹ Miller is clear to critique the tendency in theology and ethics to emphasize ideological conflicts between orthodox Christian beliefs and consumerism. Miller takes a broader view in an attempt to articulate a theological interpretation of American consumer culture that is inclusive of but not limited to "consumerism." Going beyond much of what has been written over the past decade about Christianity and consumerism as part of culture wars, Miller argues that consumer culture is not merely a set of ideologies to which we assent or dissent but a set of "habits of interpretation and use" that ultimately renders the content of religious beliefs less important.⁷²

When we consider the buying and selling of religious symbols in popular culture apart from their meaning, for example, it can be illustrative of holding one's faith as shallowly as one holds brand loyalty. People can buy religious icons from across the

⁷⁰Ibid., 180.

⁷¹Ibid., 5.

⁷² Ibid.,1.

globe in home goods stores, under the auspices of ethnic styles. Anyone can purchase cross necklaces or Tibetan prayer flags made popular by celebrities without embracing the practices or beliefs of the religion devotionally. Even when done in the name of valuing diversity, the abstraction of images or beliefs from the context of the practices they represent will only serve to further erode these traditions.⁷³ In a culture that is so visually driven, religious images lose their ability to communicate with power or depth as they compete in the commodified space with so many other images. So, Miller, concerned with how our actions correspond to our convictions, invites us to consider whether practices that emphasize the displays of religious symbols truly strengthen their influence or simply become another “disposable symbol in the cultural marketplace.”⁷⁴ In matters big and small, we need practices that come from our understanding of how commodification and consumerism may or may not be operative in our choices.

Consider the case of the clothing company, Limited Too. The Limited Corporation now sells clothing and accessories under the brand logo Justice, as re-branding of their clothing lines for tweens, capitalizing on the celebrity culture of working for “justice.” Does walking through the mall and seeing a funky lit up sign proclaiming justice contribute to our culture ethos by keeping such a value in clear sight, or does it diminish the complexity of the ethical and political demands of justice? What are the implications of wearing the word justice on a t-shirt or the back pocket of a pair of jeans with no connection to acts of justice? Might naming a brand “Justice” so dilute the power of the praxis of justice to leaving people satisfied with the logo “justice”?

⁷³ Vincent J. Miller, "Taking Consumer Culture Seriously," *Horizons* 27, no. 2 (2000). 292

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 293.

Miller explains, “An analysis of commodification will show that the cultural consequences of capitalism go beyond the selfish inclination to accumulate ridiculous amounts of goods. They fundamentally change human relationships, culture and religion.”⁷⁵ He echoes Kavanaugh’s concern that the impact of a ubiquitous consumer culture on faith development is ultimately about meaning-making—that is, for contemporary Americans the center of meaning-making lies within the framework of commodification not within the beliefs and practices of a faith tradition. Miller argues that we must be very cautious about how the underlying cultural dynamic of exchange and consumption is applied beyond the world of goods and services to people, relationships, religious identity and capacity for commitment.⁷⁶

The habits of exchange and objectification engendered by culture often trump the religious meaning-making capacity of faith communities. For example, a “self-centered therapeutic culture” created by a mix of psychology, consumerism and expressions of faith is a way that popular culture and Christian communities overlap.⁷⁷ This therapeutic approach that highlights status, self development, and self protection lacks the more complex interiority as Kavanaugh described, which impacts how we relate to others and what we expect in our faith communities. If we are not getting something useful out of religion, we have little interest. The logic of exchange replaces the proclivity toward commitment or allegiance to something greater than one’s self. “In this culture, religion,

⁷⁵ Ibid., 276.

⁷⁶ Theologian Roberto Goizueta offers a powerful analysis of the human condition in a commodified cultural context in his discussion of beauty and justice: “Paradoxically only when human action is not directly used for ethical-political ends, but is instead affirmed as an end itself, can praxis, in fact, be empowering and liberating. . . . After all the goal of social transformation—whether capitalist, Marxist, or Christian—is the creation of a society in which human action will be valued as an end in itself: e.g., work will be fulfilling rather than dehumanizing, family life will foster personal identity rather than suffocate individual uniqueness.” Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (New York: Orbis, 2003).129.

⁷⁷ Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in Consumer Culture*.85.

like other commodities, serves to fill in the identity of the consumer... Thus the form of religion that we have been discussing—shallow, abstracted sentiment divorced from practice—is ideally suited for this world.”⁷⁸ Miller even uses contemporary romantic relationships to demonstrate the “logic” of commodification in that, “Love is reduced to a calculus of maximum returns, relationships to an exchange of emotional commodities, persons to things...this logic is our cultural default, the form in which we are most likely to cast our deliberations.”⁷⁹ There is something prohibitive in the endless possibilities of self creation, which would encourage a habit of treating religious faith as one more add-on to identity.

Conclusions

Miller and Kavanaugh provide us with theological resources for analyzing consumer culture and envisioning a response from the church. They both highlight the significance of the commodification of personhood. Further, Miller draws on history and sociology to describe the ways in which the structures and infrastructures (including religious ones) of contemporary American society have supported and reinforce the culture of commodification. We have seen that the development of North American Christianity influenced the development of consumer culture; and the emerging cultural ethos has also impacted Christian institutions. A significant development was how the conceptualization of “human desire” moved out of the realm of the religious into market ideals. It was not a sudden phenomenon, as selling “desire” was part of the melding of the values of Christian businessmen into retail practices at the turn of the twentieth century. I agree with Miller that our greatest hopes and desires, even our understanding of what it

⁷⁸ Miller, 291.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 282.

means to be human, are formed by advertising as much as they may be formed by traditional spiritual disciplines and religious doctrines. Not addressing such an integrated narrative means that many Christians will continue to critique “culture” as something outside of their communities.

Miller’s insistence that the challenges of living in a consumer culture are not only the ethical implications of overconsumption but that the habits forged by underlying assumptions regarding exchange and commodification can color everything we do. These concerns echo two important points made by Don Slater cited at the beginning of this chapter. Namely, that the dominant values of a society are not only organized through consumption practices but also derived from them and that as such, the dominant culture of consumption is the privileged medium for negotiating identity. How such an ethos poses a challenge to formation of Christian identity is the driving question of the next chapter.

Chapter 2 ***Commodification as a Theological Problem: Discipleship That Challenges the Consumer Context***

“True Religion Apparel, Inc. is a growing, design-based jean and jean-related brand. ...True Religion is and always will be Timeless, Hippie, Bohemian, Chic.”⁸⁰

Religious language and imagery provide advertisers with provocative and familiar poetry for describing brands and products. Churches and religious agencies readily employ marketing strategies and their own form of brand recognition as they jostle for “consumers” in the spiritual marketplace. Christian families struggle to make sense of contradictions between a life of service and serving the demands of a status and achievement oriented society. Is it possible to embrace an alternative reality: that the accumulation of goods, status seeking, and allegiance to the promises of the marketplace are second best to the abundant life in Christian community described in scripture? This chapter examines commodification within a theological construct and explores its challenge for faith educators who seek to nurture disciples. With discipleship as a guiding analytical framework I examine the theological implications of commodification and the struggle for Christian meaning-making in a consumer age. I identify key attributes of Christian life that serve as counter narrative within consumer culture through a discussion of discipleship drawing on scripture, theology and lived experience. In the final section of the chapter I describe two contemporary faith

⁸⁰ Available at http://www.truereligionbrandjeans.com/company_profile.html.

movements that illustrate practices and a vision for resisting over-consumption and commodification.

The Christian tradition provides a set of meaning-making values, core beliefs, and spiritual habits to support the believer in everyday decision making and one's life patterns. Yet, many North American congregations seem to be embedded uncritically in the social structures, interpretive categories, and practices of the dominant culture.⁸¹ This suggests that while Christians may mentally assent to Jesus' teachings (on generosity, wealth, or anxiety over material possessions, for example) the actual habits of Christian communities do not look much different than anyone else's when it comes to spending, commercially driven identities, or worry over finances.⁸² What theological resources can be drawn upon to cultivate alternatives to the meaning-making constructs described in chapter one?

I propose that the re-vitalization of the image and concept of the Christian life as *discipleship*, encompasses both orthodoxy and orthopraxy in a way that is most helpful in this striving to address Christian resistance in consumer culture. In the following section I reflect on scripture and theology to develop a framework of an understanding of discipleship adequate for sustaining Christian spirituality in the context of a highly commodified society.

⁸¹ The question of cultural identity and consciousness is of course more complex when we discuss the nature of identity in people from the non-dominant culture (the language itself is provocative) in an American context. Is the lack of critical socio-cultural consciousness a middle class dominant culture problem? What are the needs for consciousness raising among marginalized peoples? What about issues of being bi-cultural? These questions are vital and would be important for further research on the themes raised in this paper.

⁸² Explored for example, in Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?*

Biblical Discipleship

The ancient concept of discipleship can still hold meaning for us today in terms of personal and communal identity as twenty-first century Christians. Michael Budde, professor of political science who writes about church in socio-political context laments:

We have few templates for what Christian discipleship should look like in our time and place, so pervasive is the diluted version, although the gospel stories of Jesus give us a powerful place to stand and begin such a reformation. But until we start weaning ourselves from the cheapened variety, we will lack the appetite for a God-centered practice closer to the genuine article as exemplified by Jesus.”⁸³

To begin rebuilding a template for our times, let us first examine the model of ancient discipleship.

In ancient Greece discipleship was an important aspect of many of the philosophical schools. The synoptic gospels reflect some of the same principles, particularly that discipleship meant following a teacher and adherence to a philosophical school of thought under a Master. There is also a more nuanced way that the words “follower” and “disciple” are used in the gospels akin to the rabbi /student relationship where a student both follows the train of thought of the teacher as well as literally accompanying him where he goes. Scholars suggests that the Gospel writers’ use of the word, which implies “imitation” as part of the life of the student, would not be unheard of in other master student relationships but receives much more emphasis in the Christian tradition.⁸⁴

⁸³ Michael L. Budde, "Pledging Allegiance," in *Church as Counterculture*, ed. Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow (Albany: State University of New York, 2000).224. Budde is Associate Professor of Political Science at DePaul University, in addition to the edited collection cited here he contributes to the analysis of consumer culture and the church in his works *The Two Churches: Catholicism and Capitalism in the World System* and *Christianity Incorporated: How Big Business is Buying the Church*.

⁸⁴ Michael Wilkins, "Disciples-Discipleship," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel Green and Scot McKnight (Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 2006).176-188.

An additional dimension of the New Testament description of discipleship includes “leaving things behind” to follow Jesus, which goes beyond the typical Hellenistic usage for other philosophical schools.⁸⁵ Leaving things behind implies a tremendous commitment which breaks all other ties: for the early companions of the historical Jesus there is both a physical following behind Jesus and the internal commitment to instruction and relationship with Jesus. This participation in Christ’s life, which meant both sharing in his ministry, as the writer of Luke reminds us, and abiding in him, as the writer of John reminds us, includes participation in Christ’s marginalization, suffering, and death.

A gospel vision of discipleship

To further understand Christian “discipleship,” as a life of following a master we look to the Gospel accounts of Jesus for his teachings and relationships with the first disciples. Luke’s gospel in particular provides relevant insight into the earliest Christian communities’ understanding of discipleship because there is particular attention to the socio-cultural dimensions of choosing to follow as part of Jesus’ community. A close examination of one passage, Luke 14:24-35, which contains an example of Jesus teaching directly about what it means to be a disciple, will serve as a lens into the nature and cost of discipleship described in the gospels.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ibid. See also Charles Talbert, “The Way of the Lukan Jesus,” in *Reading Luke Acts in Its Mediterranean Milieu*, ed. Charles Talbert (Lieden: Brill, 2003).

⁸⁶ There is an entire body of biblical studies literature on discipleship and economics. Many important stories are found in other Lukan passages such as: The parable of the “rich fool” 12:31-21; the parable of the two debtors 7:36-50; and the rich man and Lazarus story 16:19-31, for example. There are also teachings from Matthew which illustrate Jesus emphasis on economic stewardship, such as 18:21-35 and 21:33-46, 13:18-23. Mark is an action packed gospel which elucidates the work of the disciple alongside Jesus in ministry of establishing the reign of God. It is beyond the scope of this project to develop a theology of financial stewardship.

The theme of this passage, traditionally designated “cost of discipleship,” shares elements of the synoptics’ treatment of discipleship but has particularities that reflect Luke’s concern for his community to grasp the full implications of discipleship. Luke’s gospel, called a travel narrative, is structured to highlight the journey of Jesus toward Jerusalem and his death. His disciples are also traveling and along the way are both instructed in the life of discipleship and are witnesses to the ministry of Jesus among the crowds and teaching among the religious leaders. Against this backdrop of following Jesus as travelers we hear a specific teaching about what is required for the life of discipleship.

Aside from the literary context, which provides us with the journeying/following motif that is essential to the Lukan picture of discipleship, there are also key theological elements of the Lukan narrative reinforced in this passage. First, Luke’s theology of God is that of God the Savior, secondly as Luke enters the Greco-Roman philosophical world of concerns regarding human divine relations he emphasizes God’s invitation to relationship.⁸⁷ Third, a major theological emphasis of Luke’s writing is God’s good news to the poor.⁸⁸ I will return to how the passage reflects Lukan theology, but these themes are significant to keep in mind as we look at the verses regarding the demands of discipleship.

⁸⁷ See Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁸⁸ There is significant scholarship on this theme including, Joel Green’s work previously cited as well as Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). and Sharon Ringe, "Good News to the Poor for the Non-Poor," in *The New Testament Introducing the Way of Discipleship*, ed. Howard-Brook and Sharon Ringe (Maryknoll: NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

Luke 14:25-33

²⁵Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ²⁶"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.⁸⁹

This passage, recounting the explicit teaching on the conditions of becoming a disciple, follows directly after an encounter at the home of a Pharisee where Jesus challenges the audience there with an invitation to God's kingdom that is broad and merciful. Jesus teaches an unexpected lesson about status in the presence of the religious establishment.⁹⁰ So, the immediate context of Luke 14: 25-33 is the banquet parables that demonstrate the invitation to the poor and lame into God's kingdom. The story of welcoming the marginalized is followed by another Lukan emphasis, conditions for discipleship.

The setting, as well as the audience of listeners, has shifted here at the end of chapter 14. Luke has Jesus address the crowds here, continuing on his journey of teaching and distinct from the preceding passage in which he was teaching the religious leadership. In verse 25, the journey motif is brought out again, but we are reminded this is not a solitary journey. Many accompany Jesus. Here he Jesus is explaining the conditions of true discipleship to the "large crowds" of those who are following him for

⁸⁹ This and all Biblical references are attributed to the English Revised Version.

⁹⁰ This is noted in Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*. and Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2 vols., vol. 2, *Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1981-85).1050-1070)

the blessings and wonders associated with his itinerant ministry.⁹¹ In v. 26 there is a distinction between “coming to me,” and “my disciples,” implying that coming to hear and see Jesus is not the same as fulfilling the conditions of discipleship as he lays them out here. Verses 26 and 27, stating whoever does not do “X” cannot be my disciple, provide two examples of the degree of loyalty that Jesus expects.

Severing ties to follow

Thematically these verses provide some complications. First, how can we understand the call to “hate” (v. 26) family as a condition of discipleship? Scholars remind us that understanding the ancient Mediterranean structure of family as well as the use of words with affective connotations is important for modern readers.⁹² “Hate” is not meant in this context with its affectively laden qualities. There is no reason to think that Jesus would contradict the teachings of the law regarding honoring of parents, for example. While biblical scholar Joseph Fitzmeyer holds that “hate” could suggest that disciples should be willing to act toward family as if they were objects of hate in comparison to the allegiance they demonstrate toward the Jesus movement, other scholars see this in terms of social structure not affections, per se.⁹³ In the context of Luke with Jesus’ concerns about power and allegiance, however, using “hate” about family and discipleship is significant. In the socio-political context of Luke, the family was actually an extended household which was the locus of status, economic activity, and security and framed one’s social network. The household dictated the social standing in the

⁹¹ Green, *Theology of the Gospel of Luke*.

⁹² See also for example, the discussion in Talbert, “The Way of the Lukan Jesus.”

⁹³ Fitzmeyer, “The Gospel According to Luke”; Joel Green “The Gospel of Luke.” *New International Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.1-30;554-568); and Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel*.

community, the opportunities for trade and reciprocity of services, and the overall trajectory of one's life prospects. To hate that structure reminds us of the serious nature of Jesus' challenge to the social ordering of the community.

Placing family ties below loyalty to Jesus fits with the overall theme of "leaving everything behind" that we find in Luke as well as the other synoptic gospels in regard to discipleship. If we can understand how few opportunities of voluntary association there were in the ancient context we can appreciate that leaving family had many repercussions; expressed as a form of "hatred" toward the established order. While physical separation from household was practiced by the group of twelve who followed Jesus, Luke also includes "crowds" of followers in many passages on Jesus' teaching, so the condition of discipleship did not always entail having to literally leave the household structure. It was loyalty to household that was usurped by loyalty to the discipleship community.⁹⁴ Further, Luke's addition of the phrase "even his own life," suggests that the break with security and status is akin to willingness to sacrifice everything.

Verse 27 emphasizes sacrifice as the disciple would "carry the cross" and walk behind Jesus. Some scholars contend that this phrase is a reflection of Luke's thematic emphasis on the passion narrative and the persecution of the early apostles. Others who attribute the phrase to Jesus suggest that Jesus could have used this phrase in recognition of the Roman system of execution, understanding how his own work was a threat. The invitation to discipleship, then, included potential martyrdom. The condition of self-denial fits with the previous verses and the mention of picking up the cross earlier in Luke (9:23). In 9:23 he adds "daily" giving the meaning of taking up the cross a broader

⁹⁴ This is dealt with in depth by Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce, 'Fathers and Householders in the Jesus Movement: The Perspective of the Gospel of Luke', *Biblical Interpreter* 11: 211-38, 2003. Moxnes also addresses this subject in *Economy of the Kingdom*.

sacrifice than literal death, something more akin to an ethic of living discipleship in a hostile world.⁹⁵

A parallel condition is found at the end of Luke 14:25-33 and taken with the first two conditions, paints a picture of the degree of self-denial in discipleship in Luke's gospel. Giving up of possessions (v33) reflects the previous two demands of re-aligning ties away from the kinship system toward the new discipleship community and the threat of death and sacrifice. Jesus highlights the importance of taking these conditions into consideration before aligning oneself with his movement as a disciple.

The two brief parables in verses 28-32 are unique to Luke. The sources of the other sayings are shared with Matthew but Luke has chosen to include these contextual stories that offer the gathered crowd examples of the cost of not considering the consequences of being unprepared for a task. In both of the illustrations we see characters that will be unable to finish a task or having to surrender to enemies if resources fall short. So, too, will a disciple be unable to truly follow Jesus without first considering some of the implications. Looking back to the preceding verses, fidelity to the way of Jesus means rejecting what may have been considered a resource, such as the kin network, and fully aligning one's identity with the person and salvific mission of Jesus. Not only does Jesus expect a serious commitment he also expects people to be prepared before they commit. Luke reminds us that while there are large crowds gathered and attracted not everyone who is interested in Jesus will actually be disciple. This value will be an important thread in the discussion of resisting consumer culture.

Singular loyalty

⁹⁵ Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*. See particularly chapter 5 where he discusses ethics and the cross most directly.

Finally, in verse 33, Jesus admonishes them that they will be “bidding farewell” to possessions. This is written in the present tense, suggesting that the leaving behind is an ongoing quality of discipleship.⁹⁶ I agree with Green that this admonition summarizes a key point about discipleship in the passage. Bidding farewell is not only giving up possessions and the physical movement from clan to the itinerant ministry paradigm of Jesus but is also suggestive of an ongoing orientation regarding one’s source of security and rootedness. The substance of “all one has” would include the household clan, material property and possessions, and one’s own life taking on different meanings for disciples with different social standing.⁹⁷ Finally, by challenging the system that determined social status in the cultural context seen throughout chapter fourteen, Jesus’ call for loyalty and a change of allegiance comes both with cost and with liberation.

The passage from Luke illustrates that following the Way of Jesus may necessitate disengaging from the way of socio-political norms and expectations of our own cultural contexts. As Jesus challenges the social order with his call to the disciples, in the rest of Luke-Acts the writer emphasizes the creation of a community through this new allegiance along the way to Jerusalem. What does this new allegiance seen in the earliest experiences of discipleship look like for our context today?

The Nature of Contemporary Discipleship

Conversion away from the collective imagination and assumptions of consumer culture is paramount to the holistic development of Christian disciples in the twenty first

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Thoroughly explaining the function of “possessions” in Luke is too involved for this chapter, however note that “possessions” would have been understood to include literal wealth for those disciples who held status, as well an inference to one’s attachment to the household network that provided identity and security. (This is discussed in both Green and Ringe).

century.⁹⁸ Identifying oneself as a disciple of Jesus Christ, by nature, ought to challenge the vision and claims on identity cultivated by a consumer culture. Philipino liberation theologian Ferdinand Dagmag gives us an example of how the pursuit of instant gratification in a consumer society contrasts with the more Lukan pursuit of Christ centered gratification through community. In his insightful analysis he describes the disposition and practices of those whose lifestyles are intimately tied to each other in small Christian communities as “the long process of struggle which distinguishes people’s waiting-in patience disposition from the impatient urge of many consumers.”⁹⁹

Moreover:

People do not merely hope for the instantaneous availability and gratification offered by commodities but also for the more enduring values of Christian compassion, etc. ...The promotion of solidarity (not division), co-operation (not manipulation) patience (not aggression) cohesion and participation (not efficiency) ...all of these and many more are experienced as gratifying by people who lead lives informed by the values that Jesus of Nazareth himself promoted.¹⁰⁰

Dagmag posits that as more people live out their discipleship in counter cultural communities, the presupposition of instant gratification that guides consumer practices could be proven false and instead, “the dynamics of production-acquisition-gratification

⁹⁸ It is not my intent to thoroughly develop a theology of conversion in this project. I use the term in the biblical sense of turning and develop the notion briefly through the work of Gutierrez and Bonhoeffer. The following definition by Sr. May Kay Kinberger, spiritual director and teacher of pastoral care, written in *Spirituality Today* Spring 1989, Vol.41 No. 1, pp. 42-53, is helpful to the discussion: “Conversion is closely connected with repentance. One of the Greek words for “repentance” is “*metanoia*,” which literally denotes a change of mind and has the connotation “to turn.” In the New Testament, repentance is almost always used in the religious sense of a turning from sin, repentance for sin. It denotes a new beginning in moral conduct. The call to conversion in the gospels is the very purpose of Jesus’ being sent (Luke 5:32) and is the message of his Kingdom: ‘The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the gospel’ (Mark 1:15).”

⁹⁹ Ferdinand Dagmag, "Instant Gratification and Liberation," *Concilium*, no. 4 (1999), Ferdinand Dagmag, "Instant Gratification and Liberation," *Concilium* 4 (1999).56.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

will have to be met by the constancy and endurance of production-sharing-liberating praxis of the disciples of Jesus.”¹⁰¹

In this next section I continue to develop the concept of discipleship theologically. Gustavo Gutierrez, groundbreaking liberation theologian of the twentieth century, and another significant twentieth century theological figure, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, each decried the anemia of the established churches in their distinct historical contexts. They provide valuable insights for developing an understanding of discipleship that reflects analysis of the cultural climate.

Gutierrez has a large body of work reflecting the evolution of his theology and spirituality of liberation from the particular historical struggles of Peruvians and other Latin Americans outward to the larger body of Christians concerned about issues of oppression and justice and looking for God in the shadows of human suffering. I turn to Gutierrez in this discussion because I seek a deep definition of discipleship. I am also concerned about the relationship of consumer culture and social inequalities, and the challenges it poses to both the materially poor and the materially wealthy in the Church. Gutierrez exhorts, “ Only by rejecting poverty and by making itself poor in order to protest against it can the church preach something that is uniquely its own: ‘spiritual poverty,’ that is, the openness of the human being and history to the future promised by God.”¹⁰²

While one may expect to find resources for culturally responsive faith in liberation theology, it is helpful to find significant parallels in Bonhoeffer’s Lutheran theology, as well. For Gutierrez, the inciting context of his ideas was Christian silence in

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 57.

¹⁰² James B. Nickoloff, ed., *Gustavo Gutierrez: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).302

the face of socio-political oppression in Latin America. For Bonhoeffer, it was the accommodation of the Lutheran German establishment to the Nazi regime. While there are theological and cultural differences between them, these thinkers were prophetic voices arising out of two distinct dehumanizing political systems who were calling Christians back to a costly and comprehensive commitment to following Christ. Continuing to develop the biblical themes from Luke, I draw on the work of Gutierrez and Bonhoeffer to address interwoven threads of the spirituality of following Christ and the active mission of discipleship in the world as central to Christian identity.

Called and Sent

Two overarching and interrelated elements from Scripture are that disciples are those people who develop allegiance to Jesus, being drawn in as a follower who leaves behind old allegiances, and second, disciples grow together as a new community to go out from Christ and share in the mission. We find in both Bonhoeffer's writing and Gutierrez's work definitions of discipleship with a breadth of spirituality rooted in being called into relationship as a follower, and being sent out for action. Such discipleship reflects the human longing for God, God's ongoing giving of God's self, and ultimately the human response to the initiative of God that ignites both personal transformation (interior spirituality) and the motivation for solidarity with the suffering (missional spirituality).

First, I give attention to the dimension of one's personal spirituality. Gutierrez's work is particularly helpful for understanding the intrinsic connections between the dimensions of contemplation and action, conversion and growth, solidarity and love.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Professor of Pastoral Care and Counseling, David Augsburg has a practical book on holistic discipleship called *Dissident Discipleship*. He emphasizes the need for teaching a Christian lifestyle that

Faithfulness to God includes increasing attention to the reign of God in our own time and place. This is nurtured through practices such as liturgy with prayer, thanksgiving, learning from scripture and worship. Responding to God we receive gifts of joy, peace, and abiding love. It is very significant that Gutierrez uses language such as gratuitousness, grace, and human action in reference to discipleship. Gutierrez claims that a full and true encounter with the neighbor first requires an encounter with love and grace: God. He explains that the gospels present to us the experience that the disciples had of Jesus, and they do so with all the intimacy implied in the verbs ‘see,’ ‘hear’ and ‘touch’ so to encounter the Lord is first of all to be encountered by the Lord. There is a response to God’s extension of grace that brings people into active relationship with Jesus.

An experience of divine encounter, within the individual as part of a worshipping community of faith, is essential to sustaining faithful discipleship. Perhaps one could have social action without personal spiritual practices or one could have deep inner life without cultivating a love for neighbor, but, when people are centered on glorifying God they will naturally experience personal transformation(s) and respond to God through loving the neighbor. Reorienting to God as the center is a crucial antidote to the brands, goods and material dreams that are so often central in the contemporary imagination. Thus, nurturing a life of spiritual practices that feed the religious imagination is fundamental in transformative discipleship.¹⁰⁴

does not bear the lopsided features of much of Christianity of the past century which he describes as having either emphasized interior life or social responsibility. He goes into detail with eight spiritual practices of following and abiding in Christ which brings together these emphases in what he calls “tri-polar” spirituality. David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love and Neighbor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006).

¹⁰⁴ Philip Sheldrake makes an interesting point about the social transformation aspect of spirituality of Gutierrez (teleological) and that of a spirituality that emphasizes obedience from Bonhoeffer

Dimensions of conversion

Personal transformation as central to the Christian life gets significant attention particularly in traditions that have been influenced by pietism, which place a high priority on private spiritual practices with attention to the development of the interior life. In such traditions there may also be a strong emphasis on personal morality as an expression of conversion; turning to God can provide freedom from personal anxieties and damaging habits. These are important and well founded experiences of Christian spirituality but are not the only way to understand the transformative dimension of discipleship.

A more active and outward looking spirituality does not do away with the development of the inner life and personal devotion; however the image of discipleship helps us to frame the ongoing expressions of faith that come along with or after “conversions”. Conversion is personal and life changing, though with implications reaching beyond the individual’s “spiritual” salvation. Bonhoeffer wants us to understand the significance of following Christ after conversion. Bonhoeffer is an important resource as he experienced his own change of theology regarding conversion. His experiences in the established German church context of the 1940s led him to recognize that the common understanding of salvation in his context was inadequate and hollow, related to the world to come but not grounded in Christ’s presence in worldly affairs.

His phrase “cheap grace” refers to this notion that Christian faith consisted solely in assent to beliefs in the doctrine of the (Lutheran) church and that the grace of salvation was for assurance of life after death. But such grace, or unmerited mercy, was instead to

(deontological) as representing parts of the New Testament version of discipleship but not the whole picture. Sheldrake asserts that New Testament discipleship emphasizes the believers’ character and that virtue ethics or character ethics would prove a helpful partner for the study of holistic spirituality. Sheldrake, Philip, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press. 2005).285.

invoke a costly response according to Bonhoeffer, a response that should cause a reordering of all allegiances to the gospel of Christ. Set against the demand for allegiance to the political power in Germany of the day this message was radical and prophetic. Bonhoeffer, who left a legacy of decrying cheap grace as the operative theology of his context, calls us to recognize the power of grace and the response it calls for in the life of the believer. “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross... Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁵

Gutierrez articulates a “liberation spirituality” whereby he emphasizes “the practice of faith and critiques traditional notions of spirituality that associated religious practice exclusively with personal piety or church attendance. Belief and private piety was insufficient.”¹⁰⁶ Following Jesus is an expression of spirituality. Cultivating such spirituality is a communal experience for Gutierrez, another corrective to overly privatized orientation to Christian identity and practices. As illustrated in his work on liberation spirituality, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*, it is “the spiritual journey of a people” similar to the communal experience of Exodus and the original disciples’ journey with the historical Jesus of Nazareth, where Gutierrez grounds relationship with God.

Conversion is the beginning of discipleship; understood as a choice to follow and identify with Christ, his teachings, his ministry, and his death in one’s own time and place. This conversion is both a beginning and a process by which one grows into Christian identity. Gutierrez provides an important lens for understanding conversion

¹⁰⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H Fuller (New York: MacMillan, 1963).47.

¹⁰⁶ Sheldrake, Philip, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press. 2005).71.

and culture. He articulates a view of transformation as ongoing conversion in the Christian life. His explanations of conversion suggest that there is an ongoing turning away from sin and toward a new way of life. It is a transformation of the self into thinking and feeling as Jesus. Gutierrez's writing reminds us that people begin the Christian life with an encounter with Jesus, follow him, and "stay with him where he goes," Gutierrez's attention to discipleship as spirituality emphasizes the lived faith.¹⁰⁷ There is a clear emphasis on personal transformation which occurs through following Christ, abiding in Christ, and thus living for the other.

Further, for Gutierrez, "we have to break with our old mental categories, with the way we relate to others, with our social class, with our cultural milieu...so that we can stand in profound solidarity with those who suffer."¹⁰⁸ Even solidarity with the poor begins with an encounter with Christ, not human striving, and then extends God's love received to the other. I would add that this turning and breaking with old categories is a process similar to the ongoing "leaving behind" described in Luke's gospel.

In discipleship if we follow Jesus' example in accompanying the poor and confronting the powerful and powers, we must be prepared to follow his pattern of sacrifice. In the parables of Luke 14 Jesus reminds people to count the cost before embarking on a costly endeavor. Bonhoeffer's biographer recalls that after his arrest and imprisonment Bonhoeffer seemed more peaceful and was free from past bouts with depression; for he had finally achieved the concrete discipleship that he had so long

¹⁰⁷ Gutierrez articulates this approach to spirituality in Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, Revised ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993). See 110-116, for example. It is also a significant theme in Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: A Spiritual Journey of a People*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992).

¹⁰⁸ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 118.

pursued.¹⁰⁹ Bonhoeffer, ultimately a martyr, declared that “anybody living in the strength of Christ’s baptism lives in the strength of Christ’s death.”¹¹⁰ Both theologians take seriously the pronouncement from the gospels that disciples are to take up the cross. “The testimony of numerous Latin American Christians... makes us realize that there are more than a few who have determined to put themselves behind Jesus and follow him, paying the price of rejection, of calumny or even the surrender of their own lives,” writes Gutierrez.¹¹¹ Gutierrez and Bonhoeffer, who emphasize the call to an other-centered life of discipleship, particularly in regards to an orientation toward the poor, pose a major challenge to the self-serving ethos of a commodified culture.

Christian life is constituted by a response to God with a turning from some previous way of being. The effects of receiving God’s grace should result in a life of Christian discipleship as evidenced by emotional and psychological growth and subsequent change in a person’s life. But as Bonhoeffer and Gutierrez stress in their own ways, the conversion experience is also a new way of being oriented in the world socially and relationally.¹¹² Contrary to some understandings, personal transformation through the work of God’s spirit in us is not private. Personal change through following the Christian way orients us more and more toward right living with others.

¹⁰⁹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). 506, 833.

¹¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.342.

¹¹¹ Nickoloff, ed., *Gustavo Gutierrez: Essential Writings*.311.

¹¹² These theologians conceptualization of the process of conversion illustrates a problem that Vincent Miller discusses in his work about how the advertising of spiritualities promotes searching and choosing but not commitment with a cost the commodified nature of “spiritual transformation” in the marketplace of pseudo-religious identities, regarding the loss of infrastructure and social norms that would help sustain commitment after the “moment of choice” experienced in contemporary culture, (see 141-144 *Consuming Religion*).

Conversion to love of neighbor

Following Christ is a grounded, specific way of being in this world. In his *Letters from Prison* Bonhoeffer emphasizes the “worldliness of Christianity,” even more directly than in the ethical study on the Beatitudes which constitutes his *Cost of Discipleship*.¹¹³ He asserted from prison that only those who live fully grounded in the world have a claim to Christian discipleship. Bonhoeffer put the connection between conversion and love of neighbor this way: the church is the church only “when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need...the church must share in the most secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating but helping and serving.”¹¹⁴ Gutierrez similarly warns against a limited understanding of conversion that begins and ends with changes in attitudes or beliefs alone. He says that at conversion we break with the old systems of sin and structures of evil in the world. Moreover, to be converted is to commit oneself realistically and concretely to the process of the liberation of the poor and oppressed, such that Christian discipleship “is a conversion to the neighbor.”¹¹⁵

Our personal spirituality in discipleship will express itself best in relation to other people. A spirituality of liberation will center on a conversion toward the oppressed. We see the synthesis of spirituality with social action in Gutierrez as he reminds us that it is God’s grace through prayer that allows us to be fully converted to the other. In keeping with the motif of following Jesus and imitating his ministry we are not just to cultivate a “loving” orientation in the abstract but in a particular orientation to the poor. For

¹¹³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers From Prison*. (ed Eberhard Bethge Revised Edition. NY:Macmillan, 1968).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 382. Gutierrez also addresses a very similar problem in his chapter “Encountering God in History,” *A Theology of Liberation*.

¹¹⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* 118.

Gutierrez, spirituality is a way of living the gospel before the Lord, with human beings so that walking in the spirit is walking in solidarity with the poor. Drawing on John's Gospel he emphasizes God's initiative in our spiritual encounter that leads us through Christ in the Spirit back to the Father.¹¹⁶

Theologian Roberto Goizueta also emphasizes expressing the love of God actively in the world, not as an abstract virtue but in particular relationships. In his *Caminemos con Jesus* solidarity is not theoretical but true accompaniment with another. Attachment to Christ will result in joining in his activity in the world, particularly among the suffering. "Only through the concrete act of accompaniment do we love others as "others" as equals and we are in turn loved by them. As action, or praxis, accompaniment includes not only 'being' with another, or 'feeling' with another, but also 'doing' with another."¹¹⁷ Goizueta, with a strong emphasis on relationality, provides a concrete vision for communal life in Christ that highlights the liberating message of the gospel.

Gutierrez expresses the relational imperative of a liberation spirituality this way:

The preferential option for the poor is ultimately a question of friendship. Without friendship, an option for the poor can easily become commitment to an abstraction (to a social class, a race, a culture, an idea). Aristotle emphasized the important place of friendship for the moral life, but we also find this clearly stated in John's Gospel. Christ says, 'I do not call you servants, but friends.' As Christians, we are called to reproduce this quality of friendship in our relationships with others.¹¹⁸

The concept of accompaniment is a helpful metaphor in the discussion of discipleship.

Such an orientation requires that we ask the question: Can one seek the status provided

¹¹⁶ See Gutierrez Chapter 3 of *We Drink from Our Own Wells*.

¹¹⁷ Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment*.206.

¹¹⁸ "Remembering the Poor: An Interview with Gustavo Gutierrez" by Daniel Hartnett . *America*, February 3, 2003. Online version accessed Feb20, 2011.

by brands and accumulation of goods and live a life attending deeply to the needs of the other at the same time? According to Gutierrez, “Theology does not pretend to have all the technical solutions to poverty, but it reminds us never to forget the poor and also that God is at stake in our response to poverty. An active concern for the poor is not only an obligation for those who feel a political vocation; all Christians must take the Gospel message of justice and equality seriously.”¹¹⁹

Aiming toward holistic transformation

If it is following Christ that orients discipleship, then the incarnation is an important concept that undergirds our attention to love of neighbor as the everyday reality of following Jesus. The Christian has a commitment to imitate Christ’s mission “to pitch a tent in the midst of human history” as Jesus did.¹²⁰ Bonhoeffer’s theology was also revised through his changing interpretation of the theology of incarnation. “The philanthropy of God revealed in the Incarnation is the ground of Christian love towards all on earth.”¹²¹ He strove to live fully engaged in the world during his involvement in the plot against Hitler, rejecting the other-worldly retreat espoused by his own state-church tradition. In his *Letters from Prison* we can hear the transition from the often abstract ethics of *Cost of Discipleship*, in which he emphasizes a personal holiness that could be removed from the struggles of the world, to the developing understanding of learning to live as a disciple. He admonishes followers that they grow in faith through actions. Both theologians highlight action as prior to theological reflection. While not committed to

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Gutierrez treats this subject in his chapter “Encountering God in History” (*A Theology of Liberation*). Hear the echo of “The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood,” Eugene Peterson’s translation of John 1:14 in *The Message* version of the Bible. It illuminates God’s insertion to human history and invites us to live our faith grounded in our daily experience.

¹²¹ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

social change in the way that Gutierrez would articulate it, Bonhoeffer does provide a lens for developing a strong sense of living out the socio-political implications of the gospel in the world as an incontrovertible dimension of discipleship.¹²²

Discipleship as the aim of Christian formation offers Christian educators a way of framing the Christian life as central to identity, just as it was for the original discipleship community. Discipleship is an integrated whole—the life of following Christ is very bodily, human, and this worldly as well as reflective of a deep longing for God and a world beyond this world. Studying the gospel narratives we know that each of these dimensions was present in the life of Jesus and the first followers. We can hope that an emphasis on holistic discipleship and retrieval of thick theologies which support such living can serve to balance out the fragmentation that is commonplace in a highly commodified society dominated by choice and disposability. Appealing to the sincere longings for belonging and concern with such fragmentation could draw people toward the discipleship community.

The earliest communities' initiation process was one that emphasized welcoming in of people to a new set of relationships, practices, stories and beliefs, communal values and liturgical practices. The change was to be consuming, the new Christian had a new identity, despite the risk of persecution. This identity was personal and corporate and exemplified in the switch of allegiance from biological clan to the religious community. Gutierrez and Bonhoeffer help focus us on a discipleship that changes us: changes our

¹²² In Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983). Gutierrez analyzes Bonhoeffer's contributions to twentieth century theology as one who challenged the limits of much of modern theology, and was a major influence in the protestant development of the theology of a suffering God. The portions of his treatment of European theologies with the critique of Bonhoeffer is helpful for understanding the fundamental differences between the two thinkers as well as to see Bonhoeffer's contributions to new pathways in theology at the time.

attachments, keeps us focused on the suffering of God and the cross and draws us into new allegiances with a community of followers in love and solidarity.

Commitment to following the Christian way in a community is very important for framing of the transformative power of life in the Spirit. Church as a “community of disciples” is a helpful operative image. In addition to the works referenced here, ecclesialogist Avery Dulles describes the ideal model of church as the Community of Disciples.¹²³ He stresses that community prioritizes Christian relationships without necessarily giving the “impression that such communion exists merely for mutual gratification and support.”¹²⁴ Life together is not simply one of community, but the identification as “disciple” reminds us that following Christ is at the center. Dulles notes that this community, “with its exceptional style of life was intended to attract attention.”¹²⁵ Dulles calls the community of disciples an alternative form of society, with its own rules and way of life, modeled after the early Christian disciples’ life together.

The gospels characterize the community as holding goods in common, meeting together for meals and prayer, giving money to those in need, preaching, and carrying on Jesus’ ministry of healing, baptism, forgiveness of sins and the social restoration that comes with allegiance to the Kingdom of God. Gutierrez’s anthropology and ecclesiology are highly communal, as seen in the implementation of base Christian communities’ centrality to the liberation movement.

¹²³ See Avery Dulles, *Models of Church*, Expanded ed. (Image Books, 1987). Bonhoeffer’s treatment of community in *Life Together* also continues to influence ecclesiology. Other significant works from contemporary theology which have influenced my thinking regarding discipleship as communal are Robert J. Banks *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Cultural Setting* and Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

Bonhoeffer and Gutierrez provide us with an understanding of discipleship that runs seamlessly between the inner spiritual life and living out the mission of Christ within our social contexts. Miller and Kavanaugh describe our contemporary culture as one where spiritual longings are being met by substitutes for God and do not require anything of us in return. If most people develop identity and their orientation in relationships mediated through the values and practices endemic to consumerism then we need to develop a more adequate formative environment so that our vision is informed by scripture and theology. Just as Jesus invited a new order of allegiance with his disciples in their socio-political climate so does today's discipleship challenges allegiances and attachments.

Putting Christ Before Consumption: Living Illustrations

How might people respond when they have become aware of competing allegiances and yearn for a more complete Christian life? What does a change of allegiance look like, and how do we educate for this transformation? In the final section of this chapter I describe two models of communities intentionally pursuing holistic discipleship. In the following chapters I begin to develop the theoretical foundations for how to nurture such mature Christian faith in light of consumer culture. In these stories we see the theme of re-thinking the use of material resources and other consumer practices, grounded in the transformative themes of discipleship outlined above, specifically an interior spirituality combined with a missional spirituality.

The Simple Way: Neo-monastics in Philadelphia

The Simple Way is an intentional community in North Philadelphia. They are an example of a small but influential movement called "The New Monastics", or neo-

monasticism. As such, living in community and committing to shared spiritual practices are an important part of the identity and mission of the group.¹²⁶ Members of the New Monastic Movement identify themselves with the past generation of intentional communities as far ranging as Jesus People U.S.A., the Catholic Worker Movement, and L'Arche as well as many contemporary urban ministries with a residential component. Simple Way understands radical discipleship as the choice, "to be part of a new community, a new polity, which is formed in Jesus obedience to the cross. To be a disciple means to share Christ's story, to participate in the reality of God's rule."¹²⁷ For those in the neo-monastic movement this new community is literal, and often requires relocation and redistribution of material resources to join this body of followers. Simple Way leader Shane Claiborne resists critiques of such an orientation as being isolationist or sectarian and claims that their goal is "not fleeing from something but dancing toward something new."¹²⁸

As the members of Simple Way live this out and interpret events and scripture together their choices have led them to critique the injustices around them in light of the economic structures and over consumption habits of most North Americans. Their story begins in 1997 when a group of college students led by then undergraduate Claiborne encountered a group of homeless families living in a church building in North

¹²⁶A book written from within the movement, Rutba House, ed., *Schools for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock). is a compilation of writings from representative of a variety of current intentional Christian communities. They have identified twelve shared values that sustain their mission and vision. Two more analytical books on the subject of intentional discipleship communities are Luther Smith *Intimacy and Mission: Intentional Community as Crucible for Radical Discipleship* and *The Beloved Community* by Charles Marsh. Pastorally, the work of Jim Wallis, Ronald J. Sider have been formative. Also, the social ethics of anabaptists such as John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas pervade their approach to Christian discipleship

¹²⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).49.

¹²⁸ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006).129.

Philadelphia near their campus. The students befriended these people and began to become aware of the complex experiences of the marginalized in their city. As they spent more time listening to and worshipping with the encamped families the group partnered in advocating for their rights and getting what they needed from the city. The students also began questioning the theologies they grew up with which had not prepared them for a life of social action or solidarity with suffering people.¹²⁹ Eventually six students moved into a brownstone in Kensington, Pennsylvania, a depressed Philadelphia neighborhood where they had met the disenfranchised families. They called themselves ‘The Simple Way,’ sharing a home, and a common purse and getting involved in the everyday ups and downs of a beleaguered neighborhood.

Today, Simple Way community is no longer a student movement but consists of some of those founding young adults as well as others who have joined over the years to become residents and community development workers in the neighborhood. They not only express the values of neo monasticism, the founding members the of Simple Way have been influenced by other trends in the progressive evangelical stream, particularly like minded activists involved with Christian Community Development Association, a network of professionals and ministers who represent a variety of agencies doing neighborhood development, micro-lending, or human services. While their theology reflects many streams of the Christian tradition, The Simple Way community’s mission is basic: “To love God. To love people. To follow Jesus.”¹³⁰ Their mission statement is broad, and echoes a familiar scripture passage: “And he answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Available at <http://www.simpleway.org>.

with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself,”¹³¹ and is likely shared by many Christian groups. What gives their vision its flavor is the degree to which these commands are expected to be visible, tangible, world changing action verbs.

Some of their initial presence in the community working with neighbors yielded refurbished homes, enlarging the scope of their residential community as well as the size of the organization, which today is a registered non-profit. Simple Way now includes a hospitality dimension inviting anyone in need of transitional assistance to stay temporarily and other shorter term guests, novitiates (or interns) who are exploring a long term commitment to the communal lifestyle. Their work in the neighborhood rehabbing houses, getting people into recovery, going to court to fight evictions and removal of homeless people from public spaces, are among the examples of direct service work they have done for their neighbors.

Claiborne says when people live in interdependent community the “market economy is irrelevant.”¹³² Examples of their alternative practices include a shared health insurance cooperative that the members participate in along with other people in small Christian communities. They have at times even carried various residents from their neighborhood in their health care coop when there was an emergency. They also attempt to exchange goods and services, instead of money, with neighborhood store owners. This has included sharing second language lessons, groceries, and child care.

¹³¹ Luke 10:27

¹³² Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*.36.

Claiborne speaks of “God’s new economy” which he uses to describe the economic model of Christians communal life.¹³³ Claiborne believes that terms such as “charity” and even “generosity” have been co-opted by contemporary culture. Instead, he says, the new economic way of life is “beyond” charity and generosity, when generosity is understood as gifts given when and if the one with resources gives out of surplus to another presumed to have fewer resources. The Simple Way lives as they do in part as a spiritual discipline for themselves and as a model for the mainstream church to go beyond such a “brokerage model” of sharing resources to a relational form of redistribution of wealth and resources that comes from a “theology of enough.”¹³⁴ Following Christ with full abandon has meant, for the Simple Way members, to refuse the economic rituals that contemporary social institutions demand.

As I read their story it is clear that they began their journey toward embodying a theology of economic justice with their renewed understanding of the call to discipleship, not initially as a direct theological response to consumerism. Their alternative consumer practices have emerged from necessity out of their model of a shared purse and their shared residential life, as well as a combination of solidarity with the poor, and their understanding of biblical teaching on stewardship and economic spirituality.

The goal of simplicity that they strive for, freedom from attachment to their wealth and other resources, gives the members a strong sense of purpose and identity. We can see that their practices are rooted in worship, a process of ongoing personal transformation and solidarity with their neighbors. Their commitment to living out a

¹³³ Shane Claiborne, "Mark 2: Sharing Economic Resources with Fellow Community Members and the Needy among Us," in *Schools for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005).

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

lifestyle based on the early disciples' way of both being called to and sent from Jesus Christ has resulted in creative and effective alternatives to the commodification of self and others. However, a major critique of this lifestyle is whether intentional community is sustainable over time? That is, there can be rapid turnover, as people get married or have children, or as young adults continue to discern career and educational callings that take them out of the intentional community they thought they were committed to.¹³⁵ The work itself, often in very blighted neighborhoods, can lead to burnout in cases where self care is not built in. The strengths and appeal to living a life that demonstrates such a degree of counter culture is very attractive to many followers of Jesus, so it is important that communities such as the Simple Way demonstrate practices and a lived theology which can be replicated, and when members move out or visitors go home to more mainstream lifestyles there is an ethos which can be sustained in other settings.

Because of some of the inherent limitations of the radical community model of discipleship, I present another example of people who are attempting to respond to commodification and over consumption without relocation and renunciation of mainstream lifestyles.

SixSeeds: A vision for shaping generosity and service

My second case is a web based organization called SixSeeds, which emerged out of similar passions and commitment to discipleship seen in Simple Way. Two major

¹³⁵ When I propose my own approach to building Christian communities in light of consumer culture I will come back to this literature and these questions in more depth. For descriptions and discussions of the challenges facing such communities see Thomas Rausch S.J., *Radical Christian Communities* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990). See also shorter pieces by Jason Byassee, "The New Monastics: Alternative Christian Communities," *The Christian Century* 122, no. 21 (2005). And Rob Moll, *The New Monasticism: A Fresh Crop of Christian Communities Is Blossoming in Blighted Urban Settings All over America* (8/3/2009 2005 [cited September]); available from <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/september/16.38.html>.

distinctions between them and Simple Way, however, are the demographic profile of the people involved and the absence of a gathered community. This informal network of families grew out of the experiences of a few upper middle class families who were becoming uncomfortable with the gap between their wealth and the needs of the world. How could they manage the contradictions between the culture of excess shared by them and their neighbors and the values inherent in their Christian tradition? As maturing Christians these questions may have been brewing for sometime but it was as they watched their children becoming inculturated that they wanted to take action. According to their website: “SixSeeds began with one family wrestling with the question: ‘How does a family connect its material prosperity to its values of service and generosity?’”¹³⁶ As the founding family observed the disconnect between their children’s formative experiences and the virtues that they as parents wanted to be instilling in the next generation they began brainstorming. John Kingston, founder and current director of the board of Sixseeds, articulates his convictions this way: “...some dimensions of this moral life [based on the cardinal virtues] are more challenging to teach when we are endlessly indulged by our prosperities.”¹³⁷

“The Concept” page of the website presents their questions to the broader public this way:

Have you ever looked for your black shirt – not the V-neck, or the sweater...the scoop tee that looks so good with jeans – and realized you have ten of them with only slight variations?...Let’s face it. Even in a recession, we Americans have it pretty good. If you’re like us, you enjoy the benefits of modern life – don’t iPhones make life so much more enjoyable? But we also struggle with how to balance our blessings with a desire to make a difference in

¹³⁶ Available at <http://www.sixseeds.org/about/story/php>.

¹³⁷ John Kingston, founder and Chairman of the Board, in an informal document sent to “special partners” during the start up year to describe the Christian vision at the root of the non-sectarian organization. Available through the executive office of SixSeeds in San Jose California: cchang@sixseeds.org.

the world, to connect with our communities, to fight against the constant sense of entitlement that pervades our children and teens.

Honestly, we don't know exactly how to achieve this balance. ... We started SixSeeds because we have an inkling you're looking for this ever-elusive balance too and just might need a nudge in the right direction, an understanding ear, or support in your decision to back the U-Haul up to the house to haul those toys to Goodwill. Or maybe you've already fought these battles, figured out how to put the Playstation 3 on pause, and are raising kids who are, in fact, joyful givers and enthusiastic servers. Either way, we'd love to walk with you and your families through these issues. Perhaps together, we can fight against a culture urging us to supersize our stuff and satisfy every whim.¹³⁸

These families, recognizing the impact of commercial culture on their children and their parenting habits, which were more reflective of the larger culture than their deepest values, are seeking explicit ways of challenging their assumptions and default practices of accumulation and entitlement.

How are they achieving these goals? First, they believe that hope for impacting the socialization of families lies in pursuing the questions together with others. SixSeeds explains their name this way: "... the seed serves as a physical expression of three kinds of sharing: Sharing traits between generations/ Sharing best practices between families/ Sharing resources between those with resources and those with need."¹³⁹

A central component of the SixSeeds site is a parenting blog administered by educators who address topics such as virtue development and parenting, home economics, community service, wealth, and consumption habits for children. It begins with the comment, "We all have a lot to learn from one another as we seek to grow in family based service and giving. Fortunately, we have some very thoughtful folks in our partnership. Check out what people are teaching their kids, thinking about parenting, and

¹³⁸ Available at <http://www.sixseeds.org/about/concept>.

¹³⁹ Available at <http://www.sixseeds.org/about/story.php>.

looking at in our culture.”¹⁴⁰ Then one can click on a link to learn more and find activities by topic.

Second, a large thrust of their work is connecting families with others who want to do child-inclusive service projects both in the US and the developing world. As people visit the site they are able to meet online or connect to other people in their geographic region who could develop local fund raisers, in person discussion groups or organize service projects. These projects include direct service, such as work weeks, or fund raising as families. SixSeeds provides financial support for long term projects in partnership with Christian relief and development agencies as an outlet for the generosity they hope to cultivate as well as to carry out the mandate of Christ to bring good news to the poor.¹⁴¹ SixSeeds wants to encourage a global awareness in privileged children and put a face to poverty in their otherwise comfortable communities. SixSeeds encourages people to structure their lives economically so that they are able to give away as much as possible on behalf of the poor. One of the resources on the website is a map with markers for fifteen “Domestic Partners” links. The links are to families, part of the SixSeeds network, involved in local projects who are raising funds. The families’ stories also serve as models for the kind of generous living that the founders want to cultivate. At the bottom of each project description is an idea for how to replicate the spirit of the project in one’s own location encouraging multi-generational service.

As a ministry it bears noting that the Christian dimension of this networking project is not emphasized. The organization is not expressly religious; they do not refer to the Christian tradition in the texts of the website but intentionally seek a common ground

¹⁴⁰ Available at [http:// www.sixseeds.org/ideas](http://www.sixseeds.org/ideas).

¹⁴¹ As of fall 2009 there are ongoing projects in Afghanistan, Mexico and Roxbury, Massachusetts.

between a Christian and secular audiences who share a concern about contemporary consumerism. The motivation of the staff is spiritual; they participate in the project “because of their love for Jesus” as they walk in “faith and hope with the Lord.”¹⁴²

While the issues raised are widely appealing, the precepts of justice and generosity are spiritual matters for the leaders behind the movement. However, they believe that the need for attention to matters of prosperity and inequality are important to their professional colleagues, not only to their church communities. In Kingston’s explanation for targeting a secular audience he refers to Pope Benedict’s notion that to evangelize means to “show the path, to teach the art of living;” that Jesus’ concern for the poor includes the materially wealthy who do not experience the abundant life because of their pursuit of material prosperity.¹⁴³

Embodying approaches to resisting consumerism

Both organizations model the need for partnering with others in pursuit of personal transformation and impacting society. For SixSeeds, relationships between families is crucial; they do not create community in the residential sense, but there is a high value placed on support and mutual accountability as they seek to change personal habits. While the emphasis on intra-community relationship building is strong in both, the SimpleWay is stronger in creating new allegiances across lines of economic advantage/disadvantage. Simple Way embraces direct relational connection with the poor and many who move to the neighborhood are choosing downward mobility. One of the

¹⁴² John Kingston personal correspondence with “special partners” on the launch of the first family service project.

¹⁴³ Kingston’s reference comes from an address on the “New Evangelization” which was part of a conference given by Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, when prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, during the Jubilee of catechists in the Jubilee Year, 2000.

strengths of the discipleship practiced by the simple way is the commitment to relationships with the marginalized. They take the call to a change of allegiance in the biblical model literally. When describing the religious experience of Latino/Latina popular Catholicism, Goizueta “a spatial, geographical dimension,” to social justice work.¹⁴⁴ I see that in the lifestyle of SimpleWay. Perhaps the approach to resistance of the commodified culture in their model is “a domestic, urban theology of accompaniment.”¹⁴⁵

Can the different approach to redistribution taken by SixSeeds, of encouraging a lifestyle of charitable giving/living and a self-consciousness about spending and saving, similarly cultivate a challenge to the meaning-making dimension of consumer culture? I think it is possible. For the Christian audience, who is only part of the readership, I hope it would encourage the development of everyday practices of saving and giving that also lead to relationships beyond acts of charity. If we are only influenced by people who share our same concerns and presumptions can we experience a shift in social consciousness that is needed in the context of consumerism? I would want to be sure that they are conscious of the challenge that, as Goizueta comments in *Caminemos con Jesus*, “As a society, we are happy to help and serve the poor, as long as we don’t have to walk with them where they walk, that is, as long as we can minister to them from our safe enclosures.”¹⁴⁶ It is important, however, that ethics includes people and is not simply an approach to how to treat people: “To accompany another person is to walk with him or

¹⁴⁴Goizueta, *Caminemos Con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment*.191.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*,199.

her. ... The notion of “walking with” incorporates both the ethical-political and the aesthetic dimensions of human praxis.”¹⁴⁷

Both of these organizations provide resources for resistance and for re-imagining a Christian lifestyle that extricates itself from some of the mechanisms of commodification. Both are addressing concerns of faith and American dominant culture. Both organizations share a commitment to discipleship as their starting point. Interestingly they do not have “resisting consumerism” as their telos, nor primary self-identification, and yet by virtue of their intentional discipleship, demonstrate rich practices that reflect alternatives to the meaning-making forms of dominant culture.

Conclusions

The distinctions between these two attempts at addressing Christian concern over contemporary cultural patterns are many. They appeal to distinct demographic groups, and they differ in their levels of rejection of dominant culture values and practices. The ascetic tendencies of the neo-monastics are not echoed in the lifestyle choices of the predominantly suburban members of SixSeeds. Yet both groups long to see justice and social change for the poor. Both groups believe that how they use resources impacts others who have less control over their resources. Members of both groups have a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo of commodification and overconsumption that co-opts spiritual commitments and real transformation. Therefore, an important contribution that both communities make to the mainstream church is to make clear that there is no one set of practices that are representative of a Christian way forward within consumer culture, but awareness of the challenges of prosperity to growing in discipleship is crucial.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 206.

There will be great diversity in the paths that generate the transformation of religious life out of the “commodity form” to the “personal form.” These two examples of discipleship communities demonstrate the effectiveness of self awareness regarding contradictions between beliefs and practices, asking questions about one’s social context and questioning cultural presuppositions to find the redemptive and destructive elements. The people written about here practice reflection on their everyday activity which led to challenging their theologies and also searching the wisdom of their traditions to produce changes in practices. This lived hermeneutic will be explored in later chapters. This chapter has begun to describe how the underlying forms agreed upon by consumer culture (e.g. exchange, commodification) are not the underlying forms of a disciple community, as found in Luke, and seen in the lived practices of intentional communities such as Simple Way and SixSeeds. In the next two chapters I turn to a study of effective teaching and learning methodology which can be resources for cultivating such depth of conversion as to sustain new patterns of living that reflect ongoing personal transformation and service to others as love for God.

Chapter 3 *Effective Pathways for Resisting Cultural Norms: Transformative Learning*

The Lucases live and work in San Francisco at the heart of the city's financial district. Near this center of wealth and power lies the Tenderloin district, one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the city. One day, Ted was driving Sara from their home to the airport and reported feeling "more overwhelmed than usual by its brokenness: the physical ugliness of the cracking paint and broken windows, the rundown buildings and the despair on the faces of the hundreds of homeless and addicted wandering aimlessly on the sidewalks." Among those wandering are a high proportion of the city's homeless youths. (It is estimated that there are over 12,000 children living in the city without parents.)

Ted and Sara thought of Roger Huang, a community leader whom they had recently met. Twenty-four years earlier, Roger had been driving through the Tenderloin himself when he had to pull over because of a flat tire. As he did so, he witnessed a young boy in the neighborhood getting beaten up. As Roger described the experience to the Lucases, "I felt God asking me what I would do if that kid was my own son." Several days later, Roger and his wife spontaneously started delivering sandwiches to the low income hotels throughout the Tenderloin that housed many of these children.

Over the years, those sandwiches grew into City Impact, a nonprofit that runs a school, rescue mission, addiction recovery program, thrift store, food bank, and children's programs. As a result, Roger, his family, and City Impact have touched thousands of lives in the Tenderloin, especially those of the most vulnerable children.

The Huangs' radical expansion of the boundaries of their "family" particularly inspired Ted and Sara. The Lucases had desired to have children of their own but were undergoing a very painful struggle with infertility. Hearing about the children of the Tenderloin, Sara felt like "God was giving me an opportunity to invest the love we would have had for our own children, and giving me a new way of being a mother."¹⁴⁸

This story describes the origins of just one of the many projects initiated by partners of the SixSeeds organization. It illustrates the impact of disorientating experiences that interrupt our regular routines and can lead to a transformation of the way people see, act and believe. We expect that Christian discipleship includes small and large acts of compassion and mercy, and yet this story is powerful because while people may relate to passing by a deteriorating neighborhood with compassion, most do not reorder their own lives in order to enter relationships with those whom they see in need.

¹⁴⁸ Story told on the SixSeeds website Domestic Projects page found online at <http://www.sixseeds.org/projects>; accessed June 9, 2010.

As discussed in chapter two, Christian conversion includes an invitation to take on a new identity, develop a new moral framework, have new bonds of fellowship, and faithfully follow Christ in mission. But how does the journey to new habits and new vision happen? What processes could be in place for a congregation to support people in their “ah ha” moments of potential growth, like the Lucases and Huangs in this story, in embracing service and accompaniment instead of self-protection and status? Chapters one and two illuminate the challenges raised in a consumer culture for forming Christian identity. Here, I introduce the key principles of transformative learning theory as a way forward in addressing the need for a critical awareness regarding social formation. Christian faith—beliefs and practices—cannot simply be added on to the multiplicity of other influences on our beliefs and practices if it is to be constitutive of one’s identity, it must be integrated through socialization, consciousness, and action.

A basic insight of transformative learning theory is that critical self-reflection is stimulated by experiences of disorientation, or dissonance, when a discrepancy between new insights and learners’ long held beliefs, values, or assumptions become obvious.¹⁴⁹ The overarching purpose of education is that learners are transformed, as uncritically assimilated habits or assumptions are deconstructed and then reconstructed with new perspectives and skills. Transformative education attends to opportunities for critical self-reflection: it assists learners to frame an experience such that they can wrestle with the meaning of it from multiple points of view and come to new insight which will impact decision making.

¹⁴⁹ Jack Mezirow and Associates, eds., *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1990).18. Also, Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991).167.

The work of education scholar Jack Mezirow, who first articulated the dynamics of transformative learning that have influenced the course of adult education in the past twenty years, provides the foundation of the discussion.¹⁵⁰ I use other contemporary work in the field of transformative education to broaden the conversation. Educators are now applying the basic elements of Mezirow's theory in diverse settings and retooling their pedagogies according to the setting and purposes of their learner's work.¹⁵¹ The emerging research demonstrates that transformative learning includes a range of practices and presumptions from individual-psychological aims to communal, social activist visions of transformation.

Elements of the theory can contribute to Christian education in light of questions of socialization and discipleship in consumer culture. There are four major concepts from the field of transformative education that are particularly valuable for faith communities who hope to disentangle themselves from dominant culture. These are first, that learning should be transformative not passive; second, that adult maturity includes a degree of critical self-reflection; third, that disorientation, particularly dilemmas of meaning-making, can lead to transformation; and fourth, that particular conditions for learning environments are needed to foster transformational experiences. We begin by examining these foundational principles.

¹⁵⁰ This philosophy draws on adult developmental theory, educational paradigms, and psychotherapy dynamics. The primary sources here are Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), Jack Mezirow and Associates, *Learning as Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

¹⁵¹ As described later in the chapter collections of diverse applications of transformative learning experiences are described in essays such as Edmund O'Sullivan, "The Project and Vision of Transformative Education," in *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning*, ed. Edmund O'Sullivan, Amish Morrell, and Ann O'Connor (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002). Education scholars Morgan Gardner and Ursula A. Kelly explain that contemporary transformative learning is holistic, "educators gain expanded opportunities to foster learning environments that are integrally attentive to issues of meaning-making critical reflection social justice, diversity care collaboration and community" (1), in Morgan Gardner and Ursula A. Kelly, eds., *Narrating Transformative Learning in Education* (NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

Foundations: Jack Mezirow

Through Mezirow's initial research study with women in vocational transitions he came to recognize that adult learning experiences can foster mature thinking patterns as adults are faced with new challenges, such that an unconscious set of assumptions is replaced with a more self-reflective set.¹⁵² Mezirow asserts that adult maturity naturally includes a process of accepting or rejecting long held assumptions when faced with problematic decisions. For contemporary educators who embrace transformative learning, an overarching goal of adult education is to transform uncritically assimilated "habits of the mind" and assumptions that typically determine one's meaning-making.¹⁵³ This is a different approach to teaching and learning than content delivery for the primary sake of mastery of information. Instead, attention is given to process and how people understand themselves as learners while acquiring new skills or knowledge. Mezirow highlights the role of adult education assisting learners to "be held responsible for their acts to acquire or enhance their understandings, skills, and dispositions": so, transformation is as important as information when it comes to educational practices.¹⁵⁴

Perspective transformation and critical self-reflection

The patterns and presuppositions that adults carry through life make up what Mezirow calls "meaning perspectives," and the transformation of meaning perspectives is

¹⁵² This is a function that Mezirow describes throughout his body of work. In describing meaning-making he explains that "Learning is a dialectal process of interpretation in which we interact with objects events, guided by an old set of expectations. Normally, when we learn something, we attribute and old meaning to a new experience," (10) from Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. In later work he develops this further, see for example the chapter "Learning to Think Like an Adult" in Jack Mezirow, ed., *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

¹⁵³ Mezirow, Jack. "Learning to Think Like an Adult," in Mezirow, ed., *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*.17-18.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

vital for education.¹⁵⁵ “Meaning perspectives” are the network of assumptions that support one’s beliefs and frame what is learned, resulting in habits of thinking. Meaning perspectives, which are often tacitly held, develop throughout one’s lifetime, rooted in earliest experiences and acquired through socialization.¹⁵⁶ This early socialization shapes habits of thoughts about how the world is supposed to be. Along with socialization people can also consciously adopt ideologies that become part of the context of how they interpret new experiences and information.

Meaning perspectives provide the material for critical self-reflection. Because meaning perspectives are shaped over the course of a lifetime and are the unconscious structures out of which people make meaning, there are often distortions that are no longer appropriate for facing adult challenges and that inhibit learning. Mezirow describes distorted meaning perspectives according to three categories: epistemic (distortions such as depending on authority or reifying positions); socio-cultural (distortions such as accepting the norms for power or the false consciousness of ideologies); and psychic distortions (childhood presuppositions which generate anxieties).¹⁵⁷

Education that leads adults to becoming aware of these distorted premises, is the beginning of perspective transformation, the essential outcome of engaging in critical reflection: “Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive understand and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation...leads to making

¹⁵⁵ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*.155.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*,61-63.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*,144.

choices or otherwise acting upon new understanding.”¹⁵⁸ Being misled by errors in the process of reasoning or problem solving inhibits adult maturity, as old ways of knowing and interpreting experiences start to become inadequate for making sense of new dilemmas faced throughout adulthood.¹⁵⁹ Instead, critical self-reflection paves the way for the transformation of the inadequate framework.

Reflection is the “central dynamic in intentional learning,” and in the development of the pedagogy of transformative learning.¹⁶⁰ Mezirow draws on John Dewey’s language to distinguish ‘reflection’ from ‘thinking’ in the learning process; reflection in education for transformation is a process of rationally examining the assumptions by which we have been justifying our convictions. In transformative learning, reflection allows learners to recognize where default assumptions about a situation come from before moving to judge the validity of a claim or the justification of an action. It is through interpreting the unfamiliar in communication with other points of view that meaning is construed. Mezirow emphasizes that in an educational setting facilitators do not only engage in reflection, but promote critical reflection and self-reflection as vital elements in moving toward the ultimate goal of adults expanding their meaning perspectives.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 167.

¹⁵⁹ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, 143-144. Also reiterated in Mezirow, ed., *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. see pg 4.

¹⁶⁰ Jack Mezirow, "How Critical Reflection Triggers Learning " in *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*, ed. Jack Mezirow and Associates, *The Jossey-Bass Higher Education and Adult Education Series* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990). 5. In a related collection of essays educator Nona Lyons surveys the current landscape of reflective practices in education including contested claims about applications of Dewey’s conceptualization of reflection. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to launch such a discussion but the arguments are interesting. See chapter one of Nona Lyons, ed., *Handbook of Reflection and Reflective Inquiry: Mapping a Way of Knowing for Professional Reflective Inquiry* (Springer -Verlag, 2009).

¹⁶¹ Mezirow is not only interested in how people change intellectually, this more flexible thinking that he champions ought to result in life change.

Mezirow's particular employment of critical reflection is grounded in philosopher Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative learning.¹⁶² In communicative learning people undergo a process to evaluate various arguments looking for the least biased claims. Critical learning helps us understand what others mean when they communicate about values, ideas and morality, as one seeks to establish the validity of an idea.¹⁶³ Instead of accepting implicit claims, critical reflection leads to understanding the claims underlying an argument in order to evaluate it. Via rational discourse, then, the adult learner can "challenge the validity of presuppositions in the prior learning."¹⁶⁴

Such an approach to education is an "effort that helps the learner challenge presuppositions, explore alternative perspectives, and transform old ways of understanding and act on new perspectives."¹⁶⁵ According to Mezirow, perspective transformation will happen through these reflections and discourse, often in response to a particular "disorienting dilemma."¹⁶⁶

Disorientation

When Mezirow describes his observations about the process of transformative learning he explains that it is a disorienting dilemma that precipitates the move toward critical self-reflection and perspective transformation. Perspective transformation follows

¹⁶² This key epistemological assertion about learning and establishing the validity of meaning reflects the influence of Jurgen Habermas on Mezirow's work. Mezirow describes Habermas' theoretical framework of two types of learning, instrumental and communicative. Instrumental learning refers to problem solving reflective of the scientific method. Communicative learning is how we understand the meaning of what others communicate to us about values or morality, for example. Learners should seek coherence in perspectives from evaluating the claims of a variety of sources against the social norms.

Epistemological theories are related to the discussion here but I do not treat such work in depth. For a critical and comprehensive treatment of the development of contemporary epistemological debates in education theory see Barbara K. Hofer and Paul R Pintrich, "The Development of Epistemological Theories: Beliefs About Knowledge and Knowing and Their Relation to Knowing," *Review of Educational Research* 67, no. 1 (1997).

¹⁶³ Mezirow, "How Critical Reflection Triggers Learning " .9.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

a learning cycle beginning with a disorienting dilemma and resulting in a reintegration that developed on the basis of conditions dictated by the new perspective.¹⁶⁷ Such psychological growth is part of natural processes, but he maintains that decision making that is transformative requires self reflection and interaction with other adults—without this reflection on perspectives, transition periods can instead lead to self-centered problem solving, regression or becoming more entrenched in one’s former ways of seeing.¹⁶⁸ Mezirow observed in his initial empirical study that the stages of decision making during life transitions are similar to a process of transformative learning; initially there is immobilization, then denial, depression, letting go, testing options, and ultimately the search for meaning leads to integration and a feeling of a new beginning.¹⁶⁹

Learning conditions for transformation

Educators in the field agree that some trigger event, or problem to solve, or even natural internal challenges during adult development can precipitate critical self-reflection. Mezirow describes the “ideal conditions” for the learning environment to foster perspective transformation. “Under these ideal conditions” the learners have “accurate and complete information, are free from coercion and deception, and have the ability to be critically reflective...”,¹⁷⁰ among other values. Mezirow describes the larger social constructs that are necessary for participants to fully engage, including being “freedom, democratic participation, equality, reciprocity and prior education through which one has learned to assess evidence effectively...”.¹⁷¹ Adult educators may find

¹⁶⁷ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*.192-193.

¹⁶⁸ We find this in Mezirow’s *Learning as Transformation* collection but also is a foundational assertion from his Jack Mezirow, "Perspective Transformation," *Adult Education Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1978).

¹⁶⁹ Mezirow “Learning to Think Like an Adult” in Mezirow, ed., *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*.22.

¹⁷⁰ Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*.198.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*,199.

themselves having to work on the conditions for learning prior to effectively engaging the students in transformative education activity.

While much of the transformation process happens because of the challenges to meaning-making that occur throughout the lifecycle, some practitioners will use experiential learning to make disequilibrium explicit. One such form would be problem posing, embodying real life conflicts or dilemmas in a classroom setting, and engaging in reflection and interpretation.¹⁷² Patricia Cranton, writing about practical applications of transformative learning, suggests that some adults respond more to role playing, simulation games, and writing exercises that prompt people to take a different point of view, followed by critical discourse about the experience.¹⁷³ This approach to learning is also exemplified in experiential learning such as physical adventures that challenge people's courage and endurance and allow them to see themselves in light of overcoming such challenges. Relatedly, transformative learning can be an important part of cross cultural educational programs, as part of service learning or other educational travel programs.

In sum, developing pedagogy based on transformative learning theory means that, in a systematic manner, educators help the learners challenge presuppositions and explore alternative perspectives so that they might eventually act on new perspectives. For Mezirow, the movement toward transformation of meaning perspectives results in a new way of meaning-making that is more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and

¹⁷² Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*, ed. Alan B. Knox, *The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).171-2.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*,171-2.

integrative.¹⁷⁴ As laid out in his foundational work, adults move toward this new capacity through interpreting the unfamiliar or addressing the disorienting problem in communication with others, engaging multiple points of view in a setting intentionally formed for facilitating “rational discourse.” He observed that solidarity, empathy, and trust are requisite to a learner’s commitment to a transformative learning group.¹⁷⁵ The typical setting for Mezirow’s process has been the dialectical classroom experience, typically the undergraduate or other post secondary setting. Whatever the educational setting, formal or informal, classroom or therapeutic group, a high level of discourse frames the pedagogical orientation. As I have described, Mezirow insists that this rational discourse is the ideal condition of human communication: he highlights the importance of “dialogic communities to enable learners to engage in rational discourse and action because it is through dialogue that we attempt to understand what is valid in the assertions made by the other.”¹⁷⁶ The primary tools for fostering critical reflection are questioning and dialogue, so while, perspective transformation occurs individually the process takes place in a group facilitated by a professional educator.

Becoming aware of one’s underlying assumptions is difficult work. People are often at a crossroads in their lives during these educational experiences. The role of the teacher must be carefully considered when accompanying students in their process of reflection on experience disorientation. Even if the changes are liberating and positive, Cranton reminds facilitators that there are many unforeseen consequences that people

¹⁷⁴ Mezirow, “How Critical Reflection Triggers Learning,” in Mezirow and Associates, eds., *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*.

¹⁷⁵ Mezirow, ed., *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. preface.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 354.

must face when they capture a new way of seeing the world.¹⁷⁷ The educator must understand this responsibility of being involved in moments of change in another person's life. They should consider the balance between challenge and support and look for markers of learners' capacity for critical reflection.

Educators can learn how to enhance the capacity for this work. Karen Kitchener and Patricia King's work in the area of "reflective judgment" grows out of their experiences in the college setting where professors share a common expectation for critical thinking but may not cultivate a classroom environment or assignments that provide the resources for developing such cognitive skills.¹⁷⁸ Despite this presumption in higher education, Kitchener and King have observed that the developmental capacity for critical thinking is not universal, even when measured among people from the same socio-cultural demographic group.¹⁷⁹ Presuming that all adults can engage equally at the work of transforming meaning perspectives is not accurate; people function at varying stages of capacities for critical thinking, and judgment regarding problem solving, with strong cultural influences at play. Their work shares many of Mezirow's presumptions, particularly Dewey's proposal that reflective thinking is a primary goal of education.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*.

¹⁷⁸ Patricia M. King and Karen Kitchener, "The Reflective Judgment Model: Transforming Assumptions About Knowing," in *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood*, ed. Jack Mezirow (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1990). In addition, Patricia Cranton discusses the psychological profile of individuals which is related to capacity for transformation and guides, she asserts, the form which the transformation is likely to take. See her chapter Patricia Cranton, "Individual Differences and Transformative Learning," in *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, ed. Jack Mezirow (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

¹⁷⁹ Patricia M. King and Karen Kitchener, *Developing Reflective Judgment: Understanding and Promoting Intellectual Growth and Critical Thinking in Adolescents and Adults* (San Francisco Jossey Bass, 1994).

¹⁸⁰ Critical thinking and reflective judgment are not the same thing, though are related. Kitchener and King explain reflective judgment as a form of meta cognition that emphasizes epistemic assumptions in the reasoning process Ibid.,12-13.

However, the research by Kitchener and King with young adults goes beyond Mezirow's initial claims by exploring stages of developmental capacity for critical judgment.

Understanding developmental parameters for critical capacities is helpful when undertaking pedagogy based on the transformative learning theory. Of particular interest here is the insight from their work that the sequence of development of reflective judgment both limits learning and can be influenced by facilitation in learning environments.¹⁸¹ Recognizing, for example, that the developmental capacity for judgment evolves slowly (with new capacities emerging every 4-6 years) can help instructors set appropriate expectations for critical thinking processes and frame assignments so that the process for reflection is more explicit. With support the high level of cognitive functioning required for Mezirow's outcomes in transformative learning are more likely to develop.¹⁸²

Coaching people in critical reflection in the context of a diverse informal learning community, such as a church, with various ages and degrees of formal education poses particular challenges. Attention must be given to a learner's developmental capacity for living with ambiguity and paradox in the process of letting go of old ways of knowing and moving into more inclusive thinking. The facilitator must be conscious that people's assumptions are often related to identity and therefore must be careful to move at a

¹⁸¹King and Kitchener, "The Reflective Judgment Model: Transforming Assumptions About Knowing." 160. See also the methodology employed in a study of reflective judgement in pre-service teachers in Audrey Friedman and Lea Schoen. "Reflective Practice Interventions: Raising Levels of Reflective Judgement" *Action in Teacher Education*. v31 n2. Sum 2009,61-73.

¹⁸² In a related study education scholar Audrey Friedman examines the lives of two intellectually gifted women. She describes the major environmental and psychological factors that contribute over the lifespan to a heightened development of reflective judgment. "These case histories suggest that reflective thinking is fostered in an environment that encourages conceptual exploration and risk taking... For Deborah and Judith, reflective giftedness is not entirely intellectual; it has a social, cultural, historical, spiritual, and perhaps even a genetic component" (365). This essay models how to examine the pathways of a life for transformative moments and how they relate to reflective capacities. See Audrey Friedman, "Deborah and Judith: Case Studies in Reflective Giftedness," in *Remarkable Women: Perspectives on Female Talent Development*, ed. Karen Arnold, Kathleen Noble, and Rena Subotnik (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1996).

respectful, slow pace in the transformative learning process.¹⁸³ Effective learning experiences will build bridges between a learner's current knowledge and new insights that the learner is forming.¹⁸⁴ Such experiences are increasingly substantial when the facilitator recognizes the role that affect, imagination, and moral convictions play in coming to terms with approaches to meaning-making.

Exploring the Possibilities for Transformative Learning Theory

There are contemporary scholars of education who are expanding on the fundamentals of transformative learning theory with a more holistic vision of the possibilities. Transformative learning theory as articulated by Mezirow and many developmentalists has arguably emphasized rational discourse that reflects a highly cognitive epistemology, or at least favors intellectual skills in the process of transformation.¹⁸⁵ In this section, I include voices representing: feminist researchers who are exploring how the breadth and diversity of emerging epistemological claims should be included in the transformative learning framework; educators who have a focus on the

¹⁸³ Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*, ed. Alan B. Knox, *The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

¹⁸⁴ As applied to Christian contexts, we can respect the ground someone stands on even while nurturing movement ahead toward more integrated faith. Additionally, in congregational life small learning groups often exist already and if faith educators have exposure to this pedagogy they can take on the process of informing for faith while using pedagogy that encourages growth and maturity in thinking. Given that transformation is part of the ethos of a congregation life this is one possible resource for opening up a window into how learners understand their own formation as adults.

¹⁸⁵ Mezirow does explain that the transformation of perspective has “cognitive, affective and conative dimensions” (*Critical Reflection*, 12) but overall his emphasis on rational discourse highlights cognitive learning and cognitive outcomes of learning in contrast to the emotional, spiritual, or praxis oriented processes that could also be fostered by emancipatory education. In 2000 Edward Taylor writes there have been “assumptions about transformative learning that have been overlooked and need greater attention, such as a perspective of difference—the role of class, culture, and ethnicity in the process of change; the role of context” and continues “...without the expression and recognition of feelings participants will not engage their new reality...” (289-291) Edward W. Taylor, "Analyzing Research on Transformative Learning Theory," in *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, ed. Jack Mezirow (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

relationship of personal transformation and cultural critique asking how adults can be educated for socio-political awareness and praxis; and theological interpretations of the transformative moment.

A focus on ways on knowing

Education professor Sharan Merriam has raised questions about how we can expand the understanding of Mezirow's "rational discourse" and consequent transformations in light of broader epistemological frameworks.¹⁸⁶ Merriam questions whether the capacity to engage in the kind of discourse necessary to go through the highly rational stages of the process favors a particular population, namely students in higher education settings with western biases about objectivity and reason.¹⁸⁷ She does not want adult "maturity" to be framed as synonymous with a particular "higher order" thinking associated with cognitive reasoning skills that would then dismiss the transformative experiences of those whose expressions of wisdom may be communicated differently. She favors the language of connected ways of knowing, or interdependent thinking, as being a sign of mature thinking.

Merriam notes that in her empirical work with learners who had transformation of perspectives leading to decisive action, the outcomes were similar to what is expected in Mezirow's work, even though the people did not describe their experiences as "critical" nor a process of "rational reflection". Instead the participants describe transpersonal,

¹⁸⁶ Sharan B. Merriam, "The Role of Cognitive Development in Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory," *Adult Education Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2004).

¹⁸⁷ The capacity for critical thinking as represented in Kitchener and King's model for example, correlates with level of education, as higher education is the primary environment for explicitly teaching rational discourse, critical problem solving etc. People who score highest on their scale are people with advanced degrees.

emotional and other “non cognitive” dimensions of experience.¹⁸⁸ Merriam insists that work must continue to be done to expand the language of the theory to include intuitive, affective connected dimensions as constitutive of transformational learning.

Other feminist theorists have recognized that in most educational theories the relationship between adult maturity and meta-cognition places critical discourse as the most developed way of arriving at knowing. For example, in the notable work, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, social scientists sought to understand how women conceptualize learning and come to know something for themselves.¹⁸⁹ In their work, which looked primarily at sources of knowledge as opposed to the nature of knowledge, they found that women used different terms for coming to know than what was prevalent in the work of other developmental theories. For example, the subjects used the term ‘understanding’ as opposed to ‘judgment’ when it came to arriving at decisions and new knowledge. Belenky, et al, also brought to light the importance of social relations in coming to know. Understanding self in relationship seemed to be related to learning in general for the subjects of their interviews. “A transformation of understanding of self begins to generalize and affect how women think about truth, knowledge and expertise.”¹⁹⁰ The authors found that changes in self-knowledge were part of the steps involved in coming to know something as truth.

¹⁸⁸ Merriam, "The Role of Cognitive Development in Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory." One example Merriam cites is a study of people who became environmental activists (p66) without consciousness of critical self-reflection. It is problematic that she equates cognition with a bias toward intellectualism as cognition is the seat of emotion, imagination and many facets of knowing. Her use of the word cognitive is problematic because many social scientists recognize that emotions, creativity are cognitive capacities. Perhaps a term such as intellectual vs. intuitive would be more helpful here.

¹⁸⁹ M. Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

Similar to Mezirow's articulation of the change process happening in conversation with others in order to consider multiple points of view, women in the study demonstrated the need to test out new ideas in a group. Belenky et al articulate the change process differently, however, using the term "connected knowing" to underline ways in which their study found that care and empathy were involved in taking the point of view of another in the learning process.¹⁹¹ This corresponds to King and Kitchener's advanced stage. As Merriam has pointed out, rational discourse is understood to favor objectivity and detached thinking as building blocks for the change in perspective. A more expansive understanding of how people come to know, especially outside of the higher education setting where much of the research in transformative learning has taken place, is critical for diverse populations who may have been shaped by a critical thinking model of traditional western classrooms.

The story that I began this chapter with captures a combination of critical questioning, affective intuition, and religious conviction in transformation. Consider the inner change in the Lucases: move to being open to fulfilling the hopes of giving birth to biological children with a different passion for embracing a community of children. They began to dream of neighborhood children being nurtured in a life that would grow them into their potential. This is a good example of decision making that must have engaged every level of being, both critical consideration but something stronger and larger. Compassion and hope and social analysis led them to move from service—giving out

¹⁹¹ Connected knowing a central insight of her research articulated in *Women's Ways of Knowing*; she also describes this paradigm in direct response to Mezirow's framework in her Mary Belenky and Ann V. Stanton, "Inequality, Development, and Connected Knowing," in *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, ed. Jack Mezirow (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

sandwiches, to seeing and addressing some underlying needs, and launching a long term solution of education and relational mentoring.

Focus on praxis

Attention to the role of personal transformation and praxis within the transformational learning field is significant. Critical educators are conscious of the political nature of education, in so far as engaged learners may be prompted to respond to discoveries about the larger context of their lives and to examine their own agency. Currently, the field of transformative learning can be loosely divided according to “locus of learning” into two categories: individual and socio-cultural.¹⁹² Paulo Freire’s work, which influenced the development of Mezirow’s theory, provides an example. Freire states, “Dialogue is indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality.”¹⁹³ But, he did not work within the formally educated learning community. Pedagogically the *conscientizacao*¹⁹⁴ of his learners of adult basic literacy was achieved through problem posing, and generative questions on pressing themes that mattered in people’s lives.¹⁹⁵ In the language of *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire was educating for people to be transformed in order that they might experience political agency and effect change in social structures.¹⁹⁶ Further, it is not only the marginalized who experience freedom through conscientization, but, those in power need to be transformed and become

¹⁹² Mezirow and those most influenced by psycho dynamic theory fall under the individual locus, while those working in the context of social-emancipation, and spiritual-cultural transformation have a different focus, as described in O’Sullivan, “The Project and Vision of Transformative Education.” And developed in Sharan B. Merriam, Rosemary S. Caffarella, and Lisa M. Baumgartner, *Learning in Adulthood*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).Merriam (130-131).

¹⁹³Freire is the most recognizable of the social-emancipation visionaries. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 20th Anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2000).64.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.Commonly translated as critical consciousness, it means “learning to perceive social political and economic contradictions, and to take action....” (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.,35)

¹⁹⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. See also the important volume, Paulo Freire, *Educating for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1989).

¹⁹⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

conscious of their assumptions in order to sustain change. Using Freire as a reference point, critical dialogue as a pedagogical practice does not presuppose a certain level of educational sophistication or culturally bound rhetorical skill as critics of “rational discourse” sometimes claim. Critical conversation is part of the transformative learning across the spectrum of learner’s backgrounds, inclusive of various assumptions about epistemology and social agendas and regardless of a higher education setting or an informal community setting, whether more affective and experiential or decidedly analytical, a dialectical process is called for. Both Mezirow, whom we associate with individual transformation as well as more social-emancipatory educators engage learners in a process of mutual exchange.

As an educational approach influenced by Freire and grounded in critical theory, many in the field share assumptions about the systemic nature of power and institutions and the need for people to become aware of their place in the larger systems.¹⁹⁷ A group of researchers at the Center for Transformative Education at the University of Toronto articulate this more political rendering of transformative learning persuasively in their publications. They state, “Our purpose in transformative learning is not to delineate abstract principles of how adults learn, and we are not interested in theoretical ‘generalizability’—at least not in the sense in which this term is ordinarily used. We are asking ourselves why transformative learning matters.”¹⁹⁸ In their first collection of essays they illustrate the role of transformative learning in education for ecological

¹⁹⁷ While my own pedagogy has been influenced by Freire’s philosophy, I agree with Alan Moore who describes a liberatory approach to Christian education in Jack Seymour and Donald Miller, *Contemporary Approaches to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982). He cautions that those who want to use Freire’s pedagogy of liberation in middle class North American Christian education must be cautious about trivializing and decontextualizing the concepts and phrases he articulated in his foundational work in South America (103-104).

¹⁹⁸ Edmund O’Sullivan, Amish Morrell, and Mary Ann O’Connor, eds., *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002). xvii

responsibility, for peace making in violence-ridden nations, and for strengthening movements for participatory democracy.

The Toronto school articulates a definition of transformative learning this way:

Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender our body-awarenesses, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy.¹⁹⁹

They are making the important connection between affect and reason in the process of transforming worldviews and they are bringing action to the forefront of the framework. They connect new vision with new and “alternative approaches to living” in various cultural contexts with a particular emphasis on interconnectedness between people and with the natural environment. This team of researchers represents an important direction in transformative learning theory as it recognizes the breadth of how one comes to experience a change in perspective; their concerns also reflect their convictions about the political nature of education.

They explain that “we are most interested in the generation of energy for radical vision, action, and new ways of being.”²⁰⁰ The collection of essays in *Expanding the Boundaries* articulates the relationship between action and reflection in transformative learning in diverse learning environments. These educators seek to develop approaches that help people, via educational experiences, to develop adaptable and self-aware ways of seeing the world. One of the contributors, feminist educator Angela Miles, writes that

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., xvii

²⁰⁰ Ibid.xvii.

we need to embrace both the individual, or humanist, dimension of transformation as well as “the social meaning of the changes” occurring in transformative education.²⁰¹ She summarizes well that transformative learning in the field of adult education has generally fallen on the humanist side of this divide referring to individual learning that transforms the personal worldview of the learner. Integrative transformative learning, on the other hand, incorporates personal change with progressive social change as mutually constitutive of each other and focuses integrally on both. For her, using the framework of transformative learning must not only seek justice but also affirm life by definition. For example, for Miles the context of globalization and hyper capitalism so pervades even the educational structures, that transformative learning needs to include critical consciousness of such socio-political factors or it becomes part of the process of replicating the system.²⁰² In this way it is more focused on a praxis oriented result. Their approach is also more communal and constructive than Mezirow’s and is suitable for application to concerns raised about the context of consumer culture.

Socio-political movements recognize the power of this approach to teaching and learning: when advocating for social change personal transformation is needed. Another teacher-researcher who works at the intersection of peace activism and education, Anne Goodman, articulates the socio-political purpose of transformative learning this way, “...basic principal is the need to incorporate both critique and vision, since I see neither on its own as sufficient.”²⁰³ In her particular work with peace activism she describes

²⁰¹ Angela Miles, "Feminist Perspectives on Globalization and Integrative Transformative Learning," in *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning*, ed. Edmund O'Sullivan, Amish Morrell, and Mary Ann O'Connor (New York: Palgrave, 2002).23.

²⁰² Ibid.,23-24.

²⁰³ Anne Goodman, "Transformative Learning and Cultures of Peace," in *Expanding the Boundaries of Transformative Learning*, ed. Edmund O'Sullivan, Amish Morrell, and Mary Ann O'Connor (New York: Palgrave, 2002).192.

embracing transformative learning philosophy because it allows room for critique of culture as well as imagining the new:

A critical perspective is at least as important as a visionary one—and extremely difficult to develop and maintain since what we are looking to change are the foundational assumptions we take for granted... We need to learn to address root causes in terms of not only reacting to effects. We need to develop more systemic and holistic ways of looking at issues and more effective ways of working together globally. I believe those of us working for transformation also must develop a greater capacity to be self critical and to examine whether what we are doing is contributing to genuine change or to perpetuating the system by reinforcing its values however unwittingly.²⁰⁴

So, we can see that the field of transformative learning has grown beyond the context of higher education and formal adult education. The Toronto group believes that transformative learning must occur in schools and in all parts of life. And, while critical self-reflection is central to all transformative work, there is a broader understanding of the role of critique, as the process of reflection and how people can come to know themselves and the dynamics of a given social context in a way that engenders new praxis and new vision for the social order.

Mezirow's work has been critiqued for the seeming lacuna in his insistence that education for transformation does not necessarily have a political outcome.²⁰⁵ For Mezirow, evidence of a transformational learning experience will be reflected in an

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 194.

²⁰⁵ Mezirow addresses these long standing critiques in his most recent book, Jack Mezirow and Edward W. Taylor, eds., *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace and Higher Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).. He begins his first chapter with this summary statement: Over the past three decades, adult educators have been engaged in professional discourse regarding transformation theory, especially in the context of the seven international conferences devoted to this subject. Major influences on my own initial understanding of this concept have included Paolo Freire's concept of conscientization, consciousness raising in the women's movement, the theory of transformation of the psychiatrist Roger Gould, the writings of Jurgen Habermas and the experience of my wife, as an adult returning to complete her undergraduate education (19). At the end of his overview of the development of the theory he addresses the major areas of debate: "social change and power issues"; the role of "imagination, intuition and emotion"; understanding "cosmology" (how transformation relates to our place in the world); and "rationality and ideology". He explains that the critiques are "partially justified" (27) and recognizes the significance of the voices contributing to these future directions for transformative learning theory (27-30).

expanded frame of reference, demonstrated by ability to hold conflicting points of view in tension to get to a more integrated worldview, and at the same time Mezirow's writings imply that it is not the role of the facilitator to prescribe the outcome or preferred action for adults to take.²⁰⁶ Mezirow would concur that new action should ultimately proceed from the changed perspective, "Reflective discourse and its resulting insight alone does not make for transformative learning;" changed praxis is necessary.²⁰⁷ But, those who embrace transformative learning for its potential to foster social activism and political change do so with attention to their causes and outcomes in a much more explicit way. The Toronto School emphasizes the balance between critical and analytical education with creative visioning.

Their creative vision for educational practices also includes the need for attention to spiritual dimensions of the learner's experiences. O'Sullivan says, "I believe that any in-depth treatment of transformative education must address the topic of spirituality and that educators must take on the development of the spirit at the most fundamental level."²⁰⁸ It is to Christian spirituality that we now turn.

Biblical language and transformation

Another approach to expanding the foundations of transformative learning is examining theological resources for understanding a process of change in both attitudes and behaviors. Transformation is an overarching theme in the biblical narrative, in theology, and pastoral ministry. Taking a brief foray into the *New Testament* for touch points on transformation I focus on writings attributed to Paul where there is an emphasis

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 361.

²⁰⁷ Mezirow "Fostering Critical Reflection", 355.

²⁰⁸ O'Sullivan, "The Project and Vision of Transformative Education." 10.

on the “renewal” of the mind. As recorded in the book in Acts, Paul himself had an extraordinary transformative encounter with God that was a catalyst for his changing religious affiliation from Jewish zealot to Christ follower and leader of the emerging Christian movement. His letters to the early churches highlight a strong belief in transformation of spirit and vision. For example, “... we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” (2 Cor 4:16); and “...have put on the new self, who is being renewed in knowledge after the image of the creator” (Col 3:10).

Another central Pauline passage on this matter is Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to [the pattern of] this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that by testing you may prove what is the will of God, what is good, well-pleasing and perfect.”²⁰⁹ In Romans 12 Paul uses the word *nous*, mind, when referring to a Christian being renewed in order to conform to Christ. The usage of *nous* in its Hellenistic context does not carry the same connotation as contemporary English language where the mind is regarded as the seat of reason and cognition. According to the Greek lexicon “*nous*” should be understood as:

...the mind, comprising alike the faculties of perceiving and understanding and those of feeling, judging, determining the intellectual faculty, the understanding reason in the narrower sense, as the capacity for spiritual truth, the higher powers of the soul, the faculty of perceiving divine things, of recognizing goodness and

²⁰⁹ The Hebrew Bible also is a resource for understanding transformation of perspective in relationship to faith and practice. As Barbara Fleischer writes in an essay on transformative learning and practical theology, “...we can see several shifts in understandings of God emerged when tragedies or significant disruptions to the normal order of things occurred. The Exodus challenged older concepts of God and brought about new images and assumptions of a liberating and covenanting God. Similarly the Judaic community was plunged into questioning its understanding of God when the Babylonian captivity wrenched it into exile. The prophetic new meanings expressed by Ezekiel consoled the people...new meaning perspectives expanded once again the notion of who God is and how God acts; a larger paradigm was born.” Barbara J. Fleischer, “Practical Theology and Transformative Learning,” in *Forging a Better Religious Education in the Third Millennium*, ed. James Micheal Lee (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 2000).218-219.

of hating evil the power of considering and judging soberly, calmly and impartially a particular mode of thinking and judging, i.e. thoughts, feelings, purposes, desires.²¹⁰

As Professor Doug Heidebracht explains, the more comprehensive Greek usage of *nous* infers understanding reality as inclusive of mental judgment and perception in the soul, even the senses. In the New Testament language then to know with one's mind is to see reality the way God sees it, "If Paul's use of *nous* is a reference to that element of a human being that perceived the real essence of things, most importantly the presence of the invisible God, then renewal of the *nous* would describe the believer's increased perception of God and his will for their lives."²¹¹

In addition to the inferences of "mind" being holistic, Paul also describes logic in a holistic way. Interestingly, when the Greek term for logic is used in the Pauline context, it is not directly in reference to the mind but, as "informed worship" and "a living sacrifice" in Romans 12:1.²¹² In the context of worship as response, which is interpreted giving the whole of oneself to God and God's purposes, Paul calls for a "holistic" transformation: from the natural patterns of a person's thoughts and feelings to being formed into Christ likeness.²¹³ Renewal of the mind results in a kind of knowing that leads the community to be able to perceive God's design for flourishing. "The renewal of the mind is a call for community ethical discernment. Notably, Paul did not refer to the

²¹⁰ American Standard Version Greek Lexicon, "nous".

²¹¹ Doug Heidebrecht, "The Renewal of Perception: Romans 12:2 and Postmodernism," *Direction* 25, no. 2 (1996).58. An illustration of radical transformation that led to new practices in faith can be seen in the story of Paul's conversion. In the book of Acts the writer recounts the story of Silas, persecutor of the early church, encountering the risen Christ, being blinded and then recovering sight along with a new vision of God and God's purposes for his life.

²¹² Douglass Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans, N.I.V. Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).396.

²¹³ "Romans 12," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (New York: Oxford Press, 2001). p1104 . This echoes Jesus teaching recorded in the gospels on loving God with the whole heart, mind and strength and loving the neighbor.

renewal of individual minds but to the way the church as a community perceives God... here Paul calls on the church to be 'united in the same mind' (*nous*) so they can judge together what is right (1 Cor. 1:10).”²¹⁴

As opposed to a primary focus on how the individual discerns God’s will, Paul emphasizes that the community will together perceive things as Christ would, looking for signs of what God wills for people, seeing with new eyes. The phrasing suggests that people would be worshipping, listening to scripture and discussing interpretations together toward a change in the way they see the world and in the ethics they live by.²¹⁵ “For Paul, it is no less than a return, a conforming to the original order, a recreation of human minds,” further, “as possessors of the Spirit they are already equipped to live lives holy and acceptable to God.”²¹⁶ For purposes of applying to education, the pastoral shepherding role then includes drawing out the potential that the gift of the Spirit creates in each one.²¹⁷

James Loder and transforming moments

Next, as I develop my own definition of transformative learning for Christian education, I turn to work from Christian formation scholars to examine how spiritual transformation may best be explained. James Loder, from the field of the philosophy of Christian education, is a strong resource for expanding approaches to knowledge to

²¹⁴ Heidebrecht, "The Renewal of Perception: Romans 12:2 and Postmodernism." 60.

²¹⁵ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*. 398

²¹⁶ “Romans 12,” 1104. Interestingly, in the passage from Romans, the word “transform” is in the present passive tense, which infers that people do not transform themselves but are being transformed through an ongoing process by something outside them. Further exegetical study “Romans 12: 1-2 see D. Edmond Hiebert. “Presentation and Transformation: An Exposition of Romans 12: 1-2.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (1994): 309-324; and David Olford “Romans 12: 1-2.; The Gospel and Renewal.” *Faces of Renewal*, ed. Paul Elbert. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988.

²¹⁷ Jesus as a teacher who raised questions and posed dilemmas through parables for his listeners and disciples to wrestle, provides more biblical roots for this approach to understanding the process of transformation in the life of faith. This chapter focuses on adult education theory, not religious education theory, however there are multiple works in the field of religious education that explore Jesus as model teacher.

include the affective and bodily and also to allow for mystery and encounter with the transcendent. He uses the phrase “convictional knowing” to explain knowledge that comes from insight, or feeling convicted, about the reality of something in a new way.²¹⁸ The movement toward this insightful knowing begins with a disruptive event; the ordinary sense of reality is suspended as a spiritual presence comes into the knowing and must be contended with. Loder is interested in how highly evocative experiences, life-direction altering moments can be “knowing moments”²¹⁹ experienced as an intrusion of the divine or the void into the person’s reality

Loder recounts an extraordinary story of his own simultaneous brush with death and the Holy. In a car accident he was pinned under a car that his petite wife was inexplicably able to life off of him. Though she broke vertebrae in the process and he required hospitalization, what they remember is the strong presence of love, “by far the most significant and memorable effect was not the pain, nor the anger, but the gracious nature of the life I was experiencing.”²²⁰ In the chapter “Conviction beyond knowing” he explicates the nature of a “knowing event” that cannot be left to explanations that the human sciences, logic or dialogue alone can provide. In his work he covers a breadth of philosophical, theological and psychological ground to elaborate on the nature of the relationship between the human spirit and God’s spirit and how to interpret moments of connection, or convicted knowing.

²¹⁸ James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989).

²¹⁹ He uses the term transforming moment as well as his important conceptualization of the process called the “fourfold knowing event.” Such “knowing” is “being” fully human and the event of coming to knowing begins in the lived world, and moves through “the self”, “the void” and finally “the holy”(See 88-90 in *The Transforming Moment*.)

²²⁰ Loder, *The Transforming Moment*.11.

For Loder, the whole person with her emotions, imagination, insight, reflection, and openness participates in the interpretation of a disorienting dilemma (or, in his terms, a rupture in the knowing context). Loder's framing of transformational moments reflects his grounding in developmental theory and the psychoanalytic approach, as well as Christian spirituality. He articulates the belief in the opportunity for the human spirit to cooperate with God's spirit to come to new insights in the most disruptive and challenging knowing experiences we face. He uses the term 'frame of reference' similarly to Mezirow in that when a conflict requires a solution that challenges one's current frame of reference, transformation may occur or one may choose to ignore the opportunity for a fresh interpretation of their experiences. The transformation is not merely change, but for Loder, it is when new coherence and meaning arises to replace a given frame of reference, and there can be a radical reordering of former presuppositions, even resulting in "finding the ultimate ground of the self."²²¹

For Loder, encounters with the Holy may sometimes be explained, or interpreted, with reason and language and rationality but more often it requires imagination and psychological insight which is beyond intellectual reasoning alone.²²² He assures us that imagination is not less true than empirically arrived at truths. Loder roots such language in his biblical understanding of transformation and knowledge, with a focus on *gnosis*, implying an integrated form of knowing related to finding truth. Loder explains that *gnosis* includes reason but is not limited to it; imagination is central for the knowledge that leads to personal transformation of the spirit. Beyond any innate capacity or competence (e.g. language) it is related to what one experiences fundamentally in a

²²¹ Ibid., 88.

²²² Ibid., 14-19.

bodily way.²²³ This is an important added dimension to contemporary notions of transformation and adult development.

In part, Loder seeks to answer the question how can people faithfully come to understand the moments where they experience God breaking into everyday reality? He describes such interpretation as convictional knowing a sign of the presence of God's reign in the present day. "We may also speak of such experiences as 'conversions' ... though a better term might be *metanoia* the notion used by H. Richard Niebuhr to describe a permanent revolution or the ongoing transformation of human life under divine initiative."²²⁴ Such ongoing change in a person's life, the process of conversion, captures a notion of transformation that implies change of thinking and change in action as persons live out of their new convictions. What Loder contributes to transformative learning is an understanding of how disorientation, or disruptions, in adult development can be a "passageway to the holy," when people learn to let go of former ways of knowing and can be shepherded into new constructions of reality.²²⁵

More attention needs to be given to how to companion people to recognize and then begin to interpret their transformative moments. Loder seems primarily focused on individual transformation. It can be inferred in his work that the interpretive task of coming to convictional knowing could occur in the context of a faith community; however, his primary examples are from the practice of counseling where the confirmation of one's personal "knowing moment" would still be an individual experience with the Holy.²²⁶ Religious educator Craig Dykstra describes is this way, "The

²²³ Loder, *The Transforming Moment*.36.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*,19.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

²²⁶ Loder, 193.

world we access through life in the spirit is the real world, created and sustained by God, not a distorted delusionary norm of fear and anxiety...life of faith involves being able to see what there is to be seen beneath the surface of things, even to see beyond what can be seen.”²²⁷

Going beyond the highly individual, psycho-spiritual experience that Loder describes is the work of Christian educators who center the transformative work within the life of the community; there the process looks slightly different. For example, Dykstra addresses the connection between personal growth and communal growth. He focuses on recognizing in the small, daily practices the presence of God that transform churches as communities for the purpose of God’s active mission in the world. Such knowing of presence is both intellectual and a work of affective faith. Religious education scholar Barbara Fleischer in her work on practical theology and transformative learning suggests, “As a body of faithful, worshipping communities, the Christian church acknowledges that its own growth and the transformation of the wider social order is ultimately the work of the Spirit; ...the church is the body of Christ continues in the risen Christ’s salvific mission in history.”²²⁸

Because of his theological convictions about the cooperation between persons and the Spirit for moving communities toward transformation Dykstra takes into consideration where the language of contemporary education and human development work is limited for explaining Christian growth. Dykstra acknowledges the benefits of the metaphors (such as stages or life journey) but cautions against too much dependence on

²²⁷ Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1999), Loder, *The Transforming Moment*.26.

²²⁸ Fleischer, "Practical Theology and Transformative Learning."225.

the metaphors. Dykstra's position on transformation and human development is broader than Loder's:

Faith and the life of faith have the power to transform and shape human development and life journeys. But this can be the case only if faith and the life of faith are recognized to be something more than the outcome or sum total of development in the various natural human capacities...or the result of a series of human events and interactions.... The shape of one's faith and life of faith will certainly be influenced by one's developmental capacities and by the events that take place in one's life, but more significant, every aspect of one's human development and historical existence may be transformed by and employed in faith and in the life of faith.²²⁹

It is important to integrate an understanding of how transformation engages one's whole being. Dykstra asks whether Christian formation practices ever depend on developmental theory and natural rhythms of adult maturation. "Can we appropriately speak of growth and transformation without obscuring, distorting, or oversimplifying faith and the life of faith?"²³⁰

I do not think that Christian maturity and development theories are at odds, though Dykstra's concerns that the two not be amalgamated are a prudent push back to following trends uncritically. Dykstra and Loder both add nuance to understanding the process of transformation; in the Christian context it is part of a life of faith where internal and external changes occur in cooperation with God's purposes for human flourishing.

Implications

Integrative transformative learning theory, which builds off of Mezirow's foundational insights about how adults learn but includes spiritual, emotional and

²²⁹ Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*.37

²³⁰ *Ibid.*,36.

political dimensions, provides important prescriptive and descriptive principles to guide pedagogy. These are learning to attending to a learner's context, focusing on the socio-cultural implications of world-view transformation, and valuing the integration of emotional, psychological, social, cognitive and non-rational processes that contribute to a person's experiences of transformational learning.

Fusing the insight from the integrative theory demonstrated in the work of the feminists and peace educators described above, with the spiritual considerations of the process of adult transformation through education, I agree with Craig Dykstra's articulation of growth as the "penetration or infiltration of faith into ever-increasing dimensions of our experience."²³¹ Similarly, Mirolsav Volf, theologian and director of Yale University's Center for Faith and Culture in describing the current cultural climate for faith development remarks, religious faith is frequently plagued by:

...certain basic malfunctions. One is that faith often doesn't seem to have any effect upon people's daily life. They subscribe to faith, but it remains idle, as if they were taking a placebo and not the real thing; living a life that is completely at odds with faith's demands. Faith serves to give them energy to keep going, to comfort them in distress ... but it doesn't significantly shape the rest of their lives.²³²

Such contradictions and complacency could be mitigated by an approach to Christian education that nurtures a complex and integrated faith, at the level of raising consciousness about how people making meaning in the world and to bring social action in line with personal conviction and world view. The newer integrative transformative learning reflected by the Toronto school described above allows room for these holistic concerns.

²³¹ Ibid.38.

²³² Miroslav Volf, from the mission statement for the Center for Faith and Culture, Yale Divinity School. www.yale.edu/faith/about.abou/htm Accessed June 8, 2010

In summary, how might transformative learning contribute to that process in the context of Christian education settings? At the heart of transformative learning are these principles which can be adapted:

- It is important to question premises that have unconsciously developed over one's lifetime so that one can freely consider other points of view.
- Disorienting dilemmas can serve as impetus for potential growth.
- It is essential to encourage small, trusting communities to foster and nurture the dialogical work of coming to new perspectives and practices.
- Engaging questions about culture in community can lead to commitments for action.

According to transformative learning theory adult maturity demands that people develop stronger critical capacity and question unconscious perspectives; these are valuable in the development of mature faith as well. Explanations for the transformation of how we learn to interpret the world can be connected back to Mezirow's work on the formation of meaning-making and becoming conscious of perspective distortions. Loder and Mezirow both name the significance of a precipitating moment, or the disorienting dilemma,— adults facing such moments are at a crossroads and there is an opportunity to gain new insight and connect with God's presence. Those practitioners who focus on psychological/individual dimensions of transformative learning as well as those who take a more communal and socio-cultural approach emphasize the importance of a learning community in the process of coming to new ways of knowing and being. It is such growth, or transformation, in community that will alphas potential to form people of faith to live as God-honoring consumers. "The gospel possesses the whole soul and penetrates

to the inner recesses of the heart ... Our religion will be unprofitable, if it does not change our heart, pervade our manners, and transform us into new creatures.”²³³ People can begin to disentangle themselves from the forms of consumption that are ingrained unwittingly, as a critical consciousness arises from becoming part of a “new creation.”

Evidence of Transformative Learning in the Case Communities

If people of faith were more aware of the presuppositions that influence their interpretive lens would their faith be more integrated with their everyday life and context? Would it constitute a disposition toward more mature discipleship? Returning to the two models of culturally thoughtful discipleship described in chapter two, let us ask what are the signs of transformation/transformational learning in those communities? In the SixSeeds model of online conversation and resources we find the authors (or, voices of the website) asking questions about being socialized into dominant culture and how it may or may not resonate with one’s deepest values. They reflect on how one might capitalize on the redeeming aspects of dominant culture and resist life-inhibiting aspects of consumer culture. In the language of transformative learning they have an opportunity to incite dissonance in someone’s perspectives and presumptions through questions such as, how much space does a family need, how many toys are too many, how do parents to teach children financial prudence, and the like.²³⁴ The goal is to tap into preexisting

²³³ Theologian John Calvin cited in Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*.23.

²³⁴ Their website has many components, from family friendly movie reviews to stories of extravagant giving. Some of the content is directed at consumer habits and becoming aware of one’s own social location in a consumer society but it is broader in its aims. The running banner on the home page asks: “How can entitlement turn to joy? How to raise generous children?” See <http://www.sixseeds.org>

See also, SixSeeds, "Six Seeds Tv," (2010)., their secondary site, which describes itself as: “ an entertaining prism for parents who are plugged in and looking for the good in movies, television, sports, books, music, gaming, civic affairs, and fun family service opportunities.”

beliefs and values about how their lifestyles may not mesh with their deepest values and give the opportunity for people to share their own stories, questions, and reflections around consciousness-raising, via the blog. Through stories shared on blog pages and other ‘getting connected’ website areas, SixSeeds also invites responses such as developing group service projects, transparency with others in sharing family budgets, and fund raising ideas for social responsibility causes. As demonstrated by the story of the birth of the school in a marginalized neighborhood of San Francisco, SixSeeds offer suggestions for financial generosity in supporting member projects.²³⁵ At the same time it is primarily a clearinghouse for ideas.

Because consumer culture is not merely a set of ideologies to which we assent or dissent but a set of “habits of interpretation and use,”²³⁶ becoming conscious of the influence of culture and taking action against commodification and over-consumption are critical. Being a member of, or visitor to, the SixSeeds online community may or may not lead to a transformed lifestyle but it may be a catalyst for critical reflection and self awareness. Does this catalyst pack the same powerful punch as a truly critical episode? Of course, someone may have begun to ask questions about poverty, power, race, and social responsibility before a visit to the SixSeeds site, so in that sense the action accompanies critical reflection that has already occurred. Questioning is only the first step. However, the connection between action and reflection is clearly apparent in the lifestyle of the Simple Way community.

In both cases, the approach to formation is to join with others in life changing conversations and self reflection. However, the avenues of transformative learning in the

²³⁵ Go to http://www.sixseeds.org/get_involved/projects to learn more.

²³⁶ Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in Consumer Culture*. 180.

residential community Simple Way take a more radical form. Beginning with praxis, the community invites an active response to obvious needs and then uses the experiences as a catalyst for reflection and further questioning that may penetrate into existing beliefs and interpretations of reality. This action is demonstrated in things such as literal accompaniment of those who are marginalized, socio-political activism, and co-housing lifestyle of pooled material resources that enables members to live on less and give as much as possible. When people participate in a lifestyle change such as relocating for Christian intentional community they may experience “disorienting dilemmas,” in their new socio-cultural setting. The transformations in the lives of Simple Way partners appear to be holistic; the process includes reflecting on social, political and theological problematics, asking the big questions that previously assumed answers no longer resolve, and inviting others to a communal life where people practice their new vision.²³⁷

Beyond transformative learning theory

Transformative learning, even broadly understood to include the affective and spiritual, is not the only force effecting change in the people affiliated with these

²³⁷ Details of participant’s stories can be read in Shane Claiborne “Another Way of Doing Life” in Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. Also on their website, <http://www.thesimpleway.org>. Specifically, on the frequently asked questions page they answer the question what does a typical day look like? Shane Claiborne’s answer: “We have prayer each morning (at 8am). Then we dive into days that are filled with things like hanging with friends in the neighborhood or folks living on the streets, helping kids with homework, and helping folks get to appointments. We’ve got some lovely gardens and a little neighborhood thrift store. Most of us work jobs part-time and that frees us up to do other stuff we don’t get paid to do, but love. Activities and programs change from time to time, and we share food with lots of families, and try to be good neighbors. We have dinners together each week, and we have a Sabbath one day each week where everything rests. There are times where we have other things that grab our attention around some of the systemic injustices around us. Right now we are working hard to end gun violence on our streets, and to create some local jobs and more stable housing for folks. It’s not always sexy. In fact, we had some visitors that lived here for a week, and at the end of it we asked them what they learned. They said, “We learned it’s not that spectacular, and that we can do this right where we are.” That’s a good word.” See <http://www.thesimpleway.org/about/faq/>. (Accessed August 6, 2010).

communities. What else is happening beyond the explanations of practitioners of transformative learning? In both cases there is an explicit response to the grace of God, a mental and bodily attempt to worship with one's whole life.²³⁸ Acknowledging a source of wisdom and power outside of oneself of course makes the definition much broader than that of secular education models. Embracing the potential of transformative learning for faith communities must include as given, cooperation with God as Loder and Dykstra have articulated so carefully. We recall that an anticipated outcome of transformational learning according to Mezirow is a shift in worldview that involves a frame of reference that is more inclusive, differentiating, permeable, and critically reflective and that can integrate new experiences.²³⁹ These are important criteria for mature adult thinking, but not the definitive way to frame a picture of adult maturity, particularly mature faith. Further, there is a different telos for Christian transformative learning—while transformation of distorted presuppositions and inadequate meaning-making patterns are an important part of a mature faith journey, the aim of becoming like Christ as a disciple pushes beyond cognitive transformations to transformations of action and practice within certain given parameters. Dykstra offers a succinct statement about the purpose of Christian learning: “transformation in Christian education is not for the sake of self awareness but being formed for mission.”²⁴⁰

²³⁸ Romans 12:1+2. Also notes, as previously discussed, the Christian commitment at SixSeeds animates the staff in their personal growth and discipleship but may or not be part of the experience of a particular individual who finds the content of the network appealing.

²³⁹ While Mezirow might discount the role of religious tradition in cultivating mature rational discourse and transformation, the people working to expand the spiritual horizons of the theory, and even other critical theory educators such as Michael Welton acknowledge the strength of religious communities to nurture alternative worldviews. See Michael R. Welton, ed., *In Defense of the Lifeworld* (Albany: State University of New York, 1995).

²⁴⁰ Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*. 159.

In so far as adult Christian faith development includes, but is not the same as, adult psychological development, the criteria for Christian transformational learning will not be the same as what this adult education theory describes. In order to support holistic human flourishing Christian leaders can cultivate the cognitive dimensions of change, but also invite processes involving spirit, mind and body. Transformation into Christ likeness for individuals and communities begins with worship: God must be at the center. Critical reflection on self or culture does not necessarily lead to expressions of ethical Christian living, but Christian discipleship practices are habits cultivated through human effort with a divine center.

Becoming aware of the social justice demands of discipleship dictates that Christian work within transformational learning will be more norms-based and prescriptive than Mezirow's pedagogy with its 'neutral' facilitation in learning environments. I disagree with Mezirow and affirm that people are able to both follow a set of normative teachings and engage in critical thinking. Even the religious tradition itself may need critical attention for mature adult discipleship as there could likely be aspects of someone's religious framework that contribute to distorted presuppositions that need transformation. (Paradoxically, the faith could be part of the source of the new perspective, as well.)

Conclusions

This chapter presents many points of complementarity between the primary conditions for a transformative educational experience and the possibilities for accompanying someone in the process of transformation in Christian life. The process of change in transformative learning includes, but is not limited to these stages: 1. a

disorienting dilemma; 2. self-examination and critical assessment of assumptions; 4. recognizing one's discontent and the possibility of transformation; 5. planning action 6. trying on new perspectives/roles; and 7. the conditions dictated by the new perspective are integrated into one's everyday life.²⁴¹ Such a process can explain much of what happens through transformative learning in Christian education context as well, with an additional dynamic of attending to the content of the faith tradition and an awareness of the Holy as new perspectives and practices develop. Christian learning experiences should promote self-critical discipleship for insightful interpretation of adult experiences of both culture and the traditional texts.

As Christian educators continue to address the complexities of the relationship of contemporary culture to Christian beliefs and practices Mezirow's work can ground the development of a methodology that supports transformative dialogue and educational experiences. Using this theory for resources in developing a Christian education framework and pedagogy poses useful contributions and serious limits. It does address the need for a Christian education that nurtures a self-aware, complex, and integrated faith, particularly at the level of how we make meaning in the world. Equipped with the self-knowledge and reasoning skills born of critical reflection Christian communities will be better equipped to handle the demands of dilemmas posed by dissonance between the faith tradition's claims and the diverse meaning-making claims of surrounding cultures. Further, because community and the premise of building trusting relationships are built into the life of congregations, the learning environment of a dialogical group rooted in trust and hope is well suited to the process of transformative learning. "The need for a

²⁴¹ Jack Mezirow, "Transformative Learning Theory," in *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace and Higher Education*, ed. Jack Mezirow and Edward W. Taylor (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).19.

dialogical community in transformative models of education leaves this educational paradigm ripe for religious dialogue and an examination of the virtues and values for human discourse that arise in the major wisdom traditions...”.²⁴²

What else is needed to fill in the gaps of transformative learning theory in light of addressing formation for discipleship that resists consumer culture? Knowledge gained in critical reflection may or may not lead to social action. Thus, I turn to Christian social ethics for resources for articulating praxis reflective of a faithful relationship between Christian community and the cultural milieu; specifically, the “pastoral circle,” which joins social analysis with theological reflection to understand social context for the sake of praxis.

²⁴² Fleischer, "Practical Theology and Transformative Learning." 221.

Chapter 4

Effective Pathways for Cultivating Faithful Praxis: The Pastoral Circle

“Recovery of the [biblical] text ...entails and produces a deep and inescapable awareness of how this text, and the life it fosters, lives in deep tension with the dominant text of the global market, a tension to be entrusted to those who speak and listen to this text.”²⁴³

Evident in cultural texts and artifacts are collective, though unconscious, answers to existential questions such as: what does it mean to be human? What is a successful life? How do I pursue happiness? The answers are not declared from a public service announcement or on bill boards via Big Brother-esque advertisers, but they are addressed in the manifest cultural texts that make up our daily life. We find the answers literally in films and on magazine covers and more figuratively through the public policies we make, the presence of shopping malls, sweatshops, art galleries and in the overflowing garbage bins of local fast food chains. How can Christians uncover the cultural messages and then engage those same questions with answers lived in a Christian vision for the sake of the common good? Having established the many inadequacies of how life’s existential questions are answered loudly in the tune of consumerism in North America, I now seek to better understand how the church can be bolstered as a cultural agent, and that in transforming herself and the larger community uncovers more satisfying answers to perennial questions such as these.

²⁴³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Word That Redescribes the World: The Bible and Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006). 7.

As discussed in chapter three, transformative learning methods challenge participants to uncover the formative influences on their decision making and meaning-making presuppositions. Similarly, there are practices in the field of pastoral theology that urge people of faith to be critically conscious of the effects of culture on our imagination, our relational capacities, and spiritual growth. I turn now to work in practical theology for an effective expression of transformative learning in faith communities. As described earlier, consumer culture shapes people's beliefs and behaviors so we need to address both dimensions in order to develop a model for nurturing discipleship which responds to cultural context.

Christ in and for Cultures

Christian communities and dominant culture are mutually formative. The specific nature of the relationship between "culture," (or "the world,") and Christianity has been debated for centuries. From medieval Augustine's *City of God*, to modern Karl Barth's complex theology of culture, to contemporary philosophy's Charles Taylor and his *Secular Age*, extraordinary minds have grappled with how to understand the Christian story in relationship to cultures. Whether doing theology in academia, as a pastoral theologian or in small acts of faith, people continue to seek adequate responses to questions of faith and culture.²⁴⁴ In order for Christians to negotiate how to live out their faith in social milieus where Christian values, core beliefs, and spiritual habits may or may not resonate with the dominant culture, they need practical skills to negotiate these

²⁴⁴ The question of cultural identity and consciousness is of course more complex when we discuss the nature of identity in people from the non-dominant culture (the language itself is provocative) in a North American context. Is the lack of critical socio-cultural consciousness a middle class dominant culture problem? What are the needs for consciousness raising among marginalized peoples? What about issues of being bi-cultural? These questions are vital and would be important for further research on the themes raised in this chapter.

diverse formative influences. By skills, I mean habits of mind, such as critical thinking and fluency with the biblical tradition in order to think theologically.

The classic work *Christ and Culture* by Reinhold Niebuhr, provides a good starting point for reflection on matters of faith and culture. Not unlike contemporary theologians, Niebuhr observed that, “Christians find it difficult to combine Jesus’ claims upon them with those of their societies.”²⁴⁵ As he attempts to describe the diverse historical and biblical approaches to relating to culture in the context of Christian social ethics, Niebuhr asserts that there is a continuum between God, known in Christ through faith and the Bible, and God in nature, known through reason and culture.²⁴⁶ He describes a spectrum of varying positions identifying how Christ relates to the cultural context.

Niebuhr observes five archetypal approaches to Christian social ethics: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transforming culture. He associates each with a biblical framework and a contemporary theologian or tradition. At one end of the spectrum is the belief that Christians understand their own community as distinctly separate from the surrounding society and cultural influences, with a set of biblical imperatives meant only for the development of their own community. In this world view, based on “the new law” of Christ, what is Christian (church) is holy and what is not Christian (including culture) is corrupt.²⁴⁷ The other end of the spectrum views church communities as so integrated into

²⁴⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951).10. One of the challenges of applying Niebuhr to the present situation is not only his philosophical methodology but also the questions left by his work: is this Christology, or ethics or can it apply to both ethics and other sub-disciplines of theology? There may have been different conclusions if he wrote explicitly about church and culture and not Christ in culture.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.,xlili.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

the social context that there is little distinction between values and practices of the congregation and that of the culture and Christ is understood to be reflected primarily through the revelation of natural law resulting in what Niebuhr calls accommodation. There is also, Niebuhr suggests, a middle ground that holds the two extremes in tension and does not seek to collapse one into the other.²⁴⁸ Finally, in the fifth model, “conversionist,” which Niebuhr favors; he sees the hope of Christ as extending into the culture for the sake of transformation. That is, Christian presence in society is redemptive and we serve God in the world for social change.

It does not seem adequate to distinguish these positions so distinctly from each other. Moreover, we can use these categories to imagine the many ways that Christ may be present for and through culture and to remind us that our attitude toward the significance of culture matters when we talk about social analysis and interpreting reality. For example, as Europe and more recently America are coming to be described as post-Christian societies the pastoral response can see this as frightful or hopeful depending on both one’s theology as well as one’s understanding of the essential relationship between church and cultures. One’s theology of culture will give direction to lived faith as one looks for Christ in culture or develops alternatives to dominant streams of culture. As contemporary Catholic theologian Michael Gallagher suggests in his work on discernment in postmodern cultures, Christians ought to be skilled at “drawing out of a culture the full meaning of its noblest intentions,” as well as “challenging that culture....,”²⁴⁹ which impacts imagination, relational capacities and spiritual awareness.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998).55. The idea of holding the tension of culture being both graced and fallen is also seen in the work of James Whitehead and Evelyn Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and*

“Culture is fallible and in need of constant discernment and renewal,”²⁵⁰ he claims. We ought to be able to experience culture without being subject to it. Moving toward such objectivity and agency will take practice, and as we learned from transformative learning theory, equally important is the need to become conscious of one’s own socialization.

Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer, in his *Everyday Theology*, makes a strong case for why Christians should read culture. He situates the church between Christ and culture and calls it a community of cultural agents.²⁵¹ “To be a cultural agent—a person able to make his or her own mark on culture rather than submit to cultural programming—one needs to be culturally literate and a critical thinker... It is not simply enough to know doctrine; the competent disciple must also be able to read culture.”²⁵² When we can understand the place of the church not as fully assimilated into the dominant cultural matrix nor as outside of culture, standing in condemnation or constant suspicion but somehow standing between the present reality and the not fully realized kingdom of God, we are able to read culture and become better interpreters both of it and of the Christian tradition in context. The concept of being an “agent of culture” will be discussed in the next chapter, but it is helpful to use such language about disciples in the social context as we focus on interpreting culture in this chapter, lest the task of interpretation be understood to be passive critique. How do we go about such interpretation so as to understand the everyday relationship of consumer ideology to Christianity?

Christian Ministry, Revised ed. (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995). The method employs critical reflection on culture as theological reflection for pastoral planning.

²⁵⁰Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture*.22.

²⁵¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Interpretation," in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).55.

²⁵² *Ibid.*,55

I propose that a hermeneutical tool, such as the “pastoral circle” which asks us to “see, judge, and act” in Christian wisdom, can provide the framework of an educational paradigm for congregations to strengthen people’s ability to see cultural reality and to equip people to respond ethically as a Christian community in light of the challenges of the meaning-making claims of the surrounding culture.²⁵³ I analyze the usefulness of the pastoral circle for the particular problems introduced in this dissertation by engaging the broader literature of Christian social analysis, theological reflection, and Christian education.

Introducing the Pastoral Circle

Transformative learning is an important pillar in creating a methodology that raises people’s awareness of the culture of consumption and commercialization and to begin to disengage. Another, more distinctly Christian tool for analyzing culture in the context of faith is called the “pastoral circle.”²⁵⁴ The pastoral circle consists of three general movements of interpretation most generally called “see-judge-act”.

Scholars and social activists, Peter Henriot and Joe Holland, developed the pastoral circle as a response to the need for critical awareness of the socio-cultural

²⁵³ The term “pastoral circle” is attributed to Peter Henriot, S.J. and Joe Holland for their approach to action-reflection practices.

²⁵⁴ The term “pastoral circle” is used in Henriot and Holland, a central source for this chapter. However, the general concept is rooted in the hermeneutical circle which is a method in theology with applications beyond how I am applying it here. It is seen in a slightly different form in Gustavo Gutierrez emphasis on action-reflection, for example (Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. Similarly, in Juan Luis Segundo’s seminal *The Liberation of Theology*, he proposes the term the hermeneutic circle and defines it as “the continuing change in our interpretation of the Bible which is dictated by the continuing changes in our present day reality.”(8) in Juan Luis Segundo, “The Hermeneutic Circle,” in *The Liberation of Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1976). In the context of the scholarship of his day, “hermeneutics” referred to interpreting the scriptures. Segundo’s more broad application of hermeneutic to the relationship of lived experience to the Scripture and tradition has had a trajectory into present day practical theology methods. The “hermeneutical circle” is no longer singularly associated with the task of biblical interpretation, however, in order to distinguish the ethical /practical applications for my own work from other tasks of theological hermeneutics I primarily employ the term “pastoral circle”.

dynamics present when people begin to plan for social action. Theologian Jon Sobrino, introducing Henriot's work in this area of faith and justice names the importance of the work of social analysis in this way: we "need to allow ourselves to be affected by reality in order to analyze it properly; as a way of working for justice...in order to grasp the truth of the world we live in and to understand faith with Jesus of Nazareth as the starting point."²⁵⁵ Such a method is a fitting model for my work in which I develop an approach to culturally conscious disciple making. In this chapter I analyze the usefulness of the pastoral circle for the particular problems introduced in this dissertation by engaging the broader literature of Christian social analysis, theological reflection, and liberatory Christian education.

Henriot and Holland developed their method of pastoral problem solving in the context of working in solidarity with the poor. Unsatisfied with the standard proposals of either the political right or the left in the 1980s they issued a call to the church for a critical engagement with social reality and the Christian tradition.²⁵⁶ One of their presuppositions is that people in dominant culture operate out of an unconscious foundational metaphor for the society that is inherited in the socialization process, similar to the concept of a cultural curriculum. They suggest that operative at the core of the American cultural imagination is a root metaphor of life as mechanistic efficiency.²⁵⁷ Instead, they argue, we need a new metaphor that provides a different foundation for building a just society, such as American culture as "a work of art." Their point is that part of the struggle for justice is a struggle for the root of our cultural imagination. In

²⁵⁵ Jon Sobrino, "Faith, Justice and Injustice," in *The Pastoral Circle Revisited*, ed. Frans Wijsen, Peter Henriot, and Rodrigo Mejia (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).ix.

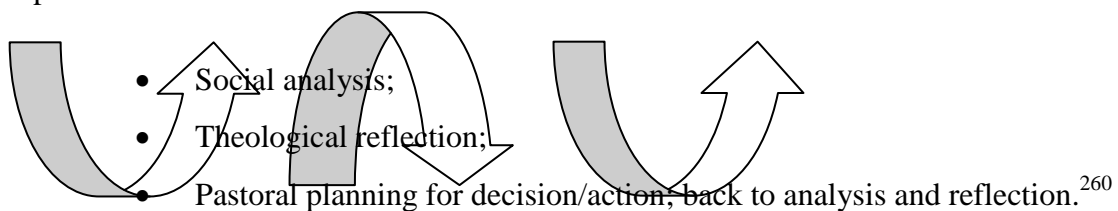
²⁵⁶ Peter Henriot and Joe Holland, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, Revised ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).xix.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

order to reflect and critique the foundational cultural images we must be critically aware of the forms they take.

For Holland and Henriot, then, movement toward social change begins with developing a new vision of society. For people of faith, this vision is cultivated through discerning how human experience leads us to the divine. What does social analysis have to do with this new vision? “If faith is to be alive in the works of justice then the reality of the social situation must first be clearly understood.”²⁵⁸ In the pastoral circle, we seek to understand how God is revealed in the experience and struggles of the everyday while avoiding an a-historical or a-cultural application of scripture.²⁵⁹ As I introduced, pastoral planning as part of practical theology often includes the general terms “see, judge, and act.” Henriot and Holland expand on this general principle in their work. Their model of the pastoral circle is a discernment process leading to social action through a circle of naming an experience, social analysis, theological reflection, and action that then leads back to deeper critical reflection.

Each of the movements of the circle expresses a mediation of experience. In summary, their hermeneutic circle progresses in this way after naming the context/lived experience:



²⁵⁸ Ibid., 6.

²⁵⁹ This tendency toward claiming the gospel message as beyond cultures is explored in Neibhur’s category Christ as “above” culture.

²⁶⁰ Henriot and Holland, 7-8.

The terms representing movements are defined this way: a) **social analysis**: naming and then analyzing the social location of a given pastoral dilemma; b) **theological reflection**: holding up the filter of the scripture and traditional wisdom, and engaging in theological reflection to name the alternative reality of the people of God; and c) **praxis**: asking how does our new way of seeing invite action for the sake of Gods reign? In so far as this process is circular (or more accurately a spiral) the new action prompts deeper reflection and analysis. The biblical and theological insights may prompt new ways of seeing the cultural context and can lead to deeper probing before moving to analysis and the spiral continues.

Although movement through the cycle may be non-linear, Henriot and Holland describe the beginning as naming the current conditions or the experience under examination. This investigation continues with social analysis, a multi textured process. Henriot and Holland name multiple layers of socio- cultural dynamics which require understanding: the historical causes, the natural links to other social issues, and the people or institutions that make up the social context of the problem.²⁶¹ With such clarity, one moves on to reflection, which is the process of judging what has been seen with both reason and faith engaged. Finally, one plans for transformative action/response to seeing reality based in the theological wisdom.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 10.

Comparative models

A similar analytical process for pastoral strategizing is described in Richard Osmer's *Introduction to Practical Theology*. Osmer, a foundational voice in Protestant practical theology uses similar categories to name the tasks of practical theology in the context of congregational leadership. His terms, the descriptive-empirical task, the interpretive task, the normative task, and the pragmatic task, echo the movements of the pastoral circle and provide a helpful breadth for the see-judge-act model used in social ethics.²⁶² Osmer allows for two steps for the judgment process, beginning with general sources of wisdom for reflection on the event and moving to the more normative dimension of theology and scripture as tools of discernment. The normative perspective provides answers to what ought to be done, but not guidelines for how to move the “particular episodes, situations and contexts to desired ends. This is the pragmatic task of practical theological interpretation...”²⁶³ Osmer's attention to interpretation is a helpful addition.

	Henriot /Holland	Osmer	
See	Naming the context	The descriptive –empirical task	See
See	Social analysis	The interpretive task	See -Judge
Judge	Theological reflection	The normative task	Judge
Act	Pastoral strategy	The pragmatic task	Act

²⁶² Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).4. He calls this a model of practical theological interpretation. “. . .the basic structure of practical theological interpretation is common to all the specialized subdivisions of practical theology. Attention to the four tasks outlined above takes place in preaching, pastoral care, evangelism, spirituality, Christian education, and other ministerial practices.” (12).

²⁶³ *Ibid.*,173.

In Juan Luis Segundo's theological work in the context of the social justice struggle in Latin America, a hermeneutic process using social analysis is described. In his model the first movement is broken into two moments. Suspicion about reality comes first, and in an equally important next step one tries to interpret their reality. To begin with experience, or "insertion" into the situation, is a demonstration of, as Juan Segundo articulates, a liberation theologian's "suspicion that everything and anything involving ideas, including theology, is bound up with the existing social situation in at least an unconscious way."²⁶⁴ The hermeneutic circle seeks a new interpretation of the Bible in context. "The circular nature of these interpretations stems from the fact that each new reality obliges us to interpret the word of God afresh, to change reality accordingly and then to go back and reinterpret the word of God again, and so on."²⁶⁵ Segundo suggests a hermeneutic process where: 1. Our experience leads us to ideological suspicion; 2. There is the application of our ideological suspicion to the superstructure and to theology; 3. There comes a new experience of theological reality that leads us to exegetical suspicion, and; 4. This exegetical suspicion results in reinterpretation of reality and of tradition with new elements at our disposal.²⁶⁶

Segundo uses the methodology of social analysis and exegetical interpretation to do theology, which may be inclusive of but is not synonymous with ethics or strategizing or pedagogy. Osmer, and even more so Henriot and Holland, engage the circle of interpretation to strategize for lived response to circumstances. For the latter, a change in understanding of Scripture or theological presuppositions may occur, but it is not the primary objective. In developing my own model, I integrate the wisdom of each of these,

²⁶⁴ Segundo, "The Hermeneutic Circle."8.

²⁶⁵ Segundo, 8.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 9.

bringing forward the process demonstrated by each model's emphasis on integrating experience, reflection and praxis. First, we shall examine each movement of the circle in more detail.

Engaging in social analysis

In the rush to action, planning for pastoral action is often rooted in a thin description of a situation or event. In the pastoral circle social analysis begins the process of pastoral planning in order to penetrate the surface descriptions to identify the underlying causes. Understanding the socio-cultural context of a problem demands a degree of analysis that uncovers the fullness of historical, political, social and cultural dynamics in operation. Social analysis provides an historical and structural analysis to understand patterns and processes over time and in the greater context of the particular struggle or injustice.²⁶⁷

The process of social analysis, or “clarification of reality” as social ethicist Eldin Villafane calls it, has many layers.²⁶⁸ Social analysis allows for a systematic structural description of a particular social setting or problem. In social analysis, we explore four elements of society: a) the historical dimensions of a situation, b) the structural dimensions such as economic alliances; c) constructed divisions of society which factor into the issues such as race or geography; and d) the multiple levels of impact such as local, regional or international.²⁶⁹ What difference does such an examination make? For example, if a church community feels compelled to respond to the gun violence in the neighborhood they would begin the pastoral planning process with questions. They would engage in

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁶⁸ Or, simply the phrase “la realidad” in Eldin Villafane, *The Liberating Spirit: Toward an Hispanic American Social Ethic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

²⁶⁹ Henriot and Holland, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*. 21.

observation and some degree of research around the historical, political, cultural and social dynamics operating beneath the visible impact of guns. There are many questions to ask before drawing conclusions about the issue and moving to action planning. In social analysis we try to identify the range of actors and institutions involved to get as thorough a picture of the context (or cultural text) as possible. In this example, if our only analysis of the gun situation was based on conversation with the police gang unit we will have a limited perspective informing the potential pastoral action. Social analysis reminds us that there are always many contributing factors to the social dilemmas we face. Asking clarifying questions slows down the planning process and asks us to see reality as fully as possible.

At a practical level, the skill of social analysis should guide our examination of an event, situation or social context. In striving to create a complete picture, one asks questions about history, structures, and the key values reflected in such structures. We attend to the history “to perceive the deep background influences of the past on the present.”²⁷⁰ One might examine critical turning points related to this issue; these could range from the national stage to the very local personal history of a neighborhood or family. We look at the structures related to the event or issue at hand in order to recognize the institutions, processes and patterns which influence the situation.²⁷¹ In cultural analysis, values also play a role. When asking questions about the influences on a particular social situation, we investigate the ideologies and norms that have guided people to the present circumstance. Holland and Henriot suggest several sets of values

²⁷⁰ Ibid.,98

²⁷¹ Ibid.,98-99.

such as, unity/diversity, competition cooperation, justice/security, and materialism/spiritualism.²⁷²

Vanhoozer also describes a “multiperspectival” reading of culture: “to get light from various sources...must be prepared to move between history, economics psychology, sociology, film studies, architectural engineering, marketing and of course theology.”²⁷³ He emphasizes the need to not confuse social analysis with simply a political or economic critique, as was popular in the twentieth century social sciences. Developing a thick description of cultural texts is far more comprehensive. Osmer reminds us that in the initial movement of the circle, seeing reality, we focus on thick description of what is going on in the event, or a situation, and the context.²⁷⁴

After completing that “empirical” task we move to asking the why questions. These questions can be informed by theories from the arts and sciences to better discern patterns and structures that contribute to the situation. Practical theologians consider this first step akin to research, that is they engage in an empirical study through observing, listening, and gathering resources in order to be accurately informed before moving on to the interpretive steps which come next.

For example, a congregation puts in time and energy and resources planning a weekly meal for homeless people in their community. They know there are homeless people because they see them on their way to and from church. A committee gets volunteers organized, raises funds and launches the first dinner. After a few weeks with very low turnout the committee is puzzled and frustrated. Someone eventually takes

²⁷² Ibid.,100.

²⁷³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends, Cultural Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).45.

²⁷⁴ Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*.9-11.

initiative to ask questions in the community about services for the homeless already available; a significant issue is that people must be in line at the local shelters by five pm for a bed or they will not be able to get in for the evening. Once people have secured a bed they cannot leave again; the church dinners started at 5 pm. Strong pastoral planning will include the proper research. Feeding the hungry is a biblical mandate; however, there are many possible approaches to such a ministry.

Engaging in social analysis is not limited to the formal work of academics, nor to the domain of the religious leader alone; though it may need to be modeled. The pastoral circle has been developed and tested in a variety of new social and theological contexts since initially practiced in oppressive political settings in the 1970s-80s.²⁷⁵ From within the work of social justice activists and theologians we can learn how social analysis tends to be employed in the field. For example, in *The Pastoral Circle Revisited* the contributors remind us of significant gains and pitfalls over the twenty years since social analysis initially garnered so much attention.²⁷⁶ As activists and researchers, the authors present cases from a variety of global contexts each demonstrating a range of applications such as personal spirituality, community organizing and seminary classrooms.

Two interesting warnings emerge however. While the process of first examining root causes and then proceeding to theological reflection based on scripture and systematic theology is often valued, in practice the move is not easy. It is tempting to

²⁷⁵ For examples of how this method can be employed in social ethics see works such as Villafane, *The Liberating Spirit: Toward an Hispanic American Social Ethic*. He lays out the social location of Hispanic community and the religious identity of the Hispanic community then employs theological reflection on important themes in Hispanic Pentecostal theology relevant to social engagement then moves to praxis. It can also be seen in the interdisciplinary work of Catholic social ethics, such as work by David Hollenbach who uses sociological, economic, and historical sources to provide thick descriptions of the socio-political struggles that he engages with Catholic Social teaching and theology.

²⁷⁶ Frans Wijnsen, Peter Henriot, and Rodrigo Mejia, eds., *The Pastoral Circle Revisited: A Critical Quest for Truth and Transformation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005).

engage in deep social analysis with little theological integration and form an action plan based on social analysis alone, or to begin and end with a theological presupposition that is not tempered by a hard look at reality. In order to utilize this hermeneutical approach effectively we must pay as much attention to the process of theological reflection as to the skills borrowed from social science in analysis.

Another warning is that people often fail to separate social data from the theological reflection hermeneutically when they “shouldn’t be mixing value judgment during the social analysis.”²⁷⁷ Of course, this is a difficult line to draw; we will always bring theological presuppositions to our approach to a social situation, especially given the fact that one has already made a judgment by simply recognizing an injustice. While people can and should claim their theological starting point, it should be bracketed off to some degree in order to be faithful to the distinct processes of analysis and theological learning, remaining open to reinterpretation as part of the circle which comes after analysis. A related pitfall is that decision making operates out of theological assertions disconnected from the facts of the social analysis (e.g. pastoral planners draw a picture of peace generalized from the Christian vision not particular to the situation)²⁷⁸ even while claiming to be doing the work of analysis.

Social analysis for pastoral decision making should be only one movement in a holistic pastoral approach to understanding how to respond to social struggles; it is not the end result. An overemphasis on analysis can lead to indecision with never ending questioning and intellectual skepticism that places too much value in seeking only to understand the ideology present in the big picture. In order to balance this, paying

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 45

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 49.

attention to other forms of investigation, such as how the artistic and imaginative reflect social dynamics could also be of value.²⁷⁹ The movement toward reflection is also a way to ensure that the entire process is not overly dependent on critique. Christian social analysis will have important implications for social action and for interpretation of Scripture in light of the new cultural consciousness.

Making a judgment

Making a judgment, often through a process of theological reflection, is the next movement in the circle. Decision making for action ultimately flows from one's observations and analysis of a situation, along with interpretation of the scriptures/theology in light of that knowledge.²⁸⁰ This movement into the normative dimension of the process necessitates knowledge and some facility with the Christian tradition's resources.

Biblical/Theological reflection

When we discuss the significance of the theological reflection moment of the circle as both the key to interpreting the descriptions emerging from movement one and to discerning the discipleship response in the third movement, it is important to emphasize the normative quality of this step. It is the moment where, "The word of God

²⁷⁹ Consider the tongue in cheek but none-the less accurate phrase "analysis paralysis." The tone of many of the Martin Luther King Jr's sermons collected in *Strength to Love* demonstrate such caution, even for this great intellectual-spiritual- activist: "Desiring to justify himself and to show that Jesus' reply was far from conclusive, the lawyer asks, "And who is my neighbor?" The lawyer was now taking up the cudgels of debate that might have turned the conversation into an abstract theological discussion. But Jesus, determined not to be caught in the "paralysis of analysis," pulls the question from mid air and places it on a dangerous curve between Jerusalem and Jericho" (31). In the sermon, "Love in Action", King preached, "...only in the bringing together of head and heart, intelligence and goodness, shall man rise to a fulfillment of his true nature." Finally, in the "Trumpet of Conscience," he writes: "In this world non-violence is no longer an option for intellectual analysis; it is an imperative for action." Martin Luther King Jr, *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1981).

²⁸⁰ Thus, the link between faith and justice. Henriot and Holland, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*.92-93.

brought to bear upon the situation raises new questions, suggests new insights and opens new responses.”²⁸¹ The interpretive work, or normative task, of biblical reflection is one of examining the experience and/ or cultural context in light of biblical themes. It may also be a moment when scripture itself could be newly illumined and brought to life by this process whereby, as someone understands reality more clearly, they hear a particular passage in a new way.

For example, if a group were exploring immigration issues in their community and turned to Christian scriptures for wisdom they would find many passages reflecting God’s instructions about treatment of the alien and images of God’s character as a refuge and oasis for the weary. If the scripture is read in a group of people who have recently had a relocation experience they will hear things that a non-immigrant person may not hear. The scripture is brought to life in a new way for the inexperienced because they hear it in the context of a real life event; for the one who needs comfort they hear what God expects from God’s people regarding care for the powerless. So both life and scripture are illumined as one engages in the normative moment of planning for pastoral action.

In *Everyday Theology*, the interaction of biblical reflection and lived experience is described this way: “As we read these [cultural] texts and trends through the lens of redemptive history, we realize that we are a part of God’s ongoing mission and salvation. We, too, demonstrate both the goodness of creation and the corruption of the fall. Because we ourselves are part of the story of God’s work in history, so too are all the texts and trends we make. Thus, redemptive history offers a truer way to understand the

²⁸¹ Ibid.,9.

world.”²⁸² Then the next logical step, “having read the [cultural] text theologically,” is to live out the response.²⁸³

Osmer calls the normative task, “prophetic discernment,” which engages the social reality in light of theology and ethics.²⁸⁴ The move to normative applications comes after we come to understand the cultural text on its own terms; then we are ready to call to mind the biblical reality. Osmer identifies three parts to the judgment process: a) “the use of theological concepts to interpret the episodes,” b) the use of ethical norms to guide and interpret practice; and c) the discussion of “best practices” related to the field from the larger community of leaders.²⁸⁵ The biblical-theological interpretation is rooted in a belief that the Christian story of redemption history is the larger context within which all cultural texts exist or occur.²⁸⁶ In using the pastoral circle participants will have a given theological lens, perhaps shalom, or hospitality, or holiness; while we may come to see a weakness in our current theological presuppositions, one will none the less begin the search for how the word of God may speak to the particular circumstance within some prior theological framework. When doing the work of social analysis and ethical decision making integrated with biblical wisdom, we will chose reference points from which we begin the interpretive work. In the case of this dissertation, I began my

²⁸² Charles A. Anderson and Michael J. Sleasman, "Putting It into Practice," in *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 242. See also Brueggeman offers an important challenge to how the biblical text can influence discipleship. He cautions that we have “lost the text, in a measure, because we have become self sufficient and affluent and we need no longer to be reminded of the powers that float around in our bodies and in the body politic”(6). He also warns against the practice of reflection that creates overindulgence in experience instead of allowing the text to have any meaning apart from one’s own small and personalized appropriation of it. Brueggeman calls for a recovery the power of the biblical text in ways that “move past fascination with our own experience; move past packaged certitudes familiar to us, and risk unlearning much of what we have known too long”(6-7).

²⁸³ Ibid., 242.

²⁸⁴ Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, 131.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 131-132.

²⁸⁶ Anderson and Sleasman, "Putting It into Practice," 240.

theological reflection on consumer culture with a theological/pastoral lens of discipleship. This requires study of the tradition and scripture, that the reflection or application of biblical wisdom is thorough and honors the text before moving to interpretation of the experience. So, to do this judgment piece as a process of Christian discernment the practitioner will practice in-depth biblical study in order to move forward in the hermeneutic circle.

The role of theological reflection

The normative moment in the circle is not static. Given the other dynamic of this interpretive movement, “reflection,” what resources are available to facilitate the work of interpretive reflection? The practical theology tool “theological reflection” provides an excellent framework for deepening the “judge” aspect of the basic see/judge/act cycle of the pastoral circle. Proponents of theological reflection as a spiritual practice insist that adult maturity includes an increase in self-awareness and the growing capacity to discern one’s own assumptions. Christian maturity also includes a dimension of critical capacity and discernment. Theological reflection practices can empower people to understand the cultural framework and how the Christian story assists people to interpret it.

In *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Killen and DeBeer claim that theological reflection “disposes us to being transformed ... to being instruments of the kingdom. It impels us to increased knowledge, greater consciousness and critical sensibilities in relation to the self, family, community and tradition.”²⁸⁷ Theological reflection is primarily a tool for individual growth and transformation through the thoughtful integration of life experience and the Christian tradition. It can help adults to think

²⁸⁷ Patricia O’Connell Killen and John DeBeer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 2003).144.

theologically. Theological reflection as a distinct spiritual discipline includes a range of practices and goals. Most generally, theological reflection begins with the lived experience of those doing reflection, correlates experience with sources of Christian tradition, and draws out the practical implications. Killen and DeBeer also recognize that when people share reflections on experience the core assumptions may be still be disguised which will block transformation that leads to new praxis: “habitual meaning-making processes move naturally in the direction of fitting events into our present interpretive framework.”²⁸⁸ So, Christians must become skillful at honestly describing and reflecting on their experiences.

There are distinct approaches to theological reflection, according to Robert Kinast, which are classified by the type of experience accessed, its correlation with the religious tradition, and the emerging practice they envision.²⁸⁹ The differences manifest in particular styles, such as what Kinast calls, the ministerial style, the inculturation style, and the spiritual wisdom style.

The ministerial style is associated with authors such as Richard Osmer and James and Evelyn Whitehead. The Whiteheads have written extensively about pastoral planning and the role of the minister in the education ministry of the church. Their description of the role of reflection in ministry emphasizes that although self-awareness is important such insight is not enough. Maturing through the art of theological reflection includes learning to contribute to the common good and to challenge the common culture when necessary.²⁹⁰ Whiteheads’ work describes the movement from insight to pastoral

²⁸⁸ Ibid.,127.

²⁸⁹ Robert L. Kinast, *What Are They Saying About Theological Reflection?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000). 5.

²⁹⁰ Whitehead and Whitehead, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*.62.

response as an example of using theological reflection and cultural analysis in an integrated way. Their purpose is primarily for ministers addressing pastoral problem solving or planning for action at a congregational level. A weakness of the ministerial model of theological reflection is that someone would need to teach the congregation to think theologically in the ways that the Whiteheads presume for their model to function effectively.

The inculturation style draws on the larger experiences of culture and social systems. In this approach to theological reflection, people learn to understand their cultural framework and how the Christian story assists people to interpret it. An inculturation model can be critical of and constructive in regards to cultural expressions of the gospel. It is commonly associated with mission and used to develop approaches to contextualizing evangelism practices or how to enculturate liturgy, for example. Reflection-praxis in this style would include the movement toward more culturally appropriate development of Christian identity through intercultural hermeneutics.²⁹¹ As Kinast describes, local theology begins with a careful listening to the culture in order to discover the Christ who is already active there. For example the experience of the hyphenated and marginalized existence felt by many Hispanic/Latino, African- American and Asian American communities has led to a deeper identification with Jesus as a ‘marginal Jew’.²⁹²

²⁹¹ Kinast, 49-51. Another helpful resource is Rob Schreier, who asks questions about how the church understands itself in the contemporary world context and what cultural forms the good news takes in the hybridized global arena. See Robert J. Schreier, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 43.

The *spiritual wisdom style* of theological reflection insists that Christian maturity includes an increase in self-awareness and the growing capacity to discern one's own assumptions as part of the development of personal or communal spiritual practices. The spiritual wisdom style is generally used to engage the full range of life experience with a view toward spiritual formation. It is designed to help individuals connect faith and daily life by drawing wisdom out of one's own context.²⁹³ The engagement with tradition is interactive and the correlation implies of synthesis of tradition with new needs and insights. These practitioners, such as spiritual directors, trust the process to bring people to deeper faith and more faithful praxis in the world.²⁹⁴

In the spiritual formation approach the process of theological reflection is used for making meaning of personal issues, experiences, and problems raised by the social environment in light of God's work in the world. Killen and DeBeer call the work of self-awareness the "movement toward insight." The aim is to provide a foundation on which to build a basic framework for understanding how theological meaning is made, particularly for connecting lives to the religious texts.²⁹⁵

I find in each of these styles of theological reflection very promising tools for cultivating Christian consciousness of one's relationship to dominant culture. People can learn to be students of the scriptures as well as of the revelatory quality of human experiences.²⁹⁶ Adults may presume that engaging in the normative dimension of

²⁹³ Killen and DeBeer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 15 and see also their discussion on p 25.

²⁹⁴ Kinast, 26.

²⁹⁵ Killen and DeBeer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*.145.

²⁹⁶ Patricia Killen, "Teaching Adults to Think Theologically," in *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, ed. James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1995).103.

problem solving or pastoral planning is simply applying theological rules to life.²⁹⁷ However, theological reflection practices teach us that it can instead be a conversation between experience, social context, scripture, traditional wisdom, and the community of faith. Patricia Killen, for example, asserts that our capacity to live Christian faith correlates with our capacity to discover the revelatory quality of our human experience.²⁹⁸ Her approach to ministry then is to help adults think theologically, critically engaging the resources of the Christian story and their experiences. Killen and DeBeer in their orientation of spiritual wisdom style do provide a sample case of reflection on culture, or social analysis, with the explicit purpose “to create a reflective context within which the people can relate some part of their cultural experience to the wisdom of the Christian heritage.”²⁹⁹

Adding such breadth to the normative moment in the pastoral circle is important; when we say that we are engaging in theological reflection on a given social reality we need to know specifically what that means. Whether used deliberately for interpreting cultural assumptions or for broader objectives of spiritual formation guided reflection is significant in the hermeneutical process of the pastoral circle: “Reflection is the art of deliberately slowing down our habitual processes of interpreting our lives to take a closer look at the experience and at our frameworks for interpretation.”³⁰⁰ In the model for a reflection group they use a series of questions and promote considerations of diverse sources for reflection: a) name their initial orientation toward the issue; b) see the

²⁹⁷ Ibid.,104.

²⁹⁸ Killen, Patricia in *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*. Revised Ed. (Whitehead, Evelyn & James D Whitehead.. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward. 1995)

²⁹⁹ Killen and DeBeer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*.118.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.,x.

culture's messages gleaned from a variety of sources; and c) identify perspectives from the Christian heritage and Scriptures on the issue.³⁰¹

So, with purposeful facilitation theological reflection can not only lead someone into deeper intimacy with God, but also to self-awareness of one's place in culture with implications for activity with God in the world. However, such a concept does not demand any particular change in attitudes or assumptions, which is a weakness recognized by the authors as a limit of the reflective process. There is a possibility of people not moving forward into a new place after the reflection process occurs, though the ministerial model is overtly oriented toward decision making. The practical models given by Killen and DeBeer do include one that begins with a general social concern as the theme and move through a series of analytic questions about it. They recognize that "the Christian way itself is not primarily a matter of increased knowledge or understanding," but of how we live out the knowledge of God's love in the world.³⁰² An important contribution is that theological reflection balances out the implicit risks of the highly cognitive epistemology of the pastoral circle. That is, the normative/interpretive moment can include the imaginative and the affective and be deliberately unhurried and prayerful as one pause before following the impulse to action based on analysis. Killen asserts that "deliberate and self-conscious theological reflection builds on the ordinary ways that we come to meaning" and thus the "capacity for finding meaning in our lives" increases.³⁰³

³⁰¹ Ibid., 101-105.

³⁰² Killen and DeBeer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*.43.

³⁰³ Ibid.,145.

Pastoral action

The final moment in Henriot and Holland's model is praxis. "Since the purpose of the pastoral circle is decision and action, the fourth moment in the circle is crucial: pastoral planning. In the light of experiences analyzed and reflected upon what response is called for by individuals and communities?"³⁰⁴ Stepping out in practices of faith reflects a new way of being but also leads to reflection and deeper analysis of the event.

Christian cultural agency is the culmination of cultural hermeneutics. It comes after we have given thick description of the work on all levels, including evaluation in light of Christian wisdom. Upon that interpretation it builds a response with our lives. And so we come full circle, from being passively influenced by culture, to agents who competently read cultural texts and interpret trends in order to change ourselves and the world for the glory of God.³⁰⁵

This moment, or task, in the pastoral circle has been termed praxis, action, pastoral strategy, the pragmatic task, or as above, the moment of cultural agency. The context of the application of the pastoral circle will dictate the approach to this third moment. For Holland and Henriot, who have developed a model of cultivating pastoral response to social injustices, the last moment is one of coming to a response or strategy to address a particular expression of injustice. Those who do this work in community organizing, economic development and social service may envision the action moment in this way, not necessarily as an individual's new personal practice, but as a plan for pastoral leadership to move people toward a common goal.

Richard Osmer offers a similar leadership based approach to his use of the hermeneutic circle in that this work of seeing context holistically and providing normative interpretation leads to pastoral problem solving; he calls this the pragmatic

³⁰⁴Henriot and Holland, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*.9.

³⁰⁵ Anderson and Sleasman, "Putting It into Practice."244

task of servant leadership.³⁰⁶ His theology of servant leadership is applied to the process of effective planning or problem solving in ministerial settings, which may be systemic or applied to individuals in a congregation, but the action plan is one for the leadership to enact alongside or on behalf of others.

“Praxis” is a favored term because it encompasses the connection between theory and practice as a process of reflection and action. Made popular by liberation theologians, praxis has the connotation of encountering God in the everyday experiences of Christian community; distinct from practices, it is an embodiment of the kingdom in lived reality.³⁰⁷ In the examples from practitioners of theological reflection, which call for both movement toward insight and new practices, praxis is how individuals work out their faith in daily life. This may include arriving at new spiritual practices, or other practical lifestyle choices rooted in seeing reality more clearly and practices that engage larger social structures in the process of working for social justice and acts of mercy. There is no one way to generalize what the moment of “action” might encompass for those who embrace the pastoral circle methodology.

Coming back to the language of the Henriot and Holland’s pastoral circle, “response” is an adequate name for what happens at this moment in the circle. It is broad enough to encompass both communal social action and personal steps toward change. A

³⁰⁶ Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. 192-199. Osmer also talks about the role of the congregation in social transformation (199-207); while his model primarily explores the role of the pastoral in leader congregational change to become Christ’s missional people, he does apply the model further to the church reaching into the larger society.

³⁰⁷ For example, how it is used in Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells*. The *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* puts it this way: “The defining characteristic of liberation theology is that it is a lived praxis in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. It is defined as theology, and not simply as an ethical or pragmatic stance, in that the key question concerns the living of a specifically *Christian* life, and the story of the Bible is brought into dialogue with the story of life, the story of the world.” Bennett, Zoë. “‘Action is the life of all’: the praxis-based epistemology of liberation theology.” *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology: Second Edition*. Ed. Christopher Rowland. Cambridge University Press, 2007. Cambridge Collections Online. Cambridge University Press. Accessed 04 October 2010.

“response” is also multi-dimensional in that it infers a cognitive engagement as well as an embodied one. For my own model, this breadth is important. I encourage both a change of vision/thinking, as well as appropriate action as one wrestles with seeing culture through the lens of theology and reading theology with cultural awareness. I need a methodology that addresses enculturation; specifically the problem of dependence on a “borrowed interpretive lens,”³⁰⁸ thus the approach to Christian education that I develop in the next chapter reflects transformational possibilities of using Henriot and Holland’s work today.

In summary, the insights from the movements of the pastoral circle which I bring forward into my approach to education for resistance to consumer culture are:

- Identify the present conflict or pressing issue;
- Analyze the immediate social context and larger contributing factors;
- Identify relevant theological themes and texts for study;
- Engage in theological reflection on the cultural text or artifact as well as the biblical text; and,
- Respond with faith in action such that reflective practices are built into the activism and deeper theological and social analyses emerge.

Neither the pastoral circle, nor the literature in theological reflection is explicitly pedagogical, though they are certainly practical. In order to apply these methodologies to the work of Christian leaders forming congregations for faithful discipleship we need to craft a teaching and learning process rooted in these assumptions about Christian praxis.

³⁰⁸ Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion*.25.

Pedagogy and the Pastoral Circle

Learning to engage in theological reflection on culture for the sake of the kingdom while people navigate the development of their values and practices is a key task for Christian formation. While this is not the only purpose of Christian formation, if neglected, our discipleship may not be fully engaged with the contextual reality of God's reign. I now introduce a significant resource from the field of religious education, Thomas Groome's Shared Praxis Approach, which shares elements of the pastoral circle and transformative learning.³⁰⁹ While not primarily intended as an approach to pastoral planning for social action, I will compare the mechanisms, values and aims of shared praxis as an example of applying the pastoral circle pedagogically.

Shared Praxis Approach

Groome has developed a pedagogy that is intended to help people integrate faith and life in a dialectical movement between human experience and the "Christian vision and story."³¹⁰ Based philosophically in Heidegger and Gadamer's theories of critical conversation and rooted pedagogically in Paolo Freire's conscientization model, Shared Christian praxis is not a method, per se, but a paradigm for religious education. First, the terminology is important. "Shared" is significant because this is a learning process dependent on group interaction. "Praxis" for Groome refers to "purposeful human activity in dialectal unity of both theory and practice, critical reflection, and historical

³⁰⁹ This is based philosophically in Heidegger and Gadamer's theories of critical conversation as well as rooted pedagogically in Paolo Friere's conscientization model. While also deeply influenced by Gutierrez' liberation themes social analysis is not a dominant thread of this work in practice.

³¹⁰ Groome uses the term "Christian story and vision" as comprehensive—the traditions of historical Christianity, Scripture, with the demands and the hopes it holds for the people who attempt to follow it, e.g. see p 448. Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith; a Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

engagement.”³¹¹ While he does not explicitly name the pastoral circle in his work, we hear an echo in the language and orientation of his approach: “... shared Christian praxis invites people to hermeneutics that are critical in a dialectical sense of their own and of their society’s praxis. As participants attend to present praxis and reflect on it with

Pastoral Circle	Movement	Shared Praxis Approach
1.Naming the context/lived experience	SEE	1a.Focusing Activity
2.Social analysis		1b.Expression of one’s consciousness of present praxis or context
3.Theological reflection	JUDGE	2.Critical reflection on present action
4.Pastoral planning for decision/action	ACT	3.Making accessible the Christian Story and Vision
		4.Dialectical hermeneutics to appropriate Christian story to participants story
		5.Decision/response for lived faith

critical reason, analytical memory, and creative imagination, they may affirm aspects of it, question or reject aspects, and discover ways in which their interpretations invite them beyond present praxis.”³¹²

The teaching and learning process is structured by five “movements” through which people reflect on their present practices in light of the Christian Tradition for the

³¹¹ Sharing Faith 136.

³¹² Ibid.,145.

sake of lived faith. These movements are: 1a). a focusing activity to stimulate openness to the generative theme/topic; 1b). naming and giving expression to one's present experience with the given topic/theme without judgment; 2). critical reflection on present experience of the theme or of the larger social context related to the educational topic; 3). facilitator presents "Christian Story and Vision" concerning the topic at hand; 4). dialectic between their own story, each other's stories and the Christian Story in order to appropriate the topic into their own lives; 5. decision regarding personal faith response and future praxis.³¹³

In the chart above, I illustrate the similarities between these two approaches to integrating life and faith. Both models move from naming present experiences toward a response that stems from reflection on God's wisdom for the situation. A few distinctions arise that call for more description. The moment of observation and naming reality occur at the beginning of the process when participants engage the topic by naming their experience of or prior knowledge regarding the theme. Because this is a pedagogical approach we note that this is a facilitated experience that involves, as Groome would say, one coming to see things for him/herself. So, a focusing activity should engage and guide people into the topic and then they proceed to give expression (through any medium) to their experience. I have demarcated the connection between judge and Movement One with a dotted line because for some people the expression of experience will be pre-reflective, that is, there is no interpretation. However, for other participants expression always involves a level of analytical thinking. The facilitated move to critical reflection

³¹³ First introduced in Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981). Also explained in Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*. See pages 283-293 for a detailed summary of how an educator could work through each of these movements for a particular theme or question.

comes in Movement Two, where a facilitator could employ social analysis in an exploration of causes and contexts; or the critical reflection could take a more contemplative form, the methods for critically exploring the topic at hand are not laid out explicitly. There is also judgment/interpretation happening in Movement Four when the hermeneutical dynamic between the Christian texts and experience occurs. The normative movement, making accessible the Story, may involve judgment on the part of the facilitator, and but it is a distinct learning moment from Movement Four where elements of the story are appropriated. The moment of action, or praxis, is Movement Five of Groome's SPA and is vitally important. Reflection should yield a decision. Finally, as with the pastoral circle, this process does not have to be linear, there may be recurring movement between steps, or it may be most appropriate to start somewhere other than with movement one. Groome also emphasizes the return to reflection following decision and action.

Dialogue in community

Groome's shared praxis approach has many elements that overlap with the pastoral circle. An important methodological addition is the key element of learning in dialogue with others.³¹⁴ Groome's approach emphasizes "partnership and participation"—important values for dialogue and inherent in community building.³¹⁵ The shared praxis approach is not an exchange of information between a student and teacher but an "inclusive community of partnership."³¹⁶ It is a process of mutual exchange of reflections, questions, analysis, insights and story sharing. The emphasis on learning

³¹⁴ In Groome's early foundational work he favors dialogue and dialogical, later he interchanges the term with conversation.

³¹⁵ Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 444.

through conversation values not only the pedagogical richness of creating environments for healthy dialogue but also reveals the importance of community. Educating for faith will include coaching people to think in a way that uses their own stories and the Christian story to bring them deeper into following Jesus' way in the world. In the context of a learning community, people are "participants...invited to recognize and critique their own and society's present praxis, and then to make decisions." In this way, Groome explains, "...through the community they have explicit opportunities for renewed praxis"³¹⁷ is a shift from "delivering" information to "making accessible" and then inviting action.³¹⁸

Such conversations are not limited to formal learning environments. The principles of shared praxis can be seen in the setting of many of the ministries of the church wherever people work together, not confined to traditional educational settings. Groome's *Sharing Faith* includes a number of examples of this approach being applied throughout the ministries of the church, including pastoral counseling and the development of the liturgy. Groome's approach encourages the formation of the "character of people for ongoing conversion,"³¹⁹ which is beyond the purview of any singular dimension of church life.

Implications

The role of the Christian educator as one who is part of the mission to form disciples must pay attention to how to maximize people's capacity to live out of the

³¹⁷ Ibid., 270.

³¹⁸ Ibid.,290-291

³¹⁹Ibid.,440. Groome's primary theological lens is "the reign of God" (See Chpt 3 in *Christian Religious Education: Sharing our Story and Vision*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980). He explains that to accept the demands of the membership into God's Kingdom as preached by Jesus means a constant call to continuing conversion and repentance.

values of the kingdom as naturally as the cultural values into which they are born. The pastoral circle as a method for approaching our engagement with social issues should be enfolded into the life of a church so it becomes the habit of a disciple in a complex social environment that demands discernment. As Vincent Miller's work on consumer culture reminds us, faith communities have many theological resources and spiritual practices born out of the unique Christian narrative to empower us to engage in resistance to the impacts of the consumerism of the dominant culture. Education in the church then needs to strengthen people's mastery of the biblical "counter narrative" as well as their ability to see the cultural reality, including the consumerist narrative that shapes our everyday lives.

In so far as effective Christian education practices can promote learning that uncovers and challenges assumptions about culture, identity, and meaning-making, the hermeneutical circle is a significant method to employ. It takes seriously both social analysis and theological reflection with a commitment to the church's transformational activity in the world. A combination of the pastoral circle with the shared praxis approach will include social analysis which grows out of recognizing one's participation in social systems and cultural dynamics, integrating the normative dimensions of faith with everyday experience, learning through conversation and relationships and community, and finally coming to a decision or active response to the situation in light of God's grace.

What I propose is an interdisciplinary approach that insists we use analytic tools and data to understand our world in the hope of not conforming to the aspects of the culture that contradict the call of the disciple. But analysis is not enough; we also must

facilitate people's search for God's wisdom in their experiences and in the Christian tradition so that people come to a deep sense of following Christ in daily life. Henriot and Holland, "urge that analysis be pursued in a framework of prayer, for ultimately it is the Spirit of the Servant Jesus who reveals to us the signs of the times."³²⁰

I conclude with applications of the principles foundational to employing the hermeneutical circle for congregational pedagogy. First, the educational process of Christian formation should *invite activities and conversations that help people see and describe the cultural context of their experiences and daily choices more clearly*. Critical thinking begins with asking good questions; this means developing a habit of learning to see reality clearly. Such a skill needs modeling and coaching, and leaders will need to structure opportunity for this deeper probing. People should be taught in a way that involves coming to see biblical truths for themselves; appropriating the claims in a deep way so that it leads to further clarity of seeing, acting, and future reflection on the Christian story. We want to avoid some of the inherent pitfalls of the relationship between normative ethics and hermeneutics, allowing for interpreting scripture and using scripture to interpret an experience

Expanding the popular understanding of Christian education as synonymous with Sunday school to one integrated across the life of the congregation is important. Thus, a second implication of educating for social action by implementing a hermeneutical approach is that it is a way of learning that, as Groome illustrates with his work, can be *integrated throughout the many functions of church*. For example, in the preaching ministry of the church the pastor can model, encourage, lead, and teach for a critical understanding of the relationship between faith and culture. The strengths and struggles

³²⁰ Henriot and Holland,94.

of the local community can provide much of the content of the preaching material for illustrations and application of the biblical message. Also, existing social service ministries should include time for critical conversations, research and teaching about the underlying issues that create the social problems that are being addressed. There needs to be time for reflection on the relationships between the actors involved and the activities that are part of ministry, as well. This way, we engage in activity in the kingdom reflexively as an expression of love but also reflectively as a part of our ongoing conversion toward a kingdom worldview.

Third, it is important when employing a hermeneutical method such as the shared praxis approach that a variety of experiences to *strengthen people's knowledge of scripture and theology* is employed. Our theological reflection on social analysis is only as deep as our literacy in the tradition. When people learn or practice reflection exercises together there is an added benefit of expanded depth of knowledge because the members will usually be at varying levels of maturity and biblical literacy and thus will learn collaboratively resulting in a more accurate and thoughtful social construction of interpretation analysis and reflection.

Finally, the method must *create communities for conversation and shared practice*. Christian formation is inherently a socializing process. If critical capacity is to become a natural part of people's adult faith development, then attention to building those skills in community must be part of the educational process. "There is no instant coffee version of social analysis. It requires deepening oneself in the experience of injustice, in the theological resources, and in the disciplines of social science. To be most effective it should engage whole communities, people working together rather than

isolated individuals.”³²¹ An orientation toward communal analysis and reflection will develop and reinforce a more lasting habit of mind and action in people’s lives. Furthermore, Biblical discipleship is a group process that includes becoming an alternative community which gives us partners for our transformation and the transformation of societies. Shared Praxis approach, which potentially engages the learner’s whole life, reminds us that changing orientation toward culture is not merely a cognitive shift but something we want to penetrate all of our way of being. Conversation and community will be significant in that process. The next chapter draws out the communal implications in more depth.

Conclusions

The pastoral circle takes seriously both social analysis and theological reflection with a commitment to the church’s transformational activity in the world. Christian discipleship can be strengthened by incorporating critical conversation with dominant culture into regular faith formation practices. Due to the formational nature of the consumer culture we need to promote learning that uncovers the challenges and assumptions about culture, identity, and basic meaning-making capacity. Through the transformation of assumptions and self-awareness fostered by theological reflection we may foster the emergence of discipleship, which is more faithful to the polity of Jesus than to national cultural symbols, systems, and institutions.³²²

³²¹ Henriot and Holland, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*.94.

³²² I should clarify that in developing a critical lens as Christians discerning culture’s message I do not seek a posture of aggressive judgment that would cultivate antagonism between church and “world.” The hope is to foster self-reflection and become disembedded enough to cultivate practices of resistance when necessary. The process of deepening spirituality through discerning God’s work is also an invitation into the world, not away from it. So a culture can be both “cherished” as containing the symbols of people’s deepest values as well as rejected when it transmits human sinfulness in its structures and practices.

With the need for this kind of awareness established, Chapter Five addresses what might it actually look like in a congregational setting to develop habits of analysis, reflection, and action. A church as a learning community can engage in transformative theological reflection for growing in faith, beyond an inherited world view toward an intentionally integrated view of self and neighbor in light of the Christian message in one's distinct social location.

Transformative theological reflection should engender discernment and the capacity for holding this level of tension. Thus, our theological reflection practices, which are designed to bring insight and capacity for new praxis, need to be introduced in a nurturing and respectful environment.

Chapter 5

Transforming Communities: From Consumption to Cultivating Contribution

“Why spend your money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, And your soul will delight in the richest of fare.” Isaiah 55:2

The prophet Isaiah invites the people of God to feed their souls with “what is good.” Could there be something that brings more satisfaction than the fruits of one’s labor, or spending on things that are not necessities? Thousands of years later, across cultures and continents the people of God are still challenged to consider what brings the soul delight; to trust whether or not satisfying deepest hungers will come from right relationship with God and neighbors or with a continuous diet of things and people that make us feel good about ourselves. I do not foresee deep lasting change in the area of engaging with consumer culture unless faith communities are willing to explore change at the level of attachment and desire.

Toward transformation

In North America overconsumption of the world’s resources is fueled by insatiable desire; in the context of globalization that means inequalities are exacerbated, as our actions affect our neighbors around the world. A robust theology of care for neighbor includes consuming only a fair share of the earth’s resources and using purchasing powers justly. In her helpful discussion of the relationship of Christian practices and expressed beliefs, theologian Amy Pauw makes an important observation rooted in virtue

ethics: at the heart of inconsistency between religious belief and everyday practice is human will. “[T]he link between belief and practice is forged by human desire and attitude. Both our cognitive and practical efforts arise out of our love.”³²³ People must become very honest about who and what they love most deeply.

It is very important to pay attention to cultivating a posture of desire and worship in distinctly Christian forms as the content of desire in consumer culture is so close to that of the church. Vincent Miller, as discussed in the first chapter has an excellent analysis of the subtle distinction between formation of desire through consumer structures and in the Christian tradition. “Consumer culture poses a particularly vexing problem for Christianity because the shape and texture of the desires it cultivates are profoundly similar to Christian forms of desire.”³²⁴ We must begin to understand how desire “functions in social structures and cultural habits that threaten to reorient legitimate religious desires into the service of furthering consumption.”³²⁵

What is the nature of such reorientation? Picture a metaphoric revival tent gathering: we can hear a church community celebrating people converting from brand loyalties to Jesus loyalty. Picture a declaration of transformation: “I no longer shop when I am depressed, my life in Christian community is so rich I don’t need new things to make me feel better.” Or, “My conversion means that I no longer feel most comfortable about myself because of the name brands I wear out on a Saturday night, now I know I am

³²³ Amy Platina Pauw, "Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices," in *Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, ed. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2001).45. The Bass and Volf volume has shaped my thinking in the area of the relationship between theological belief and everyday practice.

³²⁴ Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 107.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 109. Miller is very interested in this co-opting of religious meanings and longings, he doesn’t address such loss as simple contradictions of ideology. So, resistance must be built out of these very aspects of the tradition that are being derailed, e.g. longing for justice, desire for fulfillment.

deeply valuable regardless of the logos I display.” Or, perhaps like the biblical figure Zaccheus, the well known businessman who had been taking advantage of the poor and getting wealthy off of corruption then has a transformative experience when Jesus calls him, someone may in her renewed self display remorse and fresh, exuberant generosity.

The Consuming Church

Transformation is called for not only at the level of individual faithfulness. Consumer culture also sets the parameters for much of congregational life. People often consume religions the way they do other goods and services, choosing faith from a marketplace of beliefs and practices and trying it on. Participation, engagement, investment in other people, and deep commitment are needed for lasting, effective discipleship communities. Following the way of Christ needs to be understood not as one more add-on to identity, but as a true transformation of self and entrance to life in a new community.

Examples of how consumer culture is reflected in church communities abound. In many contemporary Protestant church services people sit in pews or arena seating and seemingly watch an event; judging for style and quality of presentation. Church budgets may reflect more about self preservation than generosity and mission. The ease of purchasing programs, curricula, and the pre-packaged replication of ideas, and even techniques can keep communities from being contextually relevant and responsive. Leaders are service providers and members consume the product. The nature of relationship of faith sharing between young and old or experienced and new initiates should be much more dynamic and creative than that model provides.

In so far as consumerism in the church and larger society has been stunting growth into deeper life in Christ and further outreach in the shared mission of compassion and justice, our contemporary faith communities need the tools to grow in transformative discipleship that addresses these challenges. My proposal for this dissertation is not a particular curriculum about consumerism but *an approach to cultivating awareness of one's cultural formation* that leads to change as people are willing to have such assumptions transformed in the context of participating in alternative cultural community.

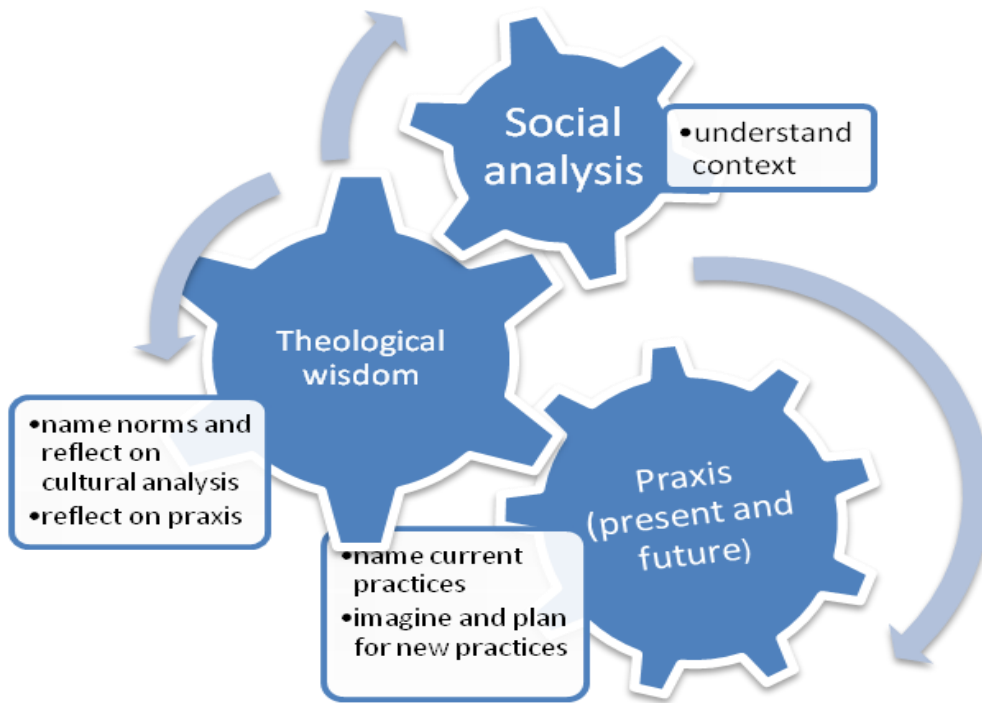
As discussed earlier, transformative moments often come at personal crossroads or times of disorientation. In the context of the challenges of consumer culture, what might this look like? Possible moments for transformation from the consumer mindset could be a personal economic crisis. This would demand new practices but not necessarily new beliefs. As illustrated in the first chapter the current economic recession did precipitate new thrift and savings, but what of reflection on the habits and presumptions that led to the behaviors, or imagining new way of being together with others, or bringing God's promises and precepts to the matter? These reflective practices call for facilitation in a pastoral context. Christian communities can provide an alternative space for the cultivation of desires such that consumer culture does not provide all the answers. An important step toward this is to educate for awareness of the cultural environment to make the basic dynamics of the consumer culture explicit, then people can begin to negotiate in community the comparison of the cultural narrative about identity with the Christian story of a life of discipleship which includes a life of social justice.

Becoming aware of the impact of culture on one's meaning-making, beliefs, desires and practices within an alternative formational community can create an opening for new sensibilities to develop. Information is not enough to change people: for example, being told we use too much water, or generate too much trash is not enough. Knowledge may inspire some people to explore an issue further but may not compel one into a lifestyle change. Telling someone how they over consume may provoke a reaction but probably not change. Christian formation is a process of ongoing conversion into discipleship: a transformation from self-centered thinking, feeling and doing to Christ centered thinking, feeling and doing. This transformation will affect not only personal spiritual vitality but will also be evidenced in how one relates to their neighbors and the created order. It is an individual process and yet will occur most powerfully and effectively in community with others who are committed to the same journey.

The Pastoral Circle Re-imagined

There must be interplay among information, reflection, examining prior experiences and contexts, and an invitation to new experience. The approach I propose invites such multidimensional learning. Drawing together the core elements of Henriot and Holland, Groome's shared Christian praxis approach to Christian education and insights from transformative learning, I propose a model of the pastoral circle applied to Christian formation.

The approach is expressed visually here through *interlocking gears of learning*:



In the context of a church or intentional Christian community, through preaching, study, missional action and prayer the movements of this transformational learning process have three primary elements, named on the gears seen in the drawing here.³²⁶

The gears represent moments in the learning experience of a community. A.) Theological wisdom is the area of congregational learning that attends to the normative element of the life of the community. Biblical and theological teaching, reflection, interpretation and analysis will go on in a strong discipleship community. In the context of the development of theological wisdom the community asks questions about what they

³²⁶ These three elements are also the primary elements of Henriot and Holland's pastoral circle.

have gleaned in social analysis, and/or about their current praxis. Reflection, knowledge and understanding should lead to decision and planning for living as disciples. This is a dynamic element, the gears are always turning; a learner will be bringing their life and context to the tradition and also be hearing from the wisdom of God how to engage their world more and more intentionally. B.) Social analysis is the element of uncovering the conscious and unconscious socio-cultural dynamics as play in one's attitudes and assumptions about the issue at hand. This is the element of congregational learning that pays attention to context, both as the formative environment and the social context within which the disciple community lives and serves. C.) The third element is praxis. People will be led to identify and articulate relevant practices related to the pressing questions the learning community is engaged in. They also will be imagining and planning future action and involvement. This is also the moment for engaging in action.

In the visual model above the interlocking gears help to illustrate the following core values that fuel the process:

- The process of transformation can begin at any of the three moments: questioning and/or disrupting the status quo through an experience (praxis); questioning and/or disrupting of the status quo through struggling with a theological or biblical concept (theological wisdom); questioning and/or disrupting of the status quo informed by social sciences/critical sources.
- The normative/theological moment is multidimensional. Reflection is not a strong enough word for the work that needs to be done to ground the learning in biblical/theological norms. There will be questioning, interpreting insights, and

searching the tradition. Strong theological reflection calls for a depth of theological resourcing, which should be a parallel process in adult formation.

- The interlocking gears show the interdependence of the moments in a hermeneutical circle. A gear can generate movement forward and backward; learning in one area will generate activity in another sphere of the learning circle. However, the gears of analysis and praxis are not connected: this demonstrates the caution of moving from critique to action without reflection. They may be linked after careful evaluation. In a learning community it may take many movements back and forth between theological reflection and analysis, or between current practices and theological reflection before new practices result. And new practices will often call for further learning in the tradition through questioning and searching.

I believe that this approach to congregational formation can be used *to deepen the discipleship community, address a consumer mindset and habits, and forward the work of Christ's liberating mission.*

Experiments in Mindful Discipleship

To imagine how these elements of social analysis, theological wisdom and praxis might be used for congregational transformative learning, I have identified three examples of pastoral leadership for resisting consumer culture. These stories from around the country provide a virtual testing ground for my approach. For each example I ask, do we see transformation from consumer culture toward a new form of discipleship culture? I look for how social analysis, theological reflection and resourcing, and reflection on praxis are at play. Finally, I imagine what my process might do to supplement these attempts at addressing people's conformity to consumer culture.

The first example illustrates a creative attempt to address a church's fears and losses at the outset of the American recession. In 2008:

The markets were crashing and Christmas was coming when Pastor Doug Ferguson stepped up to the pulpit of Houston's Grace Presbyterian Church with \$5,000 in his back pocket. He preached about generosity, neighborly love and the meaninglessness of worldly wealth. Then he handed out \$100 bills. His instructions were simple: Use the money to spread comfort and joy. Show some kindness to strangers. And report back in 90 days on what you did. Ferguson hoped the assignment would lift his congregants above the fray of financial collapse and refocus their thoughts on the real meaning of Christmas: by investing in people instead of stocks.³²⁷

Fifty people of the fifteen hundred member church came forward to accept the money. Over the next few months leading up to Christmas members spent the money on a variety of projects of their own creation: feeding people, clothing people, some people increased their donations through challenging friends to join in and give or by using the money to create something that could be sold for profit to give back to the church's mission's budget. People met hurting people whom they would not otherwise know. According to the article most of the participants have since continued in the compassion or justice project they started long after the seed money was spent. Many identified personal growth and new awareness of needs in their neighboring communities. ...*Do we see transformation from consumer culture toward a new form of discipleship culture?*

This story demonstrates pastoral leadership in the area of faith and finances along with social compassion. The pastor, as cultural interpreter, presents a dilemma and suggests a solution. He recognized fear and anxiety engendered by the financial losses in his congregation. In what may have been a counter-cultural sermon for his context he used the backdrop of lost savings and lost jobs to encourage generosity, or at least the

³²⁷ Jennifer Latson, "Spreading Comfort and Joy," *Houston Chronicle*, 12/25/2008 2008.

challenge of giving in the face of their own financial insecurity? Perhaps this caught people off guard, even angered some that their own financial losses were not more prominently of concern. He did, however, offer a tangible Christian practice as a concrete response to their personal turmoil. He turned people outward as part of the solution; he helped people take small steps toward serving their community and with that perhaps toward new habits. Of course, spending congregational money and not their own money emphasized the practice of giving without the sacrifice of giving out of one's own resources. If the pastor challenged people to spend \$100 of their own money in the wake of the financial crisis would there have been more or less participation? We can only speculate.

From the description we can name this learning opportunity as rooted in praxis: that is, the only direct teaching moment was in the sermon then in the stories participants told. People used their imagination and personal passion to take an action step. Further learning would come as each individual or family had their encounter with a neighbor in need. Many of the projects described were personal in nature; that is people did not simply write a donation check but a level of personal involvement was built into the giving. I cannot draw definitive conclusions about the role of reflection, social analysis or theological learning from the brief description in the news article but it would appear that there was no group process of analysis or discernment of what kinds of projects to engage in. Was there an opportunity for people to process their choosing the money together before they launched into their efforts? We read that participants were invited to tell their story, perhaps in order to inspire more giving and testify to the experience of service. However, going deeper in a group reflective process would allow space for social

analysis of the needs they encountered and could generate even more ideas for pastoral planning as they understand the local issues and how their congregation fits in the landscape. Further, if people began to question their own assumptions in the process of meeting homeless people, or hungry youth, where was the opportunity to search for answers and dig deeper into the questions theologically? Were this my own project I would build in such a level of critical conversation.

This church project had the potential to be transformative for individuals. It was significant for many of the participants and a concrete service to a variety of persons in need. In order of the ripple effect to be felt in the larger congregation as a community of disciples there would need to be some element of whole group processing and then replication of the best practices. Did the trajectory of the church mission involvement change because of this experiment? Did the majority of people catch the antidote for the insecurities of the recession that the pastor was trying to address? Positively, this example demonstrates that learning activities in the church should be multi-dimensional; that is the sermons, personal formation and a missional activity were connected. However, connecting the activity to the bigger Christian story and vision of discipleship, using the opportunity for building the wisdom and depth of a theology of social service and social change, and helping people name the transformative process are lost without explicit transformative learning facilitation.

*

For the second experiment I look to a project connected to the voluntary simplicity movement. In 1998 scholar-activist Bill McKibben introduced a challenge to

the commercialization of Christmas, *The One Hundred Dollar Holiday*.³²⁸ Along with publishing the book, McKibben, with his family and a handful of pastors set out to experiment if drastically limiting spending would make for a more joyful holiday season and more meaningful Christmas celebration. It was not intended to impose rules or induce guilt; rather the proposal to spend only one hundred dollars on all preparations and gifts provided a concrete set of boundaries within which to experiment with how to be creative, less stressed and more focused on people and experiences than material things around Christmas time. In an interview with the organization The Center for the New American Dream, McKibben reflects that while he has spent years calling people to change behavior for the sake of the planet he witnessed more enthusiasm for changing habits from the invitation to holiday simplicity. (He is an environmental activist writing extensively on global warming and connections to overconsumption.) Driving less, for example, is met with far more resistance than rejecting the siren call of shopping. . . . *Do we see transformation from consumer culture toward a new form of discipleship culture?*

People naturally seek happiness, McKibben notes, and that can motivate them to try new rituals for the holiday if they become discontent with the harried traditions of a contemporary American Christmas. While some people might dismiss pursuit of personal contentment as a legitimate motivating factor for a Christian it is not necessarily contradictory to yearn for a lifestyle that promotes more human flourishing, after God's own plans for human community. In the interview McKibben responds to a question about whether he thinks people can overcome the current habits over overconsumption:

Historically, it took quite an effort to persuade Americans to become big spenders. And Christmas was an important part of that campaign. Americans of

³²⁸ *Hundred Dollar Holiday: The Case for a More Joyful Christmas*, Simon and Schuster 1998.

the Colonial era were noticeably frugal...it was, among other things, a part of the theology and the culture of earlier Americans. And one of the ways that Americans were convinced to spend a lot of money on themselves was through the spread of a commercial Christmas. The reason to be hopeful that that will happen is that celebrations, the way they happen now, don't seem to make people particularly joyful, and that's a reason to be optimistic for change.³²⁹

While it may take a deeper level of conviction and shared praxis to change habits that are detrimental to the environment, such as vehicle preferences, then habit that are more personal such as holiday routines, McKibben has observed in the new practices reported from churches and individuals who tried his \$100 experiment demonstrate that it is possible to develop alternatives in the face of cultural norms.

In this case the beginning of learning for transformation comes with a text: the framing of the problem and solution comes from a leader, in this case an author in cooperation with pastors who shared his vision. Pastors encourage people to study the book, with its reasons for questioning the commercialized holidays and implement its recommendation for financial, emotional and even spiritual freedoms that can come with changed habits around Christmas. While focused on practices, this case demonstrates using an idea as an entry point. While I am considering the communal focus of the pastors and congregations who undertook the challenge, given that there is a book available for individual consumption, anyone could take the \$100.00 challenge without any spiritual or theological grounding and achieve the same results in terms of simplicity and less over-consuming. Nonetheless, a congregational fully engaged in a process of reflection on current practices of celebrating Christmas, recognizing the reasons for a change, and a concrete invitation to a new practice this has potential for long term transformation in discipleship. This experiment also has the built in strength of

³²⁹ Center for a New American Dream, "Simplify the Holiday: Transcript of Our Live Online Chat with Bill McKibben, Author of *Hundred Dollar Holiday*."

community, as McKibben himself began the process in his life with family and a spiritual community and while the book is able to be used by individuals it has been primarily launched in congregational settings where people try it with the support of a community going against the cultural grain together, which I have emphasized in my approach.

The communal approach, the combination of beginning with one's current praxis and analyzing it, then looking at the broader cultural context, then moving toward new practice is in keeping with many of the elements of my approach. There is a theological undertone in the book, in that the invitation to return to Christmas without commercialism is birthed from McKibben's conviction that Christmas be more joyful. Not for the sake of simplicity or saving the environment alone, but because the baby who was born is to be worshipped as a Messiah. However, overall the book is centrally an analysis of consumer culture and Christmas practices, as well as a how-to for making changes. So, while McKibben may have resourced theological wisdom, he does not invite his readers to mine the Christian story and vision in the process of considering new practices. In order for it an experiment such as this to bring about a new approach to discipleship it would need to be furthered fleshed out theologically and push people's thinking about consumerism in distinctly Christian terms. I would also need to know more about what happens after the Christmas experiment in the life of a congregation who said yes to the invitation to spend significantly less. Do participants critically process the experience, and mine the tradition to help interpret any questions or feelings raised? To sustain new habits and shape a community of disciples this experiment could be a great catalyst but more intentional attention to an intentional transformative learning process would be needed.

*

The third example is a recently created “lifestyle discipleship” course called “Lazarus at the Gates.” “Lazarus at the Gates” is a small group curriculum published jointly by Boston Faith and Justice Network, Sojourners Community, and World Vision.³³⁰ It is a twelve part program rooted in a biblical story of wealth and poverty from the book of Luke, chapter 16:19-31. The curriculum encourages participants to develop new practices of economic justice, rooted in reflection on Bible stories and study of global poverty. Participants commit not only to be immersed in the material over the year or six months of study but they share the joys and struggles of grappling with the message in a small community. One key component to the time spent together in small groups is that the participants share specific details of their personal budgets and ask each other how their spending reflects their deepest values. Each small group who participates sets aside savings out of their new practices of less consumption to give to an international charitable organization at the end of the experience. . . . *Do we see transformation from consumer culture to a new form of discipleship culture?*

In this final example, the process of transformative learning via the turning of the wheels of the pastoral circle is most evident. The Lazarus Project integrates theology and praxis in that, while rooted in the gospel story of Lazarus, it reflects the authors’ wrestling with consumer culture and the human propensity toward greed and self-centeredness. It both grows out of questions about the formative influence of consumer culture on the church and invites participants to enter into analysis of the surrounding

³³⁰ A copy of the complete program written by Gary VanderPol, Mako Nagasawa, and Rachel Anderson can be found at website of The Micah Challenge.
<http://www.micahchallenge.us/resources/alphaindex/resources/l.html>.

culture, their own experiences and scripture. The curriculum includes the component of reflection on praxis, particularly around personal income and spending, as well as one's larger social context. It presumes a committed small group for learning and supporting new habits. There is movement between studying biblical teachings on wealth, poverty, generosity, and discipleship, and reflection on how everyday living lines up with the ideals.

The project results in a particular practical end, specifically spending less to give more, resulting in a charitable donation that the group gives at the end of their six or twelve month journey together. But over time the participants practice many other daily lifestyle changes while in the learning community. This program reflects an example of integrating a biblical theological theme with the other elements of action, reflection and critical awareness. Also, the growth of the individual and the impact of the small group on the larger community are both important. Even as a yearlong experiment the curriculum is designed to be a beginning point to one's conversion away from the trappings of consumer culture. One time giving of the group's donation is not the mark of a transformed life; it is one step in expanding capacity for generosity. The program/curriculum communicates that transformation in discipleship is ongoing, just as action-reflection can become a lifelong habit.

I share these three vignettes as a way to illustrate the transformative potential for learning through the components of the Christian community formation cycle that I propose. The three examples vary in how they might impact a faith community over time. None of the examples demonstrate tapping into the transformative moment organically. That is, at a natural moment of disequilibrium in the life of a person or small group,

someone in the shepherding/ pastoral role notices and uses it as a way of entering the process toward growth in discipleship. However the stories do show sensitivity to inviting reflection on current praxis in the area of concern identified by the leader. In each of these cases a congregational leader initiated the process for potential lifestyle transformation. In the example of the people at the church spending the one hundred dollar bills on others, there is a moment of initiative taken by the pastor in his targeted teaching and offer of the money; he does use observations about the personal financial crises as a critical moment for embracing the call to mission but we don't know if any parishioners would have assumed this path on their own. Both bottom up and top down identification of a need for action and reflection are valid.

Implications

These examples also reflect my conviction that new practices are most sustainable when done together with others and when there is opportunity for reflection on the larger context of one's habits, and on the consequences of practices. Given the dynamics of socialization and enculturation developing habits that are alternative to strong currents of one's culture will be strengthened by a group who embodies the alternative values. Creating a new normal is helpful for sustaining practices. In a smaller voluntary community one tries on a habit and seeks deeper understanding of it through dialogue and reflection. Together there is movement toward a change in meaning-making to undergird the practices. In the biblical model, the church as *ekklesia* is the called out ones. Culturally responsive discipleship understand this as an ongoing process for people of all ages, each newly called out into a new creation of a community of called out ones in their own place and time.

Christian community is vital for the model of learning that I am proposing for the work of formation and transformation in discipleship. Ideally, learning and growing in faith reflects the corporate nature of the Christian story, and community provides relationships of nurture and accountability, conversation partners, a context of formation with shared values and commitments to shared practices. Christian communities can be engaged in “a continual rhythm of action and reflection because of its deep belief in a God who enters human history with salvific power....”³³¹ Reflection and contemplation are powerful means of formation as people enter God’s story through practical expressions of faith.

Life in small communities: fostering and sustaining alternative practices

Implicit in my approach is that Christian leaders should educate for awareness of the cultural environment: in the case of dominant American culture make the basic dynamics of the consumer culture explicit and people can begin to negotiate for themselves in community the comparison of the cultural narrative about identity with the Christian story of a life of discipleship. This will only take hold as people wrestle with the issues in a community of dialogue and shared practice, the tension between the intentional formation of community life and the formative influence of the larger social context must also be recognized. Through the transformation of ingrained assumptions and the growth of awareness fostered by theological reflection specifically on cultural formation churches may foster the emergence of discipleship that is more faithful to the polity of Jesus than to national cultural symbols, systems and institutions.

³³¹ Fleischer, "Practical Theology and Transformative Learning."221.

For the final analysis, let us return to the stories from early in the dissertation of the Simple Way. Simple Way and other neo-monastic communities place high value on serving their neighbors and the larger community as part of their ongoing transformation into disciples. Authentic and transformative community life does not have to be limited to the form of a residential intentional community. But, the example of such forms of radical discipleship provides a set of values that can be shared with the larger mainstream church. If we look through the lens of Christian education we see at Simple Way, for example, a community engaged in elements of transformative learning and socialization via worship and everyday engagement in the injustices of their neighborhood as try to live into the story of God's redemptive presence in the world.

Discipleship in intentional community captures well the two-pronged approach highlighted earlier in Chapter Two, of developing an interior spirituality and a missional spirituality. These kinds of communities of faith that have had high impact in their communities and profoundly shaped the lives of participants can be identified by both their commitment to doing acts of mercy and justice among their neighbors and nurturing their own spirituality. Among the core theological principles of intentional discipleship communities is commitment to being “a peculiar people” in a “particular place.”³³² Out of genuine relationship needs become apparent and location then concretely defines who their neighbors are, and what the nature of the efforts to serve will be. Finally, the efforts in community development and social change impact their own lives profoundly. There seems to be a built in process of action-reflection which is part of their discipleship:

³³² For an empirical study of intentional communities see Luther Smith's *Intimacy and Mission*. I find his terms helpful in identifying points of connection between the life of the mainstream church and the neo-monastics. Luther J. Smith, *Intimacy and Mission: Intentional Community as Crucible for Radical Discipleship* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1994).72-73.

“Through involvement in social transformation they become aware of the complexity of social realities and the possibilities for altering them. ... (t)hey see more clearly the reality of mission and the reality of themselves.”³³³

For traditional congregations who are serious about discipleship and hungry for creating cultural alternatives, understanding their identity as peculiar people called to a distinct purpose as a community can be developed through beginning to engage in authentic relationships with the local community, and to pursue profound fellowship and intimate worship. Placing emphasis on such practices as neighboring, companionship, and intimacy, even if it means changes in institutional traditions will be challenging. Another challenge to emulating the strengths of intentional communities in non-residential communities of covenant is developing a strong sense of location. When people commute to church and have vastly different spheres of influence in their lives Monday through Saturday, it will take intentionality to create a sense of calling to place and fresh, deep theology of love of neighbor.³³⁴ Location is influential on discipleship as both the context of where and how one engages in service, and provides the context of one’s own formation.

Community as context for learning

My own story of cross cultural immersion and the story of Simple Way community demonstrate how difficult it is to parse out practice from belief when discussing transformations and developing a strong social ethic in communities.

³³³ Ibid.,150.

³³⁴ In *Caminemos con Jesus*, Goizueta offers a rich analysis of the suburban/urban divide in contemporary America as an example of how geographic location impacts relationships, justice and ultimately human flourishing. For example, “When any family turns its home into a barricade which isolates its members from other families and from the larger human community it thereby denies its intrinsic and constitutive connection to that larger community...The true home is one that opens up to the public square. Numerous other times in the gospels, Jesus is portrayed as the one who transgresses spatial, geographical barriers and boundaries...” ,202.

Sometimes it seems people will be launched into more faithful living into God's reign with taking steps of bold action pre-reflectively. Other times the new practices will only come after teaching, meditation and informed decision making. What is clear is that to sustain change, both mental assent and taking action are necessary. Also, people need to be intentional about their formational environment if they want to develop sensibilities that see a new normal, reject overconsumption and commodification. It is helpful to examine our context and recognize the power of norms.

As discussed in chapter one, sociologist Juliet Schor describes the impact of the phenomenon of striving for particular levels of material satisfaction, keeping constantly aware of one's relative status when it comes to income and possessions.³³⁵ This highlights how much contentment is tied to what lifestyles we are exposed to on a regular basis, which shapes our vision of normal and enough. While the lived environment is central to this creation of standards television and visual media also contribute. Schor found that even conversations at the work place and during leisure events with acquaintances contribute to our definition of success and failure, contentment and striving.

Relationships matter. Who are the people that have influence over the vision one carries for his or her life? Is there a diversity of relationships enough to challenge a singular vision of success and status? Having an experience of connection with someone in extreme need, faced with choices in response to scarcity will demand action and a belief shift, turning a ministry of compassion into opportunity for transformation. To what degree could it be normative for middle class Americans to adopt a servant mindset,

³³⁵ Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Upsifting, Downscaling and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

for example, when our interpretive lens is one that favors power, and fulfillment of every desire, success? A conversion of the collective imagination and assumptions which undergird meaning-making are paramount to the holistic development of Christian disciples.

The immediate context in which one's faith develops is critical. It takes intentionality to develop an alternative cultural reality distinct from the consumer culture. Dominant culture churches can build bridges and learn from communities of people who have traditionally had to live with less, perhaps partnering with people from a different generation or with a heritage connected to societies where they learned to consume to live not live to consume. Such integrated communities could provide an opportunity to interpret a variety of practices in light of movement away from dominant culture's captivity in consumerism.

Conclusion

Christian education that takes into account the context of consumer culture will encourage growth at both the level of practice and beliefs. This will require the development of a strong theological foundation for sustaining an alternative Christian ethos related to consumption, including searching within the tradition for theological blind spots which continue to support people's unconscious allegiances to consumer culture over the demands and freedoms implicit in Christian discipleship. The appropriation of the pastoral circle implemented as I have illustrated it here can be a valuable resource for that process.

The dissertation itself has been an exercise in practicing the pastoral circle. My starting point was insertion into the social context via growing consciousness of habits and messages about consumption. I am aware that I began with a presumption that many aspects of consumer culture are in disharmony with the type of culture that the church is called to create among its people. Research and analysis for the project started with studying the dynamics of consumer culture from multiple points of view, including sociology and ending with theologians' insights into the relationship of consumer culture and faith. I then moved further into the evaluative moment using theological and biblical resources on discipleship. In order to move toward developing congregational resources in response to the disconnect between consumer practices and discipleship practices, I looked for theoretical pathways from the field of education, as well as pastoral ministry. In this final chapter I bring these resources together for the construction of a model of Christian transformative education as central to the building of disciple communities who can live out alternative practices in the midst of consumer culture influences. Instead of living to consume, they consume to simply live and use their energies and resources to contribute to culture.

The method of learning and growth I have proposed here has applications beyond addressing challenges of living ethically in a consumer society. Becoming aware of the effects of dominant culture on formation and being empowered to make conscious choices is valuable to adult maturity. However, in closing, I offer the following practices for jumpstarting the ongoing cultivation of thoughtfulness and resistance to the influences of consumer culture. These recommendations need the context of an intentionally implemented transformative learning process in community.

- a) Educate for awareness of marketing trends, and promote critical media literacy particularly related to advertising.
- b) Undertake media fasts and shopping free periods to disengage from the messages of the brand-built self and the allure of accumulation.
- c) Take steps toward ethical purchasing habits, as our consumer choices matter on the other side of the world— e.g. food production, the fashion industry, ethical financial investments.
- d) Create small intentional communities within the larger church for accountability around consumption; people need others to shape vision and personal mission and to share wisdom.
- c) Promote theological reflection on culture as a spiritual discipline in faith communities.
- e) Teach the Christian story as an alternative narrative in response to the dominant economic driven narratives that sustain and flow out of consumer culture.
- f) Build relationships with a wide variety of people. Knowing people across differences, such as socio-economic classes keeps vision wider, and keeps what is “normal” in dialectic tension.
- g) In recognizing the degree of consuming that people do, choose to be producers whenever possible. Encourage people to see themselves as creators/contributors to culture.³³⁶

I offer these specific pastoral suggestions as catalysts for the process of transformation; any of these practices could be helpful beginnings for entering into the moving wheels of the pastoral cycle as a learning community. These recommendations for praxis are

³³⁶ The theological position of Christians having a duty to contribute to the culture, particularly the language of contributing to the common good is not new and accounts for much of the social reform and development of the helping professions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even in the Wanamaker story we see an emphasis on bringing ethics to the workplace for the benefit of all. An interesting movement presently among progressive evangelicals is to encourage Christian artists, chefs, musicians, carpenters (to name a few) to embrace their work as a vocation to enhancing culture(s). One such popular articulation of this position is found in Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008).

birthed from my own theological reflection on consumer culture. They illustrate the need for multiple entry points to the wheel of transformative learning. Some of these suggestions begin with practice, such as trying out a no shopping period. What can be learned from such a fast? What are the joys? What are the challenges? What spaces are opened up for new habits when those are stripped back? Other of the recommendations begin with ideas or reflection; explicit teaching on areas of theology and scripture that deal with economic themes provide an important backbone to developing a spiritually vibrant consumer lifestyle. The final recommendation, to a renewed calling to creativity/productivity could be very exciting for twenty-first century discipleship. How are we contributing the common culture(s)? How can churches support artists, writers, builders, inventors? Creating can provide far more satisfaction than consuming.

These recommendations are practical starting points, for developing habits of action and reflection to counter the most damaging aspects of consumer culture.³³⁷ There is no singular approach to anti-consumerist discipleship. When we deconstruct the consumer lifestyle at church and at home communities can then reconstruct a way of life that leaves more room in our lives to create, to give away our money and our time, and to

³³⁷ Nowhere in my project did I explore the positive implications of life in a consumer culture. It should be noted that I am aware of nuanced economic arguments about the strengths of the free market system over other systems when it comes to human flourishing, as well as the theological correlations between a God who favor freedoms and establishing social and economic policies. Specific responses to those conversations are beyond my expertise and the scope of this paper, but would broaden the understanding of context. In so far as I can address the ethos of capitalist consumer culture some obvious benefits are the democratizing effects of the presumption of choice. Even in religious settings, “choice” may undermine commitment or free people to seek the best fit for a community of faith that will best help them grow. So-called church shopping (even denomination hopping) is a sign of changing sensibilities with many positive implications, as with social mobility in general. Experimenting and innovation can be easily cultivated in a free market system. In terms of cultural agency, there is a new level of creativity nurtured through a sub cultural valuing of dismantling what is mass produced and consumed and turning it into something else. This is seen particularly in music and web based writing, art and programming. A final example is that the same mass marketing of inane advertising delivers powerful messages about global issues as well. There are mixed campaigns with non-profits, charitable giving by retailers, fundraising through shopping and celebrity causes that complicate any critique of the marketing industry.

cultivate relationships that defy commodification. Christian communities can cultivate identity as agents of culture; if consumer culture gives the world a set of desires, and images of a certain kind of common life, then Christian communities can also provide a compelling alternative set of images, not simply respond in critique and condemnation.

There is breadth to cultivating a faithful consumer discipleship, which is not dependent on new practices alone. I have demonstrated that following particular practices alone does not make for deep discipleship, nor does assent to a body of beliefs alone create faithful discipleship. Thus, the approach to education that I describe insists on engaging in theological reflection on culture as a regular spiritual discipline in faith communities to foster the mind of Christ in a world that is forming us to think very differently. Pastoral leadership in preaching and learning experiences needs to provide the theological foundation for sustaining radical discipleship. Finally, this is not a simplified call for a rejection of “the world’s” values as if completely foreign to the faith community, but critique and analysis will always include looking within the faith traditions for theological blind spots that uphold people’s allegiance to cultures over the demands and freedoms implicit in Christian discipleship.

The approach I have crafted is an interdisciplinary approach to congregational learning that insists on both the use of wisdom from faith traditions as well as analytical tools in the process of Christian formation. The implications for the method reach beyond engaging the challenges of consumer culture: I understand this framework to be more of a holistic spirituality of congregational life than a technical model for resisting consumerism. Neither is this simply pedagogy. I propose that this approach can be integrated into the way of life of a small faith community as a powerful means of

growing in the life of faith for the sake of participating with God in radical commitment to care for neighbors. It is a way of formation that takes culture into consideration but keeps pursuit of God in the forefront, and the circular nature of the methodology emphasizes the life long process of conversion.

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