GOD, SELF, IDENTITY, AND THE ADOLESCENT TASK OF GETTING ORGANIZED

By Chris D. Clements, PhD

A casual opening note to youth workers, mentors and caring adults:

I can remember being a teenager in a Bible study series my youth group was running. Our group leader reminded us often that it is was important for us to put our identity in Christ. When this encouragement was offered, I instinctively knew this was something I really wanted to do.

In taking up the task, I found I had a hard-to-pin-down difficulty. My difficulty went something like this: if my identity is being in Christ, and Jesus defines who I am, how is it that I am still me? I appreciate this may feel like an over-achieving thought for a fifteen-year-old to have. But it is also true that fifteen-year-olds, given the way the life cycle unfolds, begin having these sorts of thoughts, and when they arrive, they feel very important.

They way I found my problem being fixed, is by finding people I want to call "heroes." A hero captures the imagination, a hero shows what is important by how they live, and we can locate what it is to be ourselves by living in their light. I knew what the Bible said about my value to Jesus, but then, it was through Mark that I saw what it was to belong in Christian community, Tim who brought into focus what it was to be a teacher, Dave who demonstrated what it was to serve a congregation, and Phil who lived out what it was to give careful attention. By living in the light of each of these people I found I could organize what it was to be me, in God's world.

What follows is a formal paper. The reason people write formal papers is to try to put their best foot forward about something they think is important. The thing I think is important is the way that our young people understand themselves both through clear Bible teaching, and through coming to care about the world in some way. I'm hopeful that maybe you could be a type of "hero" in a young person's life, who both tells them about their value to Jesus, and lives out what it is to be a child of God, in God's world.

Warmly,
-Chris.

Introduction

It is essential to Christian confession that human beings are defined by God's

claim upon them. Also at the same time, they are involved in choosing and organizing who they are. In this paper an account is given of how these two disparate truths are held together in Christian identity, and how youth ministry workers can attend to the identity process with young people.

Adolescence is a life stage where the complexities of identity are presenting themselves in a novel way. With a newly developed capacity for abstract self perception, young people are aware of their own thoughts about themselves, and adolescents are afforded a way of seeing themselves through the eyes of others. As questions about identity arise with earnest during adolescence, it is common for youth ministry workers to offer young people basic and grounding scriptural truth about their value in Christ. This is the right instinct, for holding a Christian identity involves basic understandings about a person's value as children of God (Jn. 1:12).

Yet a second dimension of a biblical identity should also be set forward. In addition to identity being grounded in the absolute reality of being loved by God, it is also the case that Christian identity involves persistently interpreting how to be involved in the world as a child of God (Phil 2:12). Inherent in being a child of God, is living a life worthy of the calling that has been received (Eph 4:1). This way of living is expressed in dynamic response to God's actions in the ongoing present (Heb 3:15). Such a life involves taking up a way of being determined by God, and a way of being involved in God's world as an individual. Ministry with young people then, will involve helping them consider how they express being a child of God, and what roles they will take up in doing so.

Given the active and involved nature of living an identity, having a "hero" to look to, can be pivotal in the identity process. The language of hero being used here refers to someone, who through their own way of living, shows what it is to have a Christian identity, that in a way also speaks to a young person's sense of self. The hero is different from a mentor, for while the mentor passes along instruction or skill-based feedback, the hero serves as a kind of art piece that holds up and organizes what makes sense for others to do.[1] The hero brings self and world into focus by acting in the world in a public way, such that young persons might see what it is to live the Christian life in the setting they find themselves.

Identity and the task of getting organized

The task of identity involves organizing the disparate elements of a life into a coherent whole. This includes knowing one's value before God, and also a way of

[1] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans., Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 35. Heidegger argues that good art conveys truth through the way it grasps a viewer's attention and shows what is important. In the same way truth sets itself to work in art, Heidegger also thinks that truth can be seen in iconic politicians, religious figures like Jesus, worthy causes, and philosophical positions (p. 60). I take this view, arguing that Christian people I want to call "heroes" set the significances of the Christian life on display.

being in the world. Through his psychoanalytic research and practice, Erik Erikson (1902–1994) came to hold that a personal identity is formed in relationship to the way a person acts within the world, and the way the world acts back. Erikson maintained that identity is a "subjective sense of continuous existence and a coherent memory."[2] In this way identity involves a sense of how things are going within a persons' social setting, the roles they carry, their body, their situation in the world, past events, and future expectations.

This broad scope of identity can leave young people feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the task, and how this task persistently impinges on their sense of how their life is going. Amid these complexities the ministry instinct to offer young people grounding biblical truth about their value to God is well placed. This basic grounding gives a young person a place to stand, from which the task of identity can be taken up. Yet this essential grounding is not the whole task of identity.

Expanding upon the task of identity, Erikson notes that identity involves a sense of the continuity of "roles" carried into social settings through time; including but not limited to expectations within social hierarchies, the particularities of male or female biology, loyalties, religious experiences, convictions about what a person is for or against, culture and political settings, sexuality, technology, tribe or family, and personal cognitive or emotional style.[3] These role-based experiences exert a claim on identity, navigated as community, and peers respond to adolescents' role-based sense of self with a range of affirmation or derision.[4]

Illustrating the kind of complexity that takes place in identity, Erikson takes up the example of what it is to be an American. To have an identity as an American (at the time of writing) is to have a way of life that was among other things, expressed through "technical proficiency," "expansion and exploitation," "production and consumption," and the presumed value of "objectivity and neutrality."[5] Such an American self is made possible through a commitment to "industriousness and teamwork," "precision and amiability," "courage," "competitiveness," and "showmanship.[6]" These traits may arrive in Americans through the pre-conscious way culture organizes what makes sense for the individual, but may also be taken up by individuals as a function of self-identification within a culture.

The task of identity among contemporary adolescents is uniquely complicated by the digital world in which they find themselves. The contemporary experience of

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[2] Erik Erikson "Psychosocial Identity" in *A Way of Looking at Things: Selected Papers from 1930 to 1980,* ed., Stephen Schlein, 675–684 (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1987), 675.

[3] Erikson, "Psychosocial Identity," 676–683.

[4] Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1968), 133.

[5] Erik Erikson "Remarks on the 'Wider Identity,'" in *A Way of Looking at Things: Selected Papers from 1930 to 1980,* ed., Stephen Schlein, 497–502 (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1987), 500. The claim here is not that Americans will always formulate identity in this specific way, but that a set of disparate elements, such as those identified here, come together to form what is experienced as an identity.

[6] Erikson "Remarks on the 'Wider Identity,'" 501.

identity involves forming a sense of self in a setting where the world and its claims upon young people are available, all the time, through their devices.[7] A digital world arrives with a mass of information geared for engagement but not organized for meaningful significance. When vast quantities of content are available all the time, there tends not to be reliable means by which some segments of information are set forward as privileged, important, relevant, worth caring about, and so on.[8] The apparent meaninglessness of content is compounded by way users interact with content in a low responsibility or anonymous way. If digital interactions tend toward low responsibility, this engagement also arrives with diminished personal significance.[9]

Further, the present digital world is implicated in the erosion of the value of labour and a personal sense of satisfying productivity. In a society where sustaining standards of living require perpetual economic growth, the demand for digital productivity increases.[10] Such a society takes up the goal of digital productivity not out of hope for the future, but out of fear of what will be lost if we fail to do so.[11] This leaves young people in a setting where more is being asked of them through digital mediums, but the significance of these activities is diminishing. When young people seek to escape this malaise by turning to digital domains for wonder or comfort, the situation compounds itself further.[12] The loss of the capacity to be present in the real world means that young people turn back to the digital domain for soothing and comfort, perpetuating its malaise.

As a result, the identity process among young people tends to be "liquid," in the sense that young people are trying on different senses of self in a quest for authenticity, but are unsure how to tell if they have arrived at their goal.[13] This phenomenon has led to identity no longer culminating in a lasting sense of self, but the achievement of "autonomy."[14] Even as autonomy is important for adult life, it is not in itself, a satisfying culmination of the identity process.

In this setting, attention to how identity is formed is as important now as it ever was. Given that identity is inherently complex, and made more so within a digital world, the language of getting "organized" becomes a helpful way to

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[7] Chris Beeman "Does Social Media Interfere with Reasoned Arguments?" in *Social Media and Your Brain: Web-Based Communication is Changing How We Think and Express Ourselves*, ed., C. G. Prado, 75–88 (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2017), 84.

[8] Hubert Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (New York: Rutledge, 2008), 15.

[9] Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, 87.

[10] Hartmut Rosa, *Democracy Needs Religion* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2024), 4.

[11] Rosa, *Democracy Needs Religion*, 22.

[12] Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Metal Illness* (New York: Penguin, 2024), 35.

[13] Roberta Katz et al. *Gen Z, Explained: The Art of Living in a Digital Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 76.

[14] James E. Côté, *Youth Development in Identity Societies: Paradoxes of Purpose* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 75.

describing the experience of identity, self, and world in a contemporary setting.[15] The organized self, or the self with a stable identity, has a way of being involved in the world that becomes a habitual way of life.[16] As self and world come together in identity, the self takes up a hierarchy of meanings, whereby segments of the world show up as significant, being perceived, for example, as surprising, important, trivial, urgent, and so on. The self perceives what it is to be oneself, in the setting one finds themselves within.

Identity, properties, and mental contents

Having spoken of identity as way of getting organized, attention is now turned to how this organization happens. There are two initial movements in organizing identity to be addressed here; locating identity as one's essence or properties and locating identity as one's mental contents. Both will play a grounding role in getting an identity organized, but neither will by themselves wholly afford identity. A fuller account of identity will then be addressed in subsequent sections of this paper.

This first way of speaking about identity involves clarifying essential properties belonging to human beings. Such a way of speaking about identity can be seen in the contemporary youth ministry impulse to ground identity in the unchanging properties of God's claim on human beings. This approach rightly offers young people assurance that an immutable ground of who they are is being a beloved child of God. The Bible speaks about unchanging sets of facts that are to be part of a Christian's self-understanding. Human beings are created in God's image (Gen 1:26) and remain so regardless of the life situations a person finds themselves within. The Christian is made alive with Christ (Eph 2:5); the Christian is complete in Christ (Col 2:10); the Christian is adopted into the family of God (John 1:12); and so on.

Biblical truths such as these contain at least two meanings for the task of identity. First, God's design is the ground of Christian identity. The Christian's basic sense of self is not manufactured, imagined, or achieved through human agency, but given. Second, that God gives the right to become a child of God, is a statement of value. Not only does a young person form identity in relationship to God, but a young person will rightly discover their value in this relationship. As the Christian young person is one who God is in relationship with, it follows that God values this young person and addresses them as a child of God.

But even as biblical value statements offer ground on which identity can be formed, these biblical truths do not by themselves bring the question of identity to completion. It is not that scripture is wrong but employing the previously referenced scripture texts in a finally definitive way misses something important. Consider how

[15] Alva Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), 6.
[16] Noë, *Strange Tools*, 8.

Aristotle (384–322 BC) reasoned that things like planets, animals, and plants each have a unique being, because each of these are unique substances with essential properties.[17] Aristotle correctly sees that essential properties are one dimension of identity. Yet in addition to essential properties, entities may also have contingent properties.[18] A contingent property is something that may be chosen, or transitory, perhaps for a period of time, but its non-essential nature does not make it any less constitutive of identity.

To set this complexity within the real world, imagine two twins born in Boston. Upon growing up, one stays in Boston and the other moves away. The question proceeds, what makes either twin a Bostonian, or not a Bostonian?[19] In response, we would say that we recognize either twin not only by fact that they are from Boston, but also by the way they maintain a style of living that people in Boston tend to have or tend not to have. To be a Bostonian involves a way of dressing, cheering for the Red Sox, walking along the Boston harbour, having a curt conversational style, and so on. To be a Bostonian then, is not just to have the essential property of having resided in Boston for some number of years but is taken up in the range of ways Bostonians tend to engage with the world. Being a Bostonian, or not being a Bostonian, arrives through a mix of essential and contingent properties that come together in "Bostonian" or "non-Bostonian" ways of being organized.

It could also be said that what is essentially defining about us is what we know, in the sense that it is essential to know at least some things about Jesus to see oneself as a Christian. Yet consider again how a Bostonian might be said to be someone who knows certain things that people from Bostain tend to know. Just as having an essential property cannot wholly be constitutive of identity, knowing select truths also cannot be wholly constitutive of identity. For example, the twin who moves away from Boston knows the best places to watch the sunrise over the ocean unimpeded by buildings. This knowledge will hold some role in this twin's roots as a Bostonian. But it could be that the twin who moved away, while knowing Boston-specific knowledge, also dislikes the loneliness of the city, and is looking for some distance from Boston living. Identity will involve being a subject that holds certain understandings.[20] But identity also involves organizing or caring about these mental

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[17] Aristotle, "Metaphysics," in *Aristotle: Introductory Readings*, trans., Terence Irwin and Gail Fine, 115–194. (Indianapolis, IN: Hacket, 1996), 175; book 8.1 (1042a).

[18] Filip Grgić, "Aristotle on Deliberation and Contingency," in *Free Will and Action: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, eds., Filip Grgić and Davor Pećnjak, 103–115 (London, U.K.: Springer, 2018), 110. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-99295-2_8

[19] Gareth B. Matthews, "Aristotelian Essentialism" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50.1 (1990) 251–262; 254–5. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2108042

[20] Hubert Dreyfus and Sean D. Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 139. What it is to be a modern "subject" is traced to René Descartes (1596–1650), who felt that all knowing must have a rational basis. What Descartes didn't account for, is that he

contents in some way.[21]

These thought experiments point to the fact that identity is not only being of particular substance, or holding particular knowledge, even as identity in Christian form involves being a child of God, and knowing something about Jesus. The task of organizing Christian identity also involves responding to God's action in our lives (Phil 2:12); living a life worthy of the calling received (Eph 4:1); being open to the Spirit in the ongoing present (Heb 3:15); persisting Christian living without growing weary or losing heart (Heb 12:1–3), and so on. In these ways scripture points to identity as a relational encounter, between God, self, and world.[22] This relational quality of identity involves persons with essential properties and mental contents but also in persistent relation to God, themselves, and the setting they find themselves within. In the next section a sense of identity as involvement, being organized, or caring about, is set forward with ministry application to follow.

Identity and caring about

Being a Christian involves a way of caring about the world, or a way of being involved in the world. In the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus tells his listeners to "seek first the Kingdom" (Matt 6:33). This encouragement may most immediately be recognized as a pastoral insight, for human beings have a way of worrying about acquiring more and more things that distracts them from God's purposes and plans. But within the purposes of this paper, Jesus' encouragement in Matthew 6 speaks to what it is to be a Christian. The Christian is someone who has a "seeking first the kingdom" way about them. "Seeking first the Kingdom" is not a defining property, or a belief, but is a way of being involved in the world.

This capacity human beings have, to be invested in the world or care about the world in some way, is structural to identity. A seminal Christian thinker attuned to this aspect of identity was Saint Augustine (354–430 AD). As a thinker and writer, Augustine was not against the type of reason that might identify human properties or right Christian beliefs. But he saw that being human involves a way of caring about the world, in addition to being of a certain substance and holding certain beliefs. At about the age of seventeen, Augustine was sent to continue his schooling away from home, in the city of Carthage. When he was far away from home, he noticed that what made him most essentially himself was not what he knew through his studies,

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cared to make this claim, given the way his life unfolded as a scholar. Descartes did not see that human reason can cover up the more basic way of being; namely of caring about things and living in a particular way that organizes what makes sense to do.

[21] Michael Rea, "The Metaphysics of the Narrative Self," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 8.4 (2022) 586–603; 589. https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2021.28

[22] Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 74. Anderson argues that human beings understand themselves in relation to others, world, and God.

but what he cared about, what he loved, and what he desired. Augustine noticed a "real hunger was inside" him that was for a "more inward food" than knowledge.[23] This hunger was a desire for God, and Augustine came to feel that this hunger was structural to his sense of self, even if it wasn't until some years later that he would come to fully articulate this.

That he had this seeking way of being was confirmed to Augustine when one day he took reprieve from student life at the local theater. During the performance, he saw that what most defined each character in the show was not their independent physical properties, or even what each character knew, but what each character desired, and how each character chose to express this desire within the unfolding story.[24] This realization that identity involves a type of "caring" about something led Augustine to speak about the way the heart is involved in identity and selfhood. He argued that the most basic "desire" of human beings is to praise God and maintained that the heart is "restless" until it rests in God.[25] Augustine believed that the search for self is resolved when the way humans care about the world affords them a place within it, chiefly and most truly, through being a Christian. This means then, that identity is not only the set of properties that can be used to describe a person but is also a persistent sense of whether a person's way of being involved in the world is proceeding well.

The contribution Augustine made to selfhood and identity became, in due course, somewhat overlooked. Amid the scientific advancements that captured the imagination of early modernity, a pervasive sense that legitimate knowing was scientific knowing became entrenched in Western assumptions. It was assumed that religious scholars like Augustine had struggled to fully appreciate the significance of reason-based understanding, and in this atmosphere, it came to be that Augustine's contribution, while not faulty, received less attention than it deserved.

Then in the early twentieth-century, while when teaching a course on Augustine's thought, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) found it curious how Augustine appeared to be preemptively answering the problems of modern scientific identity. Heidegger was struck by how Augustine avoided speaking of human beings in terms of essential substance, properties, and mental content.[26] While not inclined toward Augustine's Christianity himself, Heidegger was drawn to Augustine's Christian sense of the self as a desiring creature. Adapting Augustine's work, Heidegger came to claim that human beings are "distinguished" among beings (or entities), by the fact

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[23] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans., Sarah Ruden (New York: The Modern Library, 2018), 51; book 3.1.
[24] Augustine, *Confessions*, 52; book 3.2.
[25] Augustine, *Confessions*, 3; book 1.1.
[26] Fred Lawrence, "Cor ad cor loquitur: Augustine's Influence on Heidegger and Lonergan," in *Augustine Our Contemporary: Examining the Self in Past and Present*, eds., Willemien Otten and Susan E. Schreiner, 315–364 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 317–318.

that the human being is a being whose being "is an issue for it."[27]

To have one's being be an issue, is a way of saying that human beings are the sort of being that must express what it is to be themselves through getting involved in the world around them in some way. Heidegger felt that the search for objective properties and understanding could be useful, but could also cause humans to "miss themselves" and "cover up" the fact that they actively care about things in the world through being invested in the world in defining ways.[28]

Heidegger maintained that "care," or being involved and invested in the world around a person, is "structural" to what it is to be a human being.[29] In Heidegger language, "care" is a way of being toward the world that is not a result of objective rational deductions but is the way that humans find certain segments of the world showing up as relevant, important, or significant. Caring as a way of being is not an understanding that is held in ideas and reason, but is expressed in how a person lives.[30] As living is a persistent activity, what it means to be themselves is also expressed and renewed in an ongoing way.[31] To use the identity language of organization, oneself is not a one-time affirmation of who a person is, but identity is an ongoing process of organizing self and world into a coherent sense of what one should do.

Being in the world, or caring about the world, in Heidegger's view, does not precisely involve having a set of goals to achieve, even as caring about something does tend to involve aiming at specific goals. Instead, being in the world or caring about the world involves a set of actions that are drawn out of humans. For example, the task of parenthood is not something that is achieved and completed, but is an ongoing way being invested in the wellbeing of one's children. Being a musician is not a matter of achieving musicianship and then moving on to something else, but is a way of caring about instruments, recordings, touring schedules, and so on. And the same is true of the Christian life, for there is not a time when Christians would say that the aims of Christian living are achieved. Rather, living as a Christian is an ongoing way of caring about God's world, of being involved in God's world, and of having Christian actions being drawn out of them, given the way they are invested in God's world as Christians.

Getting organized in a particular direction

How humans come to care about the world in an everyday way is brought into

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[27] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford U.K.: Blackwell, 1962), 32.
[28] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 168.
[29] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 296.
[30] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 25.
[31] William Blattner, *Heidegger's Being and Time: A Reader's Guide* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 38.

focus by someone Heidegger calls a "hero."[32] The hero demonstrates some paradigm of being, through representing in their action what it is to be drawn into the world in a particular way. The hero "sees" what situations ask for, and by responding in some way, the hero shows what it is to care about the world as the hero does.[33] The genius of heroes is not quite so much that they represent a capacity for logical judgements or careful deductions. Instead, it is in how they demonstrate a way of being in responsive relationship to the world. Heroes portray what it is to see some set of significances and shows through their way of living how to respond to these significances.

The language of "hero" is a bit of a poetic choice and approximates what would otherwise be understood as mentoring. Yet while the mentor might more commonly be understood to have the role of passing on skill and understanding, Heidegger's "hero" most centrally passes on a way of valuing or desiring something in the world. Through watching the hero care about the world in some way or being involved in how the hero cares about the world, the hero's way of being in the world is brought into focus for others.

In addition to passing on teaching and skill-based practice, it will be important for those in Christian ministry with young people to also imagine they are this type of "hero," who shows what it is to get involved in the world as a Christian. The Christian mentor (or hero) functions almost like a kind of art piece. As art is a way of organizing or drawing attention to significance in the world, the hero is also organizing or drawing attention to some way of being involved in the world.[34] In the context of ministry with emerging generations, an example of the action of the hero can be seen in the way a leader shapes a discourse, by persistently calling attention to something like joy within the life of the community.[35] The leader who lives with a joyful disposition isn't so much engaged in a teaching activity, even as teaching may be involved in joyful living, but the leader is demonstrating what is important through living out the Christian life with a joyful attunement to the world, in a reasonably public way.

While not using the language of "hero" explicitly, Paul in the New Testament speaks to the task of getting organized in a Christian way, calling attention to people who could serve as the cultural hero or mentor. Paul instructs his readers to "follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). He indicates to his readers they will be able to see what it is to care about the world as a Christian, through observing and taking up his way of living. Elsewhere Paul holds up Timothy as someone who will live the Christian life in a public way, evidenced in part by

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[32] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 437.
[33] Blattner, *Heidegger's Being and Time*, 83.
[34] Noë, *Strange Tools*, 30.
[35] Andrew Root, *The End of Youth Ministry? Why Parents Don't Really Care about Youth Group and What Youth Workers Should Do about It* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 152–153.

Timothy's attention to the needs of the Philippian church (Phil 2:20). Further still, Paul holds up Epaphroditus, as someone to "honour" as an example of what the Christian life should look like (Phil 2:29).

Even as Paul does not render his position in these exact words, he holds the view that caring about the world in a Christian way is structural to Christian identity. This sentiment is present as Paul points out that knowing mysteries and prophecies, exhibiting exemplary faith achievements, or straining one's body in feats of endurance are of limited significance if a person is not foundationally organized around a Christian way of being involved in the world. Essential to such a way of living is a self-giving disposition toward others (1 Cor 13:1–3), modeled on Jesus, and expressed in the way that a Christian lives in all their circumstances.

As Paul lives his life, he shows a way of organizing what makes sense to do. This way of organizing life transmits a particular type of "readiness" to others as they also take up Paul's way of living.[36] The language of "readiness" references the way others adopt the postures that the hero has toward the world. Continuing the example of joy, Kenda Creasy Dean speaks about the way that young people are developmentally attuned to the world at times through self-absorbed "brooding," and then at other times through wonderful and joyful experiences of grace.[37] Dean observes that a leader's way of living can have a "decentering" effect on young people, whereby young people's brooding can be taken over by an attunement to joy.[38] Such a shift is not necessarily the result of teaching or identity reflection, even as both teaching and identity reflection could be part of the process. Rather, the shift occurs as the leader, or "hero," represents a posture of joy that slowly organizes the community, and gives the community a readiness to joy, where once there was a readiness to brooding instead.

The Christian hero does not only care about joy alone, but the Christian hero takes up a gentle posture, has a readiness to minister the gospel, is involved in prayer practices, sees the significance of trusting faith, desires to turn from sin, and so on. Like any work of art, the readinesses of the hero are not available to everyone, for some people will remain unable to see what it is to be a Christian despite the "hero's" best plans and intentions. But for those who catch what it is to be involved in the world as a Christian, these readinesses will serve as dimensions of identity, along with the essential substances and mental contents of being a Christian.

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[36] Sean D. Kelley, "Seeing Things in Merleau-Ponty," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen, 74–110 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 100. Kelly uses the language of "readiness" to describe the way one's understanding of a situation organizes what makes sense in responding to a situation. He argues that "we experience our environment at least partly in terms of the activities it immediately leads us to perform" (p. 102).

[37] Kenda Creasy Dean, "Losing our Scales," in *Delighted: What Teenagers are Teaching the Church about Joy*, by Kenda Creasy Dean, Wesley W. Ellis, Justin Forbes, Abigail Visco Rusert, 1–15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 12.

[38] Dean, "Losing our Scales," 11.

Lastly, it is to be acknowledged that the specific language of "hero" is not quite at home in the Christian world, given that heroic action and humility tend to be at a distance from one another. Scripture is clear that the paradigm of Christian living is Jesus, who takes up a servant's posture (Phil. 2:6–7). Yet it is also to be noted that Paul's exhortations to imitate him, to care about the world as he cares about the world, are not actions of ego massaging grandeur, but inhabit the kind of hero-posture that Heidegger has in mind. It will be helpful for those who minister with young people, to view themselves as this kind of servant-hero, who brings into view what it is to be a Christian, not only through what they teach, but also how they care about the world as a Christian.

Conclusion

The ministry instinct to encourage young people to place their identity in Christ is a good instinct. In this paper a case has been made that placing identity in Christ involves not only maintaining a set of beliefs, but also a way of being in the world as a Christian. When encouraging young people to place identity in Christ, it will be helpful not only to speak about identity as a status before Jesus, but also as a way of being involved in the world. In service of this goal, ministering persons will aim to transmit not only the knowledge and skills of Christian living, but will aim to display in their way of living, Christian identity and its accompanying readinesses. Living in this way gives young people a potential servant "hero," or mentor, who brings Christian living into focus, and offers both ground and form for organizing a Christian identity.

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