Revealing the Power: New Creation Epistemology for Adolescent Girls

by

Emily Anne Peck-McClain

Date: April 17, 2015

Approved:

Fred P. Edie, Supervisor

_________________________________________________
Fred P. Edie

_________________________________________________
Susan Grove Eastman

_________________________________________________
Mary McClintock Fulkerson

_________________________________________________
Evelyn Parker

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology in the Divinity School of Duke University

2015
ABSTRACT

Revealing the Power: New Creation Epistemology for Adolescent Girls

by

Emily Anne Peck-McClain

Date: April 17, 2015

Approved:

Fred P. Edie, Supervisor

_________________________________________________

Fred P. Edie

_________________________________________________

Susan Grove Eastman

_________________________________________________

Mary McClintock Fulkerson

_________________________________________________

Evelyn Parker

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Theology in the Divinity School of Duke University

2015
ABSTRACT

Adolescent girls need a meaningful and liberative theological lens for interpreting their lives. I argue that a close reading of Romans 6-8 offers this lens because of Paul’s apocalyptic understanding of the present time, the implications of the crucifixion of Christ, and the promise of the coming new creation. I additionally argue that critical liberative pedagogical strategies enable girls to see from this new perspective with the help of adults, particularly adult women, in their communities of faith.

Adolescent girls are subjected to different layers of oppression in the United States. They are given no voice and no vote in the public sphere. Their silence is assumed by their churches as well. Additionally, all girls struggle against sexism. Racism, classism, sizism, and heterosexism also impact some girls. Girls experience prejudice related to all these areas of oppression in their lives in personal ways. Pauline apocalypticism offers a way to understand these experiences and how they occur in order to liberate girls from taking responsibility for the ways others objectify them.

Using conversational interviews based on the work of Elliot Mishler, I spoke with 24 girls who are active in United Methodist Churches in the New York Annual Conference. I then did a close exegetical reading of Romans 6-8, and put the interviews into conversation with that reading. Emerging from those interviews were specific themes especially important to these girls. Some theological insights from Romans 6-8 are particularly pertinent to those themes. The conversation between Romans 6-8 and the interviews with girls led to pedagogical suggestions for how to help girls see from Paul’s perspective and interpret their stories and their lives in real time according to that perspective.
Girls need to be included in the full life of the church, something that is theologically supported by Paul’s understanding of the individual as always in relationship. The church is a corporate body of those participating in Christ by means of their baptism. When girls see with a new perspective, a “new creation perspective,” they can see the powers of Sin and Death manifesting in their lives through these oppressive systems. Girls need mentors who will form an alliance with them for the interpreting of their own lives from an apocalyptic perspective and against the powers of Sin and Death as they manifest in girls’ lives both in and outside the church. These mentors should be women who can share their own stories from a new creation perspective, welcome girls’ stories, help girls interpret their stories, and work to help the whole church be a welcoming community of co-interpreters for girls.
For the 24 girls in the New York Annual Conference

who shared their lives with me.

And for my own two girls.

I will always work for you to live into your freedom in Christ.
Table of Contents

Table of Contents.................................................................vii
List of Figures.................................................................................ix
Acknowledgments..............................................................................x

Chapter 1: Apostle to the Adolescent?........................................1
  Why Paul?
  Why Adolescent Girls?
  Methodology
  The Interviews
  The Project

Chapter 2: Being a Girl in 2013..................................................33
  Clothing the Body
  Temptation
  Sin
  Race and Racism
  Sexism
  Summary

Chapter 3: Waiting and Hoping for the New Creation.................86
  Romans Chapter Six – What it means to be in the Body of Christ
  Romans Chapter Seven – Living in the Body of Christ While Sin is Still a Threat
  Romans Chapter Eight – Living in Christ While Waiting in Hope
  Summary

Chapter 4: An Epistle to 21st Century Girls............................141
  What Time is It? Liminality and Apocalyptic
  The Power of Sin
  The New Mortal Body
  Hope
  Righteous Action
  Violence

Chapter 5: Confronting the Powers in Community....................203
  Girls Who Paint
  Paul Revealed: Seeing from the New Creation Perspective
    Modeling Perspective
    Question Posing
    Naming the Powers
  A Call to Arms
The Body
Conclusion: Hope That is Seen is Not Hope

Works Cited.........................................................................................................................259

Biography.........................................................................................................................265
List of Figures

Figure 1: One-Eared Mickey Mouse ......................................................... 217
Acknowledgments

My love of Paul began with taking a course called “The Apostle Paul” in Spring Term of my junior year in college. I am deeply grateful to the professor of that course, Alexandra Brown, who has continued to support me in my studies of Paul and in my life ever since. Her love of Paul and the clarity of her reading of Paul’s apocalyptic worldview were both contagious.

I am extremely grateful for my dissertation committee for reading through chapters, bearing with me as dates shifted, and spending their time, energy, and wisdom on my education. I am humbled by their taking my work seriously. Thank you to Susan Eastman, Evelyn Parker, and Mary McClintock Fulkerson.

At the head of that committee is Fred Edie, who has been a tireless dissertation supervisor, academic advisor, mentor, and friend in my years at Duke. He is wise and patient, thoughtful and attentive. He believes in the importance of ministry with young people and the transformative potential we in the church hold to help not only young people, but all of us, respond to the grace of God. He has always taken me seriously and helped me to think carefully through what I am arguing. He is an excellent teacher. He helped me find my way from being a pastor to being a student again to being a professor. Thanks does not seem a sufficient word.

My thanks also to my mom, my first and last editor and my best cheerleader. I also want to thank Joyce Mercer and Dori Baker, both of whom gave me the gift of their time, insights, and guidance at different stages of my work. I truly benefit from their work and their willingness to consider me a colleague. For the nuts and bolts of this project, which I could not have figured out on my own, I thank TWB, Jonathan
LeMaster-Smith, Joel Harding, Chris Gonzalez, and Elizabeth Bendler Bannon. The headaches you saved me cannot be counted.

The majority of this dissertation was written during my year as an American Association of University Women (AAUW) Dissertation Fellow. I am grateful for their support, but am mainly grateful for their tireless efforts of empowering women and girls. I am honored they see me as part of their important work.

Andy, my patient, supportive, and loving partner, I thank you the most. You have always believed in me and my work, sometimes for the both of us. You have ministered with me and built a family with me. You are how I was able to finish a degree, be in ministry, and start a teaching job, all while parenting our two children together. I am a better scholar because of you.
Chapter 1

Apostle to the Adolescent?

You chose the kind of friends you wanted because you hope you could be like them and not like you. To improve your image, you made yourself more stupid and less kind. As the months passed, the trade-off for belonging started to feel too great. The shutting down of some vital part of yourself, just so you could be included on a shopping trip into town, not have to sit on your own at lunch or have someone to walk home with. Now among friends, you were often lonelier than you had been before. The hierarchy of girls was so much more brutal than that of boys. The boys battled for supremacy out on the pitch and, after, they showered away the harm. The girls played dirtier. For girls, it was never just a game.¹

- Allison Pearson, *I Think I Love You*

I was listening to NPR in early 2011 and heard an interview with author Allison Pearson, who had just published her novel about teenage life in England. I really wasn’t interested in the book until she read the above excerpt from it. I ordered it that day from Amazon.com. She put into words what middle school felt like to me.

I was in middle school when I started thinking I might want to be baptized. I was active in a youth group led by passionate and caring adults and college-age volunteers. I went on retreats and work missions. I was an acolyte. And yet I don’t think I let that vital part of myself come back to life until I was nearing the end of high school. This may be partially a developmental stage, but it is certainly a theological problem, one that, no matter how active I was in youth group and church, was not answered. I did not know how to think theologically about my life. Though from my years in youth group, I did

know I should give some of the money away I earned waitressing, should not have sex before marriage, and should generally treat people nicely.

Then I met the apostle Paul - not in a Bible study, a sermon, or a youth group lesson, but in a college classroom. Reading his letters opened my eyes to a way of processing my teenage years and current struggles. I now had the theological lens I had so desperately needed in middle and high school. I began working as a youth director of my home church while I was in college and have continued working with youth ministries in some capacity ever since. I constantly see the need for Paul’s perspective in the lives of adolescents.

This is where the inspiration for this project arises.

Why Paul?

The Bible is regarded as an authoritative source for ministry across the age spectrum in Christian churches. The United Methodist Church, in which I am ordained, and from which the interviewees in this project come, states that, “The Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”² In my experience in churches, including their youth ministries, I have heard Paul’s epistles used in mainly moralistic ways: they are used to offer a fairly black and white version of what a Christian should or should not do. They are also used to explain the sinfulness of

---

humanity as a result of human misdeeds. Paul’s exhortative comments found in his letters are taken as isolated and conditional statements. Paul tends to be used to tell folks that if they do what Paul says, then they are really Christians (or really good Christians). His statements about sin are often interpreted as being the result of an individual’s free will choosing (whether consciously or not) to act against God’s will. He is often read as dualistic, seeing the body as problematic for the spiritual well-being of a person’s soul. These interpretations of Paul are founded on a concept of the person as an individual who is willfully or ignorantly acting against God. The individual is charged then with making a decision to be better, to do better, and to stop sinning. This negative and individualistic view of the person in relation to God is then supported by interpretations that Paul provides people with the correct course of action, which although they are unable to take, should be aware of and feel badly about when they do not do so. Paul’s letters are rarely taught in churches in ways that offer liberation, despite Paul’s own words declaring “For freedom Christ has set us free.”

This word of freedom, a liberative word, in Paul’s writings comes from his theological perspective on the world, something called “apocalyptic” theology. In short, understanding Paul’s worldview assists in recovering his writing as good news. Detailed exploration of Romans 6-8 as apocalyptic literature will be developed in chapter 3, and the implications of that for ministry with adolescent girls will be explored in chapters 4 and 5. What follows in this chapter is an introduction to apocalyptic interpretations of

---

3 Galatians 5:1a, NRSV.
Paul’s work and an introduction to the ethnographic research that yields a conversation partner for those interpretations in the lives of adolescent girls.

Beverly Gaventa, a New Testament scholar, points out the problematic nature of the term “apocalyptic.” She notes that often apocalypticism conjures images of violence, destruction, dualism, and escapism.\(^4\) For those in youth ministry, the term often brings to mind the *Left Behind* book series written by evangelicals Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. This series, a fictional account of the end times, is loosely based on Scriptural references mainly in the book of Revelation and is immensely popular in Christian evangelical circles, especially with young people.

The term “apocalyptic” comes from the Greek word, ἀποκάλυψις, which shows up often in Paul’s writing. The word can be translated as revelation or unveiling. Clearly, there is linguistic connection in the translation of the word as “revelation” and the title of that book in the Bible, which is the Revelation of John. The interpretation of the book of Revelation as a prediction of the end times is consistent with the evangelical understanding that the Bible should be read as literal truth with direct application to today. For Paul, the term “apocalyptic” and the way it informs his entire worldview is quite different. Revelation is the gospel revealed to him by Christ. God has revealed the world for what it is through the act of Jesus as Christ on the cross. Paul says that the gospel was apocalypsed to him (Galatians 1:12). The Christ event – what happened on the cross when Jesus died and then was resurrected – reveals the identity of God and Jesus and also reveals that there are other players in the universe, namely the powers of

Sin and Death. These anti-God powers\(^5\) were conquered in that event, though their presence is still very real in this time before the eschaton.\(^6\) The term apocalyptic will be used in this work because it is original to Paul’s language, although I recognize that there are difficulties in using the term.

Another term used in this work will be “new creation.” This is shorthand for the new reality that exists since God has broken into the world as Jesus Christ and is also the term Paul uses to describe the fulfillment of God’s promise for which creation waits with longing (Romans 8:22-23). The title of this book comes from the above concept. Reading Paul with an awareness of his apocalyptic worldview, with a cognizance of how this worldview affects everything that he writes, and with attention to the very way he writes, is an irreplaceable resource for offering a liberative theological lens to adolescent girls for the interpretation of their lives. To know the world as Paul knows it is to see God’s revelation in Christ, to perceive its effect on the whole of creation, and to realize that the powers of Sin and Death are defeated. Knowing from a new creation perspective is to know the world and one’s self through the new reality which Christ ushers in and in which Christians participate now through their incorporation into Christ through baptism. This happens in the present, though the new creation is not yet fully here.

While many New Testament scholars read Paul as an apocalyptic theologian, there is no official definition of what that means. Gaventa offers a useful definition, quoting from the Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism: “the belief that God has revealed the

---


\(^6\) “Eschaton” is from the Greek word ἔσχατος, meaning end or last. It is used to talk about the “end times” in which Jesus is to return to the earth as he promised, bringing about the end of time and the completion of the Kingdom of God.
imminent end of the ongoing struggle between good and evil in history.”

There are several different traits of apocalyptic outlined and used by different scholars. Some of these traits are common across the work of several scholars. These include: a concept of two aeons; the embattled sovereignty of God; cosmological language; an emphasis on suffering; and certainty of divine judgment of the present time. Apocalypticism has implications for how the individual is understood, for agency, and especially for the concept of Sin. All of these themes will be explored in the course of this paper.

The concept of two aeons in Pauline correspondence includes reference to the present time and the time yet to come. Paul calls the present time the “present evil age” in Galatians 1:4. He refers to the time yet to come (that has already begun) as the “new creation” in verses like Romans 8, 2 Corinthians 5:17, and Galatians 6:15. J. Louis Martyn points out that discerning what time it is lies at the heart of Pauline apocalyptic. In looking at the way the world was conceived at the time of Paul’s writing, he notes that it was comprised of certain “antinomies” that kept the world in order. Martyn uses that term “in an idiosyncratic way, namely to render the numerous expressions by which the ancients referred (in many languages) to a pair of opposites so fundamental to the cosmos, being one of its elements, as to make the cosmos what it is.” He notes that in Paul, the old antinomies have gone away, while new apocalyptic antinomies have taken root in the ground of the new in-between time. This is one way to discern that Paul sees that the time has changed and the world is fundamentally changed because of it.

---

7 Ibid., 80.
9 Ibid., 115.
10 The present time is in-between when Christ comes and when Christ comes again, it is in-between when the world has been broken into by God and the time in which the new creation is fully here.
Galatians 2:16, 3:28, and 6:15 show these old pairs of opposites disappearing and new pairs of opposites taking root. The time is neither the present evil age nor the new creation, but rather the new creation breaking into the present evil age in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Throughout Paul’s letters there is evidence of this concept of the old age ending and the new age coming, a change that happens because God has entered the world as Jesus.

In this time in between the fulfillment of the new creation and the present evil age into which God has sent Christ (Galatians 1:4), the sovereignty of God is embattled. Looking at the promises and hopes expressed in the Bible for God’s world, one can quickly see that those promises and hopes are not yet fulfilled. If God’s sovereignty was unchallenged, the world would look quite different than it does. New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann notes, “[t]he world is not neutral ground; it is a battlefield, and everyone is a combatant.”  

Martyn notes that although this battle is currently ensuing, the end is not in question: God’s sovereignty will win out. He writes, “the nature of this present battle is determined, however, not only by the past event of Christ’s death/resurrection, but also by the future event of his parousia. The apocalyptic drama encompasses, therefore, not only the real and present warfare, but also the confidently hoped-for consummation of that warfare in the future.”  

This language about the embattled sovereignty of God shows up in places like Romans 8:38-39 where the powers and principalities that threaten the Roman Christians are spoken of in stark language, though

---

12 “Parousia” is a Greek word meaning advent or coming; meant to refer to the second coming of Christ.
13 Martyn, Theological Issues, 64.
with the confidence that they cannot separate “us” from the love of God in Christ. The power of Sin and Death which battle the sovereignty of God are also seen in Romans 5 and 6. The language of battle, war, and of Christians being enlisted as soldiers in this fight is powerful, although clearly violent.

Violence is not foreign to people in this country, and adolescent girls are no exception. Girls are aware of violence in this country. They have grown up in a post-September 11, 2001 world; they hardly remember a time when our country was not engaged in war. At the time of my interviews, the news of the killing of Trayvon Martin was fresh in the minds of the girls with whom I spoke. In the New York area, many were aware of the death rate of men of color in exchanges with police. Not only do they deal with this overt violence, but much of what they face is violence to their emotional and spiritual well-being. Stanley Coopersmith, educator and psychologist wrote, “children return home from school each day like warriors home from the battlefield.” Although this language of war, battle, and soldiers must be examined closely and carefully, lest it seem apocalyptic theology encourages or celebrates violence, it is also true that it is an appropriate way to describe the lived experience of adolescent girls in our current time.

Those who participate in Christ, which is how Paul talks about Christians, endure suffering at this time when the sovereignty of God is embattled. Susan Eastman notes that this kind of suffering is inevitable when one does not conform to, and even dies to, the old cosmos. She points specifically to Paul’s labor pains in Galatians 4:19 and his call

---

14 Ibid., 65.
15 As quoted by Dawn H. Peck, "101 Ways to Fail School" (lecture, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, November 1988).
to the Galatians to become like him in Galatians 4:12. In fact, she notes that all the texts where Paul asks or tells his readers to become like him are connected to a “willingness to suffer for the sake of the gospel.” These passages show up in 1 Corinthians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philippians, in addition to Galatians. Those who are in Christ with Paul will suffer; it the natural result of living at odds with the old cosmos that has been invaded by Christ. The new creation has begun within the old creation because of God’s intervention in Christ. Living as a new creation within the old order causes suffering. Other letters, too, show how suffering is connected with the new apocalyptic reality. For example, in Romans 8:18-19 Paul talks about how the sufferings of this age cannot be compared to the glory about to be revealed. In 1 Corinthians 4:13 he talks about how he is considered as refuse, which is proof of his being in Christ. For women and girls who suffer in some way, this can be good news: they can understand their suffering in a new theological way. However, like the language about violence and warfare, the idea of suffering as a new creation at odds with the old order must be handled carefully. Too many women and girls have stayed in abusive relationships because they feel they somehow deserve that kind of suffering. Debra W. Haffner has authored books on raising sexually healthy children and teenagers and is the director of the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing. She writes, “Dating violence is real. Almost half of girls and boys report that they have been hit, slapped, punched, or sexually coerced by their dating partner.” Too many girls have been told that “beauty is pain” as they starve

17 Ibid., 28.
themselves. Additionally, there are also other ways adolescent girls suffer, which came up during the course of interviews for this project.

Pauline apocalyptic offers an explanation and context for this kind of suffering. In apocalyptic theology, the old age is marked by submission to the power of Sin. In this in-between time, Sin still holds sway and causes suffering. Sin expresses itself in dating violence and the unattainable beauty myth. Sin is found taking a foothold in relationships between people. Apocalyptic theology exposes Sin for what it is and how it expresses itself in the lives of adolescent girls. Apocalyptic theology offers a lens for perceiving how suffering occurs at the hands of Sin. The present time is a time of suffering, and this suffering is temporary. Paul offers a theological context for suffering and a certain hope in its ending. He does not glorify suffering for its own sake and yet at the same time, he is also aware that suffering is inevitable in this apocalyptic in-between time.

For those who have been baptized into Christ, there is present hope in the fact that their suffering takes place within the Body of Christ. They are no longer suffering alone. Not only do they have people alongside them while they suffer, their suffering is part of a bigger picture. All of creation is suffering because of the power of Sin. As girls cry out against injustice on a large scale and the intimate ways it affects their daily lives and concept of self, their cries join creation’s own painful cries. Suffering does not happen for the sake of suffering; it occurs because it is part of waiting for the birth of the new creation. Moreover, in this time of suffering at the hands of Sin, girls are called to act

---

against Sin along with other members of the Body of Christ. Those who are in Christ are
told to fight against Sin. They do not sit idly by waiting for the new creation and hope
they can endure the suffering long enough to see it come to fruition. They join forces
with God against Sin and actively participate in the new creation’s impending birth. They
endure the suffering because it will assuredly end and because new creation cannot be
birthed without it.

Cosmological language is another marker of apocalyptic writing. Paul writes in
this way in places like 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 8. Martyn argues that Paul’s
apocalyptic is like the Hellenistic 3-Actor Moral Drama way of conceiving of the
world. These actors are God, humans, and anti-God powers. The anti-God powers are
revealed to be cosmological in scope. Sin is not exclusively cast as the action of a
competent human actor, but also as a supra-human actor itself. Moreover, the actions
taken by these supra-human actors, which Paul calls “Flesh,” “Sin,” and “Death,” are
enslaving powers; they are against God and against humans acting in freedom with God.
Käsemann points out that when Paul talks about human existence, it is always
cosmological in scope. He writes,

…existence is always fundamentally conceived from the angle of
the world to which one belongs. Existence is ‘in flesh’ in so far as
it has given itself over to the world of the flesh, serves that world
and allows itself to be determined by it. But since confrontation
with the creator is characteristic of this world,…even believers are
not withdrawn from the flesh while they are on earth. But they are
no longer forfeit to the flesh and can fight against its demonic
power. They can only do this, however, if they are ruled by the
other world and the power of the divine Spirit.21

21 Käsemann, Perspectives, 26.
In this way, whether one is “in flesh” or “in Christ,” it is conceived of by Paul as a sphere of being, a world. This is dissimilar from typical body/soul or body/mind dualism. This is not about whether an individual decides that they are going to listen to their physical impulses or rise above them by means of spiritual fortitude. Instead, there are realms of power that exist because of the cosmological scope of the current time. The world of the Spirit of Christ invades the world in which humanity lives and therefore humans can be ruled by the Spirit and fight against the anti-God power of the Flesh while still in its corporeal reality. According to this perspective, the Flesh as a power is not the same as a person’s physical body, rather it is Sin establishing itself in a person, which includes their body, and commandeers human agency. Flesh becomes Sin’s partner. In the sphere of Christ, one is free, both bodily and spiritually, to operate differently in this world and be part of a new community that is not available when one is in the sphere of Sin.

The certainty of divine judgment of the present time comes from God’s involvement with this world at this time. This judgment is another trait of apocalyptic theology and is seen in places in the Pauline corpus like 1 Thessalonians 5:5 where the children of light are compared with the children of darkness; 1 Corinthians 1:18 where those who are perishing are compared with those who are being saved; Romans 5:18 where condemnation and justification for all is expressed; and in the cosmological language of God’s final victory in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28.

Apocalyptic is a way to conceive of the world, of time, and of reality as a whole. The claim of Paul is that this world, at this time, has been invaded by God in Christ. The anti-God powers of Sin and Death have power during this present time and are engaging
in a war with the power of Christ and Grace and the Spirit. When this war is over, Grace will triumph. Those who are in Christ are in the new creation already, while at the same time waiting for the new creation to come to its completion. They vicariously participate in the new creation through Christ’s resurrection as they wait for their own because they have died with him through their baptism. This is a vivid and powerful way to conceive of reality. If taken as the true picture of the time in which we find ourselves, there are implications both for how to interpret Paul in the authoritative Scripture that is the guide of Christian faith and for how to live in this world. The implications for adolescent girls will be addressed in chapters 4 and 5, including a new theology of Sin that speaks to their experiences in a liberating way, including their understandings of the self, others, the world, and view of the body.

In addition to the challenges of using the term “apocalyptic,” there are significant complexities of reading Paul in this way, because it is often so different from the traditional readings of Paul Christians expect. Paul is largely an untapped resource for liberative ministry for women, including adolescent girls. Certainly this in part due to the concerns feminist theologians, biblical scholars, and church goers have in struggling to interpret texts like 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, where Paul writes that women should stay silent in church and submit to their husbands. These concerns are valid. Therefore, methods like biblical historical criticism should be brought to bear on interpretation of this and other problematic texts. Women who have been hurt by some of what is in Paul’s letters and how these letters have been used by the church to oppress them will be surprised to find that Paul also offers the church, who looks to his letters for truth regarding claims about God and the world in which we live, a resource for liberation for
women. In fact, reading Paul also offers insight into how to hold churches accountable for their sexism, as will be shown in the following pages.

**Why Adolescent Girls?**

My own gifts for and experience with youth ministry and my own experience as an adolescent girl have led me to consider this population for research. Since beginning this project, I have also become mother to two girls who will, in the not too distant future, be adolescent girls themselves. My years in youth ministry have shown me the deep struggles that adolescent girls in particular face. I have worked with girls who struggle with eating disorders, addictions, self-mutilation, questions of sexuality and expression of sexual desire, body image, and self-esteem. I have seen them think about larger systemic issues like racism and sexism as they struggle to make sense of the world and their place in it. Youth curriculum, even those targeted toward girls, seems not to offer much more than advice for making the “right” decision around these topics (moralisms). This does not seem enough to approach the complexities and depth of these struggles. Having found a liberative word in my own studies of Paul, therefore, I began to approach his writings, which comprise so much of the New Testament canon, with the question of what he has to say to these girls, to myself as a teenager, and to my daughters once they become teenagers. These struggles, along with some of the reasons behind them, like marketing industries in this country, violence against women, patriarchy, racism, and family

---

22 For example, Beverly Gaventa, writing about Galatians: “If instead of asking only about the relationship between Paul and the historical audience of this letter, or about Paul’s attitude toward women, we ask about the letter’s profound theological dynamics, then Galatians emerges as a powerful voice articulating God’s new creation, a creation that liberates both women and men from their worlds of achievement and identity.” *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 74.
systems, lend themselves to finding a message of freedom and empowerment utilizing an apocalyptic perspective. Vocational and personal interests, therefore, are a part of why I chose adolescent girls as the population on which to focus for this project.

Pauline apocalyptic theology is a liberative opportunity for Scriptural study, worship, and for providing a theological lens for interpreting one’s life. There is freedom from the things that threaten people’s humanity and wholeness in this theology. This freedom is for the whole of the cosmos, given the scope of apocalypticism and the promise of the new creation. Freedom is not limited to the population of adolescent girls in the United States, or the adolescent girls who are in the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church (the particular population of girls interviewed for this project). However, there are some reasons why adolescent girls are a particularly interesting and important population with which to read Paul and use his theological lens.

From my own observations from the interviews conducted for this paper, I have reached the following conclusions about these girls. They have a critical eye toward the world around them. They are often aware of hypocrisies that exist in the church, their school, social expectations, and their families. They are frustrated by double standards that they see operating around expectations and assumptions about boys and about girls. They have a passion for life, an excitement and an energy, that is almost palpable when speaking to them about their lives and their faith, about what matters most to them. Like most children and young people, they are not quite as cynical and resigned to the world the way it is as adults can be. They are honest. They want to tell their stories and to be heard; they know the value of speaking. They have vibrant spiritualties. They are not idealistic about the world around them and yet maintain hope in the future. They are fun
and funny. They see the world in bright colors, rarely in black and white. They are thoughtful and take the asking of questions about themselves seriously. These characteristics are strengths for being able see in the way that Paul sees.

Joyce Mercer notes particular characteristics of adolescent girls that can be helpful in introducing and working within an apocalyptic framework. Mercer writes that “elements of compassion, integrity, vocation, and justice” make up girls’ spirituality. They do not separate their spiritual lives from their everyday lives, therefore their spirituality is wound up in and expressed in what they share about their lives, even if it not and explicitly spiritual or religious topic. Mercer argues that the spiritual lives of girls are composed of two aspects of their experience, that of their day-to-day lives and that of transcendence. Importantly, she notes,

Adolescent girls are particularly well positioned to hold the tension between these two aspects of spirituality. Whether by social construction or biological factors, girls especially live in their bodies, highly aware of their own embodiment in all its immediacy. Furthermore, girls tend to place priority on relationships in a way that invite interconnection with their contexts – a certain consciousness of those around them…at the same time, developmental features of adolescence mean that these girls have heighted capacities for imagining larger-than-self realities.

Adolescent girls, therefore, are particularly well positioned to perceive the world similarly to the way in which Paul did, with three very real actors in their sphere of experience: God, themselves and other humans, and anti-God powers. In addition,

---

24 Ibid., 125.
25 Ibid., 127.
adolescent girls are in deep need of a theological framework for their lives that can be both liberating and empowering. Evelyn Parker, a practical theologian, writes that “[a]lthough Christian feminist, womanist, and mujerista theologians have made great strides in articulating the effects of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism on the spiritual lives of women, parallel research and publications on adolescent girls has been minimal.”26 These realities of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism are clearly present and operating in the lives of adolescent girls, as my interviews show. This project is designed to offer a theological lens that is particularly well-fitting for adolescent girls; it may help them understand these realities in a theological way and respond in life-giving ways to them.

Religious educator Dori Baker echoes Parker’s concerns about the lack of attention to these matters in the lives of adolescent girls. She writes that in the 1970s-1990s while women were working to transform the church and offer new ways of thinking about God from their unique position as women, girls were often left out of these conversations.27 At the same time, psychological literature was spending a lot of time talking about the particular challenges that girls were facing, including eating disorders and cutting. She writes, “While academic, athletic, and professional arenas opened wide to support and encourage girls, their spirits seemed to be quietly growing smaller, snuffed out by a culture that demanded that they be ‘smart, strong, and bold’ as well as thin, athletic, and above all, nice.”28 These pressures are certainly still operative in

28 Ibid.
the lives of girls, however, the girls I spoke with are strong and resilient, something that both Baker and Parker noticed in their work with girls as well. This project offers tools for the empowerment of adolescent girls in the face of societal and familial pressures, along with the systems of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism that threaten their humanity, sense of self, and often their safety.

Methodology

I interviewed 24 girls between the ages of 12 and 19 in the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. The New York Annual Conference is a regional designation within the United Methodist denomination. The area includes New York City, Long Island, Western Connecticut, and the Hudson Valley, almost up to Albany. The girls I spoke with are all active in their United Methodist Churches, many of them are new members of the church, having been confirmed and taken membership vows in the past several years. I reached out to some of the girls directly because I already knew them through my work with youth ministries in the Conference and my work as an ordained pastor in the Conference. Some of them were parishioners in churches I previously pastored. The others I reached out to through their district superintendents, pastors, or youthworkers. Thirty girls were initially interested in the project, twenty-four followed up with setting up interview times and turning in their informed consent forms.

The interviews were conducted in spaces the girls requested. Some were in their churches, some were in public spaces like cafes or coffee shops, some were in the homes of their youth workers. Of the 24 girls I spoke with, 13 were interviewed in groups of 2-5.
The others were interviewed one-on-one. Initially, I envisioned only doing one-on-one interviews enabling me to hear more stories from each girl’s life. However, some of the girls requested to speak with me in groups. The first group interview I did was with two girls, who expressed clearly that they would be more comfortable interviewing together rather than separately. This was one of the first interviews I conducted, and I did so as a kind of experiment, knowing I could simply choose to not use the interview if it turned out to not work as well as a one-on-one interview. As our conversation progressed, I learned that one of the girls suffered from selective mutism, a psychological condition that rendered her unable to speak during specific times of stress or anxiety or with specific people.29 When she was unable to speak to anyone, the other girl was her mouthpiece – the one person to whom she could vocalize her thoughts. This had been the case since childhood, and the two girls are now seniors in high school. Clearly, she was someone who benefited from the presence of her friend during a research process that involved speaking. I realized that the comfort of the girls during the process was extremely important to me and I needed to consider this option for future interviews.

Joyce Mercer writes that adolescent girls “tend to place priority of relationships in ways that invite interconnection with their contexts – a certain consciousness of those around them.”30 This may be part of the reason that group or pair interviews were preferential to some girls, maybe especially for those girls who did not have a prior relationship with me.

30Mercer, 126.
In their chapter, *Writing on Cellophane: Studying teen women’s sexual desires, inventing methodological release points*, in *The Methodological Dilemma*,³¹ Sara I. McClelland and Michelle Fine make the argument that speaking with girls in groups is sometimes a better methodology than one-on-one. They argue that, “Wrapped in a kind of *collective discursive cellophane*, we believe it may be difficult for [teen women] to speak as their tongues are weighed down with dominant assumptions and panics; and, similarly, our ears may be clogged with our own dominant (feminist) discourses for their desires.”³² McClelland and Fine are writing about their methodology of studying teen women’s sexual desires. Among the many suggestions they offer for how to do such research, they note the collective wisdom of girls and the way girls will encourage the conversation forward, adding to each other’s comments in a group setting. Although sexuality and sexual desires did come up in my interview protocol and the interviews, themselves, this was not the focus of my work.³³ However, their argument about girls’ assumptions and my own expectations and desires for our conversations about their life and faith rang true. I therefore determined that interviewing in a group would be an important dynamic to include in the project. I offered the option for a group interview if a girl, her parent/caregiver, or youth minister asked if it was a possibility.

The interview protocol was designed with special attention to the power dynamics of the interviewer/interviewee relationship. Elliot G. Mishler, Professor of Social

---

³² Ibid., 232. Italics original.
³³ My interview protocol was approved by the Duke University Institutional Review Board, May 2013.
Psychology at Harvard University wrote an important book on interviewing from his perspective as a scholar of narrative psychology. He writes, “In the mainstream tradition the interview-interviewer relations is marked by a striking asymmetry of power, this is the central structuring feature of interviews as research contexts.”\(^{34}\) Mishler argues that empowering respondents in the interview situation tends to produce narrative accounts as they speak, and that, importantly, “through their narratives people may be moved beyond the text to the possibilities of action.”\(^{35}\) These interviews were not an end in and of themselves; I sincerely hope that sharing their stories open up possibilities for action in their lives. These stories certainly open up possibilities for action in the ministries churches offer adolescent girls as part of their community; these possibilities are explored in chapter five.

Some of the interviews were emotionally difficult for me as the interviewer. In addition to stories celebrating the strength and resilience of the girls who shared them, girls also shared stories of great pain, anger, mistrust, and frustration. I struggled with dropping into the lives of these girls, hearing their stories for my own research purposes, and leaving again. Girls often do not feel or operate as if they are subjects of their own lives. They have limited freedom because of their age, family responsibilities, and realities of the neighborhoods they live in and schools they attend. They are made objects by the intense and intricate marketing industries of the United States who seek their disposable income. I did not want to make them the objects of my work, or to use or


\(^{35}\) Ibid., 119.
misuse their stories. I wanted to respect them as subjects of their own stories, which they add willingly to my own work. I consider them collaborators.

In efforts to respect the girls and the stories they shared, I tried to level the asymmetry of power between myself and the respondents in some key intentional ways. This power came from my being a middle class, white adult, and authority figure in the church as an ordained clergywoman. I was very aware that these girls were taking time away from their lives, mainly from their summer vacations or summer employment, to help me with my dissertation. I thanked them for their participation. I began and ended each interview with time for the girls to ask questions of me. Sometimes these questions were seeking more information about my school project. Sometimes these questions were about why I wanted to interview them. Sometimes they had no questions. In two different interviews with groups of Black girls, I was asked if I had experienced racism. Some of the girls asked if they would be able to read my dissertation when it was complete.

The girls also thanked me for interviewing them. Though I found this initially surprising, I have learned that is often the case in ethnographic research done by religious educators. Margaret Ann Crain and Jack Seymour conducted interviews of religious educators using ethnographic methods in their research. They found that “…people and congregations often share themselves in open and trusting ways, thanking the researcher for the opportunity to be interviewed.”36 Their interviews gave voice to some of the same questions I was asking myself during the process of my own interviews with adolescent girls: “What right do I have to even hear these people’s stories? And when I have heard

---

36 Margaret Ann Crain and Jack Seymour, “The Ethnographer as Minister: Ethnographic Research in Ministry” Religious Education 91, no 3 (Summer 1996), 300.
them, how must I respond? Am I a dispassionate researcher? Am I in ministry?"  

They insist that when a researcher interviews someone, they participate in their culture and transformation occurs, both for the researcher and the interviewee. The question of what kind of transformation that will be is a question of ethics that was important to consider for my own ethnographic research. The findings from Crain and Seymour’s interviews with religious educators who have done ethnographic research add to my own theology of research. Their findings, along with the methodological insights of Mishler and McClelland and Fine, helped me in designing my interview protocol, carrying out the interviews, and interpreting their findings for use in this project. As they point out, “[c]aring ethnographers begin with a passion for understanding, hoping their interpretations will benefit those being studied.”  

I began with passion, both for Paul and for ministry with adolescent girls. Having had the stories of these twenty-four girls shared with me during the course of my research, it is indeed my goal that my interpretations of their stories in conversation with Paul will benefit these girls and others over time.

The interview protocol was designed in three groups of questions. The first was basic background information, the second was religious life, and the third was more in-depth questions about their experiences as a girl in 2013. Although the questions served as a guide for the interviews, I was not bound by them. I often allowed the conversation to flow naturally, picking up on things the girls spoke about that they were obviously interested in or experiences that they had had that were particularly meaningful. Sometimes information I had anticipated would come later in the interview would come

---

37 Ibid., 306.
38 Ibid., 306.
up at the beginning. Using Mishler’s methodology as a guide, I followed his perspective that interviewing is a “form of discourse between speakers.” This was because I am interested in liberative ministry with girls and Paul as a resource for this ministry, it was important to me that the interview process itself be a practice of freedom. Encouraging narrative and viewing the interview time as a time of conversation or discourse between myself and the girls was part of putting into practice the theology explored in this paper.

The anonymity of the girls is preserved; no real names or specific locations within the New York Annual Conference are used in this paper. This practice of maintaining anonymity of respondents is controversial. Mischler points out that while sometimes confidentiality is “consistent with the aim of empowering respondents,” sometimes it instead reinforces the decontextualization that is a part of an interview process and deprives them “of their own voices.” I did not therefore take the decision to opt for anonymity lightly. In the interest of protecting the privacy of the girls, all of whom were extremely open and honest with me, I determined that using a pseudonym would be the best course of action. As a member of the New York Annual Conference who has been active in working with youth here since 2003, I felt it would be difficult for the girls to have open conversation with me if their confidentiality were not ensured. I know many of their parents, youthworkers, and pastors. I did not want them to worry that their stories would come back to people with whom they were not already comfortable sharing those stories. Additionally, because most of the girls are minors, I approached our conversations with additional sensitivity. They were informed that our conversations

39 Mishler, 7.
40 Ibid., 125.
would be used for my dissertation and possibly for other future publications. They were
told that I would be obliged to report any abuse that I suspected or they reported, but that
other than that our conversations would remain confidential. Therefore pseudonyms are
used throughout the paper in referring to the girls with whom I spoke. Rather than
assigning them a name, because names carry so much cultural and personal connection, I
asked each girl to choose their own name. In one interview, I forgot to ask this piece of
information. When I emailed after the interview to ask for a pseudonym, I did not hear
back. Therefore, the pseudonym of “Lena” for one of the interview participants was my
own creation. All others were the choices of the girls interviewed. Many of the girls were
excited about this part of the process. They often had names that they wish were their
names and were excited to use them. Some of them picked the names of their heroes from
television or the music industry. Three seemed to struggle to find a pseudonym.

Christian Smith and his collaborators in their project for the National Study of
Youth and Religion, interviewed thousands of youth in the United States over a long
period of time. He has published three books following the religious lives of young
people in this country. The project was extremely large in scope; the conclusions he has
drawn from it have influenced many educators, scholars, and pastors in churches. In his
conclusion to Soul Searching, the first of the books written on the research, Smith and
coauthor Melinda Lundquist Denton conclude that youth are generally very articulate
about their lives and their hopes and dreams, but not about their religious beliefs. “In our
in-depth interviews with U.S. teenagers, we also found the vast majority of them to be
incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its
meaning or place in their lives.” Based on their research, I expected to find these interviews difficult to conduct. I did find their conclusions to be consistent with some of the interviews I conducted, usually with the younger participants. However, in most cases, I found the girls were very thoughtful about their religious beliefs and were very articulate, if not about their actual firm beliefs, then about the questions they were seriously considering and through which they were working. Some girls did have very firm beliefs they could articulate clearly. During several of the interviews, I asked the girls if they had ever been asked these kinds of questions before. In all but a handful of cases, they said no. Those who had, mentioned that something “like this” had happened as a part of their Confirmation process. This leads me to wonder if the expectation of articulation of beliefs is an appropriate one for youth. If they are not asked to think through questions of their beliefs, they may not be able to articulate them. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they do not have beliefs that are extremely meaningful in their lives. In some cases, the girls were working through articulating their beliefs for the first time during the course of their interview. Often times they would pause, consider the question, and work through it aloud in conversation with me. This did not mean they did not have beliefs prior to the conversation, but rather that they had never been asked to articulate their beliefs and the effect of those beliefs on their lives prior to our interview.

The Interviews

---

Of the twenty-four girls interviewed, I have chosen to spend significant time focusing on Sam, Sadie, Tay, Brooke, Raven, and Genevieve. Although any of the girls would have fit as focus points for this project, these six girls were diverse in their theological commitments and life experiences, thus forming an interesting sample on which to focus. About half of the interviews were conducted one-on-one, the other half were conducted in groups. This sample group of six accurately reflects that split: three were interviewed in a group, three were one-on-one. Although these girls are not meant to be representative of all adolescent girls or even all adolescent girls in the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, they do illustrate how the ideas of Pauline apocalyptic theology can enrich the lives of girls of different backgrounds and social and theological locations. Sam is Asian, Brooke is Hispanic and Latina, Raven is Caribbean American, and Genevieve, Tay, and Sadie are white. These girls are from different socio-economic backgrounds, ranging from lower middle to upper middle class.

Sam and Sadie both attend the same church. They have been attending their church for as long as they can remember and are friends outside of their involvement in church activities, although they attend different high schools. They both live near their church. Sam is 17 years old and a junior in high school. Sadie is 15 years old and a freshman in high school. I knew both girls prior to the interview.

When asked about her ethnicity, Sam describes herself as Asian and as “a banana.” When asked to share more about what that means to her, she says, “yellow on the outside, white on the inside. I don't know, I don't really see myself as Asian, though. I don't see myself as anything else… I am Asian. I do like my skin color.” Sam was adopted from her birth country by two white American parents. She lives in a
predominantly white neighborhood. She attends a school with a diversity of races and cultures and where her group of friends is not white. Sam lives with her mother, father, and younger sister, who was also adopted from an Asian country. When asked about her sexuality, Sam responded that she is gay, something she has known about herself “ever since I was little.” She came out to her parents in eighth grade. She describes this process as going “fine.” Her mother works for a computer company in another state, but works mostly from home. Her father is a stay-at-home dad.

Sadie lives with her father, mother, and younger brother. When asked about her ethnicity, Sadie responded, “I'm white. I wish that, I mean, I, OK, I know it sounds like it doesn't, it doesn't sound good to say I wish I wasn't white, 'cause that shows a lack of understanding. Because it's a lot easier to be white. And that's why I wish I wasn't white. Which is so stupid and, like, so not thankful of whatever, or, it's, I don't even know. I mean, like, I don't know, but like, at my school especially, like at the beginning of the year everybody always called me that white girl. And it was just like, oh my God. And it was annoying…” Like Sam, most people in her neighborhood are white, but most people in her high school are not. When asked about her sexuality, she responded, “Oof, I wish I knew…so for a while, like when I was in middle school, like when I was in eighth grade I was like, ‘OK, I'm gay because I like girls, and then I was like wait,’ and then, so this, like at the beginning of the year people all would be asking me out, and they were boys and I would be like, ‘nope.’ And I would tell myself, ‘it's...'cause you're gay. You don't like, you don't like guys, so, like, why would you?’ and then I don't know, like, I just, it bothered me so much that I couldn't, like I couldn't tell if I was gay or if I was straight, and then so I was like I'm bisexual, because that's both. And then I decided that, like, I'm
neither. I don't know why because it just frustrated me so much that I wasn't gay and I wasn't straight…But then my brother, like, he's always saying like, ‘Sadie's gay,’ but that bugs me because I'm not gay. I don't literally like boys, but I don't feel gay.” Her father is a minister and her mother is a professor at a community college.

Brooke describes herself as 50% Spanish and 50% Latina. Both of her parents are deceased and she lives with her aunt and uncle, both of whom are retired. Her aunt used to work for a bank and her uncle used to own a repair shop. She moved in with them once her mother passed away when she was 11. She did not live in the New York area until then. Her mother passed away from complications from surgery for a condition from which she herself also suffers. A year ago, she underwent the same surgery that resulted in her mother’s death. She is 16 years old. She also has an older half-brother, with whom she has not lived since their father died when she was 3. She describes her sexuality as “straight.” She and her mother tried attending churches when she was younger but they never found one that they liked. She began attending her local United Methodist church when she moved in with her aunt and uncle because it was the church that they attended.

Genevieve is a member of the same church as Brooke. The two of them were part of a group interview with three other girls from their church. She went through Confirmation Class with Brooke and both of them joined the church after that class ended in 2009. Genevieve is 17 years old and in her junior year in high school. She lives with her father, mother, and two brothers. The three siblings are triplets. Her mother has a part-time job, which Genevieve could not specify. Her father works for a manufacturing company. She describes her ethnicity as “white” and her sexuality as “straight.” She was
brought up in her local United Methodist Church and says that she always attended and went to Sunday school. She has lived in her town for her whole life.

Raven is 18 years old. Our interview took place during summer vacation after she had just graduated from high school and was preparing to attend a state university in the fall. Her interview was also a group interview, with three other girls from her church. She moved to the United States from the Caribbean country in which she was born 13 years ago with her mother. Her father and his family remain in that country. She has strong ties to that country, its culture, and its food. She has been attending her local United Methodist Church since she came to the United States. Her mother works as a financial representative for a hospital. It is clear that she and her mother struggle some financially. She states that her mother “believed in the whole ‘American dream’ you could find a better life living here… Which is completely a lie.” She describes her sexuality as straight.

Tay is 17 years old and just completed her senior year in high school. She plans to attend community college for two years and then transfer to a design school. She wants to major in photography. Her parents both work at different stores. Her father is a salesman and her mother works as a receptionist with some responsibilities for bookkeeping. She was looking for a job at the time of our meeting so that she could buy a car in order to get to her classes at college while living at home. Tay has had a difficult relationship with church. Her church has gone through several different pastors in her time involved there. One of her previous pastors, who was there during Tay’s confirmation, was known to be ineffective in ministry. Tay describes how this situation caused her father to stop being involved in the church until their current pastor was appointed about a year ago. Tay
herself also has some difficulties with the attitudes of some of the members of her local church whom she calls judgmental. She has been active in a denominational Christian formation program that involves retreat weekends and small groups. This is where she finds the most support for herself and her faith. When talking about her ethnicity, she refers to the many European countries from which her family ancestry originates. She describes her sexuality as “bisexual,” something that she has only recently come to terms with and has not shared with her parents.

**The Project**

This book is organized with the intentionality of focusing on the experience of adolescent girls as primary for research, exegesis, and pedagogical decisions. Chapter two is an exploration of who adolescent girls are in terms of sociology, psychology, and theology. In addition to these overviews from other fields of research, this is where the particular stories of the six girls I have chosen to highlight will be shared and described in more depth and in conversation with the information offered by those secondary sources. Chapter three is an in-depth look at Pauline theology as expressed in Romans 6-8. This chapter is focused on exegesis of these three chapters, highlighting those themes that intersect most clearly with the experiences and concerns of the adolescent girls I interviewed. When writing this paper, I chose to begin with the stories of the girls I interviewed. Their stories and voices were in my head as I closely read Paul’s words to the community in Rome. The whole letter, and especially chapters 6-8, offers opportunities for hearing both the more traditional readings of Paul as well as the more liberative reading. This enables the contrast between these traditional readings and the
apocalyptic reading to be clearly seen. Seeing Paul’s apocalyptic worldview involves a more complicated anthropology and hamartiology, and has implications for action in the world different from what traditional readings of Paul might suggest. Chapter four offers a conversation between the exegetical insights gathered from this close reading of Romans 6-8 and the stories of the girls interviewed. Chapter five is the concluding chapter, which offers pedagogical and ecclesial implications of the conversation in chapter four. J. Louis Martyn argues that Paul’s letters were intended to do something. “…Paul’s rhetoric presupposes God’s action through Paul’s words, this rhetoric proves to be more revelatory and performative than hortatory and persuasive, although it is both.”42 This means that if Paul’s letters can be read in such a way that its intended revelatory and performative functions operate, then the revelation of God, the anti-God powers, and the lives of girls will happen. Certainly there are reasons that Scripture is hard to read and hard to approach for teenage girls. Part of the task of this paper is to offer ways for Paul’s apocalyptic worldview to influence the way girls perceive their world. The hope of this final chapter is to offer concrete ways for adolescent girls to also know their world from this perspective: a new creation epistemology. Additionally, this final chapter offers pedagogical suggestions for how to mentor girls into having a theological perspective on their lives that is informed by Paul’s wisdom, especially as found in Romans 6-8. This final chapter is about apocalyptic, and therefore liberative, pedagogy for adolescent girls and their communities of faith.

Chapter 2

Being a Girl in 2013

If one envisions the teen years as an adventure on an unexplored, sometimes wild, river, the boarding dock might be the safety of childhood and the landing dock the unknown region of adulthood. In between, imagine the boiling rapids, pleasant calm places, narrow chutes, wide bends, swirling eddies, huge boulders, and occasional shore-line havens that remind one of the safety of childhood. If one were a teen girl about to set out on this voyage, whom and what might she take along? What would be the skills one might need? Who might one’s companions on the trip?¹

In the United Methodist Church, “youth ministry” is defined as: an inclusive title encompassing all the concerns of the Church and all activities by, with, and for youth. The youth ministry of United Methodist Church shall include all persons from approximately twelve through eighteen years of age (generally persons in the seventh grade through twelfth grade, taking into account the grouping of youth in the public schools), who are currently or potentially associated with the church or any of its activities.²

The twenty-four girls interviewed from the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church are all currently associated with their local churches. Most of them are members of their local churches. “Youth” is the church word for the developmental distinction “adolescent.” According to the American Psychological Association, there is no standard definition of adolescence. According to their reference manual for professionals working with adolescents, “Although often captured as an age range, chronological age is just one way of defining adolescence. Adolescence can also be defined in numerous other ways, considering such factors as physical, social, and

² Book of Discipline, 184.
cognitive development as well as age.” For the purposes of their reference manual, they define adolescence as ages 10-18, noting that for some professionals in the psychology field, the upper limit may be even 21-25.

Seeking to understand who adolescent girls are, to get a full picture beyond and in addition to what they shared with me in these interviews, the fields of social and developmental psychology can offer some insights. There are, however, limitations to their helpfulness. These fields examine “normal” adolescent behavior, as expressed and determined by theories about the growth and change people experience over time. However, these secular fields of research fail to take into consideration that no matter what life stage someone is in, they are a full and complete creation of God’s. Theology can speak about who a person is and understands the transformations that happen throughout life in a different way, though aided by research in these other fields. In painting the picture of adolescence, it is helpful to explore some theories about what is happening in the adolescent brain and with social interactions during the age range I am exploring in this project.

Whatever the age or developmental stage, adolescence is a time of liminality. This is a time in which someone is neither a child nor an adult. In the culture of the United States, it is a time of limited freedom, limited responsibility, and preparation for the next step. Attendance in high school, whether public, private, or at home is mandatory for the majority of adolescence. Public high school curriculum is designed to prepare students

---


4 Ibid.
for their life after leaving high school – whether it is to continue education or to enter the workforce. Public high schools offer a combination of academic classes that are designed as college preparation and classes that focus on practical skills. Adolescence is a time after childhood and before adulthood. It is culturally, academically, and physically liminal. The advantage of this liminality is that it can offer abundant space for intentional reflection on one’s life so far and discernment for where one wants to go next. Negotiating this in-between space socially and developmentally can be challenging. Adolescence is also a time of self-discovery and identity-making.5

One of the main cultural ideas about adolescence is that as a teenager starts to develop a concept of identity, it is inevitably a time rife with conflict within oneself and between oneself and one’s family of origin. As churches seek to minister effectively with adolescents, it is important to look into this idea of adolescence as a tumultuous time. Christian educator James Loder wrote, “the young person is making a major transition in development, with the disequilibrium as intense as any other since birth.”6 Usually this causes some amount of conflict between the teenager and his or her parents or caregivers. Loder notes that adolescents disclose patterns of society in their sometimes seemingly psychopathic behavior. He writes that the adolescent can exhibit “depression as aggression directed against the self; manic-depressive mood swings; obsessional guilt and compensation; hysteria…; suicidal thoughts as displaced aggression against one’s caretakers; and megalomania, in which the adolescent will now resolve the world’s

If adolescence is characterized by these signs of a troubled society visited in the particularity of one’s home and sometimes directed at one’s caretaker, then it seems inevitable that there be serious conflict during this life stage. Following Loder’s assessment, teenagers are a kind of microcosm disclosing problems of society in a volatile way to their own social and family locations. As teenagers begin to see their identity as separate from their families of origin, they may seem to pull away from their parents and begin to exercise their wills and to search for their own identities. Loder, working from Erik Erickson’s work on identity in adolescents, explains the adolescent’s search for identity as, “a consistent sense of oneself” through given different axes: the bodily, ideological, authority, love, and work. “On all of these axes the adolescent ego is striving for a balance that transcends the extreme of rigidity on the one hand, and diffusion on the other.”

Erickson himself wrote that adolescents are “sometimes morbidly, often curiously, preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are…” Importantly, Erickson’s theory of development and way of understanding the adolescent stage was highly influenced by G. Stanley Hall’s work at the beginning of the twentieth century. Hall interpreted adolescence as a time of “storm and stress.”

Hall was the first psychologist to take seriously the psychology of adolescence as a stage separate from other childhood stages. According to Hall, adolescence is the

---

7 Ibid., 204.
8 Ibid., 207 and all of chapter 9.
stage from puberty to adulthood, generally about age 12 or 13 to somewhere between 22 and 25. This period of storm and stress, a term which comes from a German literary genre, is characterized by extreme contradictions and paradoxes needs and emotions. Thus adolescents are unstable and vacillate regularly, they are impulsive. Adolescents are also heavily influenced by peers. The end goal of this stage, reaching adulthood, is characterized by maturity, which in turn allows for future development. Hall envisioned adolescence as a river, much like the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, in which adolescent energies must be harnessed or risk being dissipated downstream to the detriment of the society to which these youth have the potential to contribute. David White points out that although Hall’s ideas have largely been discounted, “their residue still informs our view of youth.” Adolescence is generally viewed in our society as a time of deep unrest, conflict with parents and other authority figures, and experimentation. Many adults are intimidated by adolescents and view them as somewhat dangerous. These fears and the residue from Hall’s writings in the early twentieth century hinder the relationships between adults and adolescents. Adolescents are kept separate from adults, in high schools and in church youth buildings, containing them and “keeping them safe” until they have reached a more mature and stable place that is also more socially acceptable. In this separate and liminal space, the wisdom and insights that adolescents offer as part of the gift of their being the age that they are, is lost, overlooked, and ignored. As White points out, “Hall’s vision of adolescence as a river dammed and

13 Ibid.
exploited accurately expresses the perspective that dominates the imagination of the North American church, distorting our relationships with youth and aggravating, if not creating, many of the problems in youth ministry.”

Psychologist Jeffrey Jenson Arnett helpfully traces the responses and critiques to Hall’s theory of storm and stress. Arnett argues that there is evidence that adolescence can be, but does not have to be, a tumultuous time in a person’s life and can result in conflicts with the adolescent’s family. He writes that there are benefits to understanding that whether due to biological or cultural, or a combination of both, adolescence can be a difficult time. “Although it is true that if adolescence is expected to be a time of ‘turmoil’ there may be adolescents whose problems go unrecognized and untreated, it is also true that if adolescence is expected to be no more difficult than childhood, then adolescents who are experiencing normal difficulties may be seen as pathological and in need of treatment.”

Through my ministry with teenagers and my interviews with the adolescent girls for this project, I can confidently say that adolescents are faced with many of the same difficulties as those in other age groups. The search for self and the implications of those discoveries on existing relationships and ways of understanding the world and one’s place in it can continue well beyond adolescence. Every life stage involves resolving and understanding new facets of a constantly forming identity. Growth, development, identity formation, and stress are not limited to adolescence; nor do all adolescents experience

\[\text{14 Ibid., 35.}\]
\[\text{15 Jeffrey Jenson Arnett, “Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered,” American Psychologist, vol. 54 no.5, (May 1999), 324.}\]
their teenage years as a time of tumult. There are also adolescents for whom this life stage is particularly challenging as identity formation and relationship renegotiations in families and with friends take place. It is also true that if adolescence is assumed to be a time of storm and stress, adolescent concerns may be taken lightly, which invalidates and silences their voices and experiences. White’s claim is that assumptions of what adolescents experience in their development are largely negative. Loder’s description of adolescence as a time of “seemingly psychopathic behavior” can cause adults to be afraid of teenagers and to seek to avoid them, when in actuality teenagers are seeking direct involvement of caring adults in their lives.\textsuperscript{16} Listening to what adolescents actually say about their lives is important. Rather than taking these assumptions at face value, in listening to teenagers, adults can begin to see how their stories either confirm or contradict these assumptions. If adults approach adolescents trusting that these kinds of assumptions are universally true, not only are they likely to want to distance themselves from teenagers, they are also likely to be dismissive of the difficulties adolescents face in their lives and not take seriously their view of the world. The challenges that adolescents face need to be evaluated on an individual basis, taken seriously. Whether or not they are in need of psychological treatment, there are resources available through the Christian faith to help these adolescents negotiate the difficulties they do face.

According to James Fowler, the adolescent faith is taking shape as their sense of identity is also developing. In adolescence, a person is beginning to claim her faith as her own. Fowler’s extensive research, which sought to understand faith development in terms of stages similar to how psychologists have understood emotional and psychological development, shows that close to 80% of people between the ages of 13 and 20 locate in stage three or between stages 3 and 4. Close to 90% of younger teenagers and older children (ages 7-12) locate either in stage 2 or between stages 2 and 3. Faith stage 3 is characterized by authority being outside of the person, rather than internal, “despite their genuine feelings of having made choices and commitments, a truer reading is that their values and self-images, mediated by the significant others in their lives, have largely chosen them.”¹⁷ Teenagers are self-conscious, can be egocentric,¹⁸ and find their identity in their peers’ reaction to them. Teenagers seeking to create their identity will do so by taking cues from their peers. Fowler’s work certainly does not apply to all people, many of whom develop in their faith at quicker or slower rates that he included in his work; however, it does offer helpful generalizations as adults who work with youth seek to understand the young people in their care.

In looking at adolescent brain development, it is helpful for those who are in ministry with teenagers to know the shape their thinking can take. One of the main goals of K-12 education is to help young people develop critical thinking skills.¹⁹ There are nationally standards devised for general critical thinking skills expected of high school

---

¹⁸ Ibid., 153.
students based on the fact that these skills are necessary for them to be successful after high school and based on their developmental readiness. People with critical thinking skills are able to negotiate the challenges of daily life, they are able to think about their own thinking (metacognition), and they are able to think abstractly. Though critical thinking used to be a sign of the intellectual elite, it is now expected of high school graduates. This skill is part of how people function responsibly in the United States:

In the world beyond the classroom, high school students are exposed to powerful messages that confound efforts to think critically. The vital need for critical thinking in and beyond formal learning in everyday life, relationships, ethical choices, and in the maintenance and development of participatory democracies grows increasingly apparent. The proliferation of information via the Internet will only be managed effectively by individuals with well-developed thinking skills.

Exploring where adolescent girls are developmentally and considering that critical thinking is one of the explicit goals of their formal education in this country is a helpful way to begin to understand some general aspects of who adolescent girls are. However, and not surprisingly, the best way to understand adolescents is to listen to directly to them. This is true for adolescent girls as a segment of that population as well. Among others, practical theologians Joyce Mercer, Dori Baker, and Evelyn Parker endeavor to do this in their recent works that engage with the lives of girls. Mercer’s book is based on interviews with adolescent girls who were participants in the Youth Theological Initiative summer program at Candler School of Theology. Mercer found through her conversations with these young women that their religious lives were an integral part of

\[20\text{ Ibid., 3.}\]
\[21\text{ Ibid.}\]
\[22\text{ Joyce Mercer, GirlTalk/GodTalk; Evelyn Parker, ed. The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls: Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gender (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006); Dori Grinenko Baker, Doing Girlfriend Theology.}\]
their self-understanding. Faith was not a separate topic, but something that was interwoven into every part of their lives and developing identity. Similar to White, she notes that youth are relegated to separate spaces from adults and that their stories are not often heard. She writes, “Despite the fact that faith plays such a huge part in their lives, adolescent girls are not asked very often to talk about it. And when they do engage in such talk, their understanding of their own religious experiences may be discounted or not taken seriously.”

What follows are excerpts from the interviews arranged by topics around which the girls seemed most animated. Like Mercer, I found that the faith lives of girls are woven through these topics, whether or not they are “religious topics.” The topics covered in this chapter, explored using the words from the girls themselves are “Clothing the Body,” “Sin,” “Temptation,” “Racism,” and “Sexism.” These topics contribute to the picture of what life is like for adolescent girls. Their emerging sense of identity, their critical thinking skills, their faith formation, and their general perspective on the world surfaces from their words those topics most important to them. Many other topics were covered during the course of the interviews, but these six topics had particular energy associated with them during conversations. Whether asked explicitly about them or asked seemingly unrelated questions, girls’ experiences seemed often to stimulate mention of these topics. The qualities of resilience, critical thinking, engagement, and their willingness to tell truth all come through in conversations surrounding these especially important topics. They show what these girls are struggling with and how they think

---

23 Mercer, GirlTalk/GodTalk, xxiii.
24 Ibid., xxiv.
through the problems with which they are faced. Also clear in these conversations is that
girls are ready to share their wisdom and experiences openly when asked and when their
answers are taken seriously.

**Clothing the Body**
Adolescent liminality is a time of biological and sociological change. Although
persons develop throughout the lifespan, the biological change during adolescence is
quite dramatic and happens relatively quickly. For girls, these biological changes are
accompanied by cultural expectations and pressures. Historian Joan Brumberg notes that
there are particular challenges for girls going through these two areas of change.

Puberty begins earlier today, which means that girls must cope
with menstruation and other aspects of physical maturation at a
younger age, when they are really still children emotionally. Until
puberty, girls really are the stronger sex in terms of standard
measures of physical and mental health: they are hardier, less
likely to injure themselves, and more competent in social relations.
But as soon as the body begins to change, a girl’s advantage starts
to evaporate…The explanation of this sex difference lies in the
frustrations girls feel about the divergence between their dreams
for the future and the conventional sex roles implied by their
emerging breasts and hips.  

The girls interviewed for this project often voiced the challenges they were faced with in
terms of their changing bodies and responses they received to their bodies and how they
were clothed. These responses came from peers and from adults, sometimes in church
settings and sometimes in school or social settings. Girls’ perspectives on and
experiences through their bodies were connected to their understanding of their faith as
well.

---

Two of the editors of the American Psychological Association’s 1999 volume about adolescent girls note that often girls are viewed as being preoccupied with appearance. As noted above, teenagers can be egocentric and self-conscious, which may be one way to interpret adolescent preoccupation with appearance. These editors title the volume *Beyond Appearance*. From the interviews I conducted, I found that these girls were often concerned with their appearances. They talked a lot, whether prompted by a question or not, about clothes, body image, and how their appearance is received by others. The problem with Johnson and Roberts’ statement is they assume that along with this “media and societal attention”, girls’ “self-absorption with appearances” is surface level. From my conversations, when girls talked about appearances, they were well aware and critical of what lies beneath the surface: consumerism, fashion industry, pressure to have a certain body type, generational differences, sexism, racism, and assumptions made based on appearance. It turns out that the way girls experience their lives as embodied people is not at all surface level, nor is it self-absorption.

Adolescent girls experience their lives as embodied. They do not see their bodies as separate from their emerging identities, but rather integral to it. Brumberg writes that for contemporary adolescent girls, the body is the site of expression of the self, “The body is a consuming project because it proves an important means of self-definition, a way to visibly announce who you are to the world.”26 Contemporary womanist theologian Shawn Copeland writes about the importance of the body as well. She states

---

26 Ibid., 97.
that “the body is the site and mediation of divine revelation.”27 The body, then, is an essential way to experience the Holy. For the girls I interviewed, their bodies were an important way they experience their lives and a lens through which they seek to understand their faith and their faith communities.

Connecting the body and soul together is unusual in Western Christianity, which tends to negate the body or to view it as inherently problematic or even dangerous to a person’s spiritual life. This view of particularly the female body as problematic or dangerous is shared by American culture as well. Brumberg writes that this view in our society toward the female body is connected with the awareness that although girls reach sexual maturity (begin to menstruate) earlier than in the past, their intellectual, social, and cognitive development does not mature as rapidly. She notes that, “Although early maturation is known to increase vulnerability to all kinds of psychological and social problems…young women are less protected and less nurtured than they were a century ago.”28

When I asked Sadie what makes her faith journey more difficult, her answer was quite succinct, “I would say myself,” she responded. I asked her to say more and she indicated that she was weak, emotionally and physically, and that she didn’t like herself sometimes. She saw places she has grown in her life so far, noting that watching movies, for example, used to be very troubling for her but that she is able to not get quite so upset by what she views as she used to. She also recognizes that she can see emotions as a

possible strength of hers. But growing beyond disliking herself in terms of her appearance is something she still struggles with.

Sadie: And that's also why I get frustrated with the way I look. And I can't do anything about it, I mean I can try. And I tell myself that I can do stuff about the way I look, but I can't really.

E: What would you change?

Sadie: I think I'm too fat... I don't think anybody's ever called me fat in my life...Well, that's a lie. But, for the most part.

When I asked her more about where she has received messages about being fat, other than from herself, she mentioned people in school who had told her she didn’t dress right or gave her tips about where to buy jeans. She mentioned someone she spent her summers around who would “always ask me how much I weigh.” She also mentioned that until late in middle school she did not feel that she had friends who really liked her, she says she felt annoying to them. Somehow being annoying to others was connected to her weight.

I wanted to ask about the liminal space that adolescents inhabit so during our conversation, I asked Sam what she thought it meant to be a woman and what was different about being a woman rather than being a girl. Her response, however, was about the difference between being a man and being a woman. In this interview, it was me who brought up clothing in order to see what Sam’s thoughts were on the messages girls receive about clothing. I brought the subject up in the middle of this conversation about sexism, which she had previously named without my introducing the term or concept.

Sam: [The difference is] maturity level... Cause it's sort of the same as just being a man. Um, you have responsibilities...I mean you have your family and friends,
but, you know, can't really depend on them all the time, and uh, yeah. Cause when you're a kid, yeah your parents can take care of you. They sign you up for classes, you don't have to call the store to return stuff. They do it, so, yeah, just doing stuff like that. Um. It's not necessarily, I think the only difference is from being a woman and from being a man is, um, standing up to sexism. I guess 'cause men don't necessarily have to do that. Just a man, unless they're gay, then they don't have to do sexism but they have to stand up for that.

I asked her about what kind of clothes she wears and she indicated that no matter what she was doing, she basically wore the same kind of comfortable clothes.

E: What about what you see other girls wearing?

Sam: Um, it's hard not to make judgments 'cause you know society's made you that way, but.

E: Society's made you what way?

Sam: I don't, it's just, first impressions, first judgments on someone, oh she must be a slut. I mean I hate that word, but yeah.

E: Because of what?

Sam: Because of like, she's wearing a shirt that goes up to here, like sports, sport bra...

E: It's like just below her bra.

Sam: ...and, um.

E: Sports bra and shirt?

Sam: Just wear a sports bra, you know, just don't wear a shirt. Um, and then like shorts that basically show the start of your butt. Um, I used to not get it, so I used to wear shorts that were like here (points to close to her knee), but then I started wearing short-shorts, and like hey, this is actually like nicer. Cause then, the other shorts are just so hot, so I understand now partly why, um, people wear short shorts. But then like really short shorts, it's like you're just wearing underwear, just come to school…in a bra and underwear. It's really not different.

E: So why do you think girls wear really short shorts, and really, I guess, short shirts?
Sam: Um, I mean people see it as they want attention, but then, um, you also, I don't know how to put this, um, you also have the people who say, you know, girls should be able to wear what they want, you know, and not, um, have guys just holler at them, and uh, um, just because they wear something skimpy doesn't mean they want attention just because of their fashion. Which I think is true, sometimes. But for girls at my school, I don't know. It sort of does feel like they want the attention. Or they want to show off something.

This tension that Sam alludes to is common for the girls I interviewed. Girls want the freedom to wear what they want without judgment or undesired attention, but at the same time, they are aware that sometimes girls choose their clothing in order to get some kind of attention. Is it an exercise in freedom to wear whatever one wants? Should there be limitations? If so, what are they and who sets them? When I asked the group of Black girls of which Raven was a part what they wish was different about their church, the subject of dress came up immediately. Beverly, who is sixteen, said that the church was judgmental, specifically around what girls were expected to wear, which she says is covered up and wearing “ankle skirt and stuff.” Raven, however, notes that girls with different bodies have different expectations placed on them. The following interchange took place between Raven, Beverly, and Monica, who is nineteen and Beverly’s older sister:

Raven: Like certain things are, like, hard to help. Like, to stop. Like if you have a certain body shape or something...[A] simple, plain black dress can look 10 times worse if you have no body, but if you have, like, a body with curves, a butt, and chest, then it's gonna look like it's sexy. But it's just, like, I'm wearing the same dress as another girl here. It's just that because she's a little skinnier, it may not look the same. But they don't take the time to look at it that way. They just see, "Oh look at her boobs and her butt all out! I can't even concentrate!"

E: Do you hear that? Like, are you overhearing people saying stuff?

Raven: Of course! No, they tell you.
E: They tell you right to your face?

Monica: Like, they'll tell my mother.

Raven: And then, I mean, we're a little younger so I mean, I personally don't like things to my knees, sorry. I'm not saying I'm going to come to church in a mini skirt. But, I come, like, my dresses can be, like, here (pointing to a few inches above the knee). But even here, I've already been told, "Oh your thing is so short; it needs to be below your knees." I'm 18 years old, where am I going with below-my-knees dress? Like, they don't even sell that for 18 year olds! It's so annoying! And it's just like, okay, you know, but then, like, I bet you if a skinny girl put on the same dress, but it went above her knees, she's not bulging out bodies so it's not gonna, like, show. You know?

E: So you said someone talked to your mom? About what?

Beverly: Yeah, um, about all of us, all my sisters. …Saying that, we, we need to cover up when we come to church and dress more appropriate. But I mean, and my grandma buys all our dresses! So, it's like, um, our grandmother. So, come on, like, I don't think it's that bad.

E: So what do you think they're objecting to? Like, what do you think the problem is?

Beverly: They want us to dress like them.

Raven: My personal issue is that I can't, the reason why I have a hard time agreeing with it sometimes 'cause I don't know if this whole dressing rule is man-made or like God said. In other words… why is a skirt here so wrong? Is that because adults don't like it, or is it because it's inappropriate to God himself? Like, how do we know, like, I feel like you're just telling me to do cause you don't like it. But I don't, I think, I don't know, I think in my head it's like, I'm here in church so God is happy with me just being in church. I didn't come here completely naked. I'm wearing clothes.

Monica - I agree with Raven, though, because like, I see some rules like that as man-made because, like, I feel like especially there's a lot of stress, like, the church will put on females and the way they dress and stuff like that. Um, and I think that's not even so much for our well-being like, you know, I'm not saying to come to church with like your butt and boobs hanging all out, but, like, if you, like, I feel like even if we do show a like little bit of shoulder or something like that, back then, that was like a big deal. Because of how it was perceived like it was scandalous. And why was it scandalous? Because it was considered like a seduction or whatever. So I see that more as a, like, being a man-made thought, like, we're taught to hide our bodies because, I don't want to say cause men can't
control themselves, but because, it's considered tempting to like, you know, people. And I feel like that's not, I kinda want to say, I don't want to say, I mean, it's not fair. But, at the same time I'm not saying, you know, go out naked. But I'm just saying, like, don't put restrictions on what we wear because some people can't control themselves. You know?

E: So, I'm hearing 2 different reasons why the clothing thing is such a big deal. And one is because it's kind of a traditional thing; it's just not what they're used to. And one is that it's because your bodies can be tempting to other people. Is that right?

Monica - Females have a lot of restrictions, you know?

The above interchange is full of important aspects of the girls’ lives and how they process what they experience. They are concerned about the ways girls and women are treated differently from men and boys. They experience this difference through the expectations placed on what they wear to church and how different female bodies wearing the same thing have different expectations. They do not want “restrictions” put on them around clothing because they feel they are capable of making their own decisions around such matters and being appropriate in their choices. Moreover, they see these restrictions as “man-made” rules that are put in place in order to somehow protect men who can’t control themselves. The conversation involves their faith. If it were a God-made rule, presumably they would feel differently about it, but they see it as a man-made rule to protect men from the temptation that their bodies (and how they are clothed) provide.

Raven points out that girls with different body types have different expectations placed on them about how they will clothe that body. She seems frustrated that her own curves make her seem sexually provocative in a dress that would not be considered sexy for a skinny girl. The critical eye with which these girls are evaluating their experience
about clothing and church shows how adolescent girls are able to pick up on hypocrisy and will point it out. They are asking important critical questions such as, do these rules come from God or from men?\footnote{Generally I avoid using gendered language and would instead write “humans” here. However, based on the conversation, I think it more accurately conveys the girls’ meaning to use the term they themselves chose – “men.”} Why might those rules be there? Why are rules different for some bodies than others? Why are rules put in place against women because of the actions of men?

Raven also points out how what girls choose to wear is often dictated by the marketplace, and not by free choice. She says, “I'm 18 years old, where am I going with below my knees dress? Like, they don't even sell that for 18 year olds!” She is uncritical of the marketplace for making this decision for her because she seems to not want to wear anything longer than what she sees sold in stores. Tay, however, also pointed to the fashion industry as a part of her experience in her body. She is critical of consumer culture and clothing is the way she experiences it. The marketplace has presented a challenge for her own acceptance and understanding of her body, as well as for her friends. Tay was quite interested in the subject of bodies and clothing; it came up in our conversation without my prompting. Having been directed to the topic by her English teacher, she had just finished her senior term paper on it.

Tay: …[T]he fact that, I've grown up being overweight constantly I've realized that there are very, very judgmental people when it comes to like the fashion industry and, um, being in high school when you're being overweight you're always being judged…And, the fact that you're a woman doesn't help, and, I'm always in between sizes, because of the way that my body is. And, there is nowhere that has clothes that fits me perfectly. So, I'm always getting either a size too small or a size too big. So, that's always been an issue for me, and my friends are always saying, “Oh,
you're just not looking hard enough.” I'm like, “No. There is no pair of pants that fits me perfectly.

E: So…the fashion industry tells you to wear they don't even offer you something to wear?

T: Yeah. And it just, the fact that the sizes are going low, like, lower in numbers instead of like higher. Which, people are complaining that America is the most obese country. And the fact that they don't even have clothes to fit us…Like, you're creating more of a kind of a risk for teenage girls going more towards eating disorders than losing the way [that is] healthier because they wanna lose it faster. So they can be in perfect weight for bathing suit season or summer. Just so they can fit in the bikini. Like it's putting more pressure on girls than it needs to, that's why there is a higher rate of girls killing themselves and girls cutting themselves and girls having eating disorders, because there's more pressure on females to look hot instead of to look natural… It's putting more pressure on girls to wear make-up and to look hot instead of looking like you're comfortable in your own body.

Because most of my friends have told me they are not comfortable in their own bodies no matter what size they are. [One friend is], like, a size zero, [another friend is] a size six or something like that. They're all, all of my friends are small. And they always complain about never being able to find something to wear. And I'm like, well how do you think I feel?... And we always get into arguments about that, and all of my friends hate the way that they look. And the fact that I have to hear my friends say that and them being absolute beautiful is making me feel horrible because, what does that make me? And, the fact that society is still bringing that upon teenage girls, it's making it harder for us to continue that message of being perfect the way you are, you're beautiful no matter what. My favorite quote, um, the lead guitarist of All Time Low has this amazing quote, I love it. It is my favorite quote. I used it in my senior thesis, it was the last sentence. It's "Beauty isn't judged by the size of your jeans." And that quote has made me realize that, no matter what size I am, I'm fine the way I am. If I'm happy, that's all that matters. And that's why I kind of brush off the fact that I'm overweight, I know I do need to lose weight, I am still trying to lose weight. But, for the moment I am still perfect the way I am. Doesn't matter.

Like Raven, Monica, and Beverly, Tay has a critical eye toward the way that bodies and clothes are viewed. Her focus in this part of our conversation was around the fashion industry and sizism, along with the way that her friends talk about themselves.

Elsewhere in our conversation she spoke, as Raven, Monica, and Beverly did, about how her church responds to her clothing. Tay mentioned that, except in the summers
and holidays when people are visiting from elsewhere, she is the only teenager in her church. In her area of the Conference, there is a large presence of a denominational ongoing youth gathering, which she has found more helpful for fellowship and formation because she has the opportunity to be with other youth. This gathering includes weekend experiences of spiritual growth and formation followed by opportunities for small group interaction after that experience, as well as continued participation in other weekend-long events as an alumna. She describes the event as involving people who care about her and can help in ways her church does not because they are “very judgmental because it’s all older people.” When I asked her how she experienced this, she pointed to several different situations, including disapproval in the congregation of her pastor being engaged to a non-Christian woman and people in her congregation saying that same-sex relationships are “disgusting,” when her view on the issue is quite different. She also pointed to how her clothes have been received:

Tay: Like if you don't show up to skirt, to church in a skirt, or a dressy outfit, you're gonna get judged cause you're not dressed appropriately for church.

E: So how, how does that play out? I mean, so you walk in wearing jeans, does someone roll their eyes at you? How do you experience that?

Tay: There's one woman who I do not get along with, I tried so hard to get along with her but everything she does annoys me and pisses me off. But, I came into church wearing a short sleeve shirt and a pair of jeans, because we were doing a church clean-up after church and I didn't wanna have to change. And she, like, rolled her eyes at me and I was like, “OK…what's wrong with me today?” And I heard her whispering to her husband, "She's not dressed appropriately, I would send her home if she were my child." I was like, “OK, well thanks.” So I, I always sit in the front because we have a laptop and a projector that projects the service onto the screen, so I control it. And, um, I like sitting in the front because I can't see people like whispering and judging and all that.
Although clothing and bodies are on the minds of many adolescent girls, this is far from the only thing about which they are concerned. There has long been an assumption that adolescent girls are preoccupied with their appearance. As two of the editors of Beyond Appearance write:

All too often, the passage of adolescent girls is viewed as inevitably problematic. All too often, media and societal attention have focused on how girls look or their presumed self-absorption with appearances...As we go beyond the appearance of adolescent girls into their competencies, their relationships and their communities, we see opportunities to enhance their voyage and ways to ease their passage.30

From the evidence offered by the interviews I conducted, their concern about bodies is not an unhealthy self-absorption but an exercise in developing their own critical lens and a struggle to understand the different messages they both receive and wish to send. There are certainly pieces of the conversations above which show that girls struggle with how to like the way they look, but this is not the main point of their talking about bodies and clothes. Rather, these points of tension around how a girl looks or dresses are actually about sexism, pressures from churches, society, and traditions, and the effects of the marketing of the fashion industry on how girls view themselves. The negative messages girls receive about their bodies and clothing become incorporated into their developing sense of self. These messages are often also received from their religious communities. When this happens, girls also incorporate these messages into their faith.

Practical theologian Katherine Turpin points out, “there is no way to live in the United States and avoid the powerful and relentless formation that the [consumer culture]
system offers.”31 American youth are a target of that consumer culture system. “The roots of the teenage market reached back to the 1920s, when the high school population first began to grow.”32 The teenage market may have first been noticed in the 1920s, but it reached new levels by the end of the Second World War. “American family life had witnessed a basic transformation: Adolescents were no longer children. They were ‘bobby soxers’ and ‘teenagers’ who had a voice and vote in family affairs and who fully expected to enjoy a private social life.”33 Along with a private social life, came spending potential. The culture and economy of the postwar United States created the environment necessary to launch teenage spending and therefore teenage marketing to new heights. 1945 was the year the first marketing survey research was done through Seventeen magazine to find out how to target young consumers with expendable income.34 Consumer culture that targets and exploits teenagers is detrimental to their healthy faith development. It capitalizes on teenage insecurities and takes advantage of their developmental stage. “By focusing on branding, companies hope to make their logos into a ‘personality’ – that is, a lifestyle, an image, an identity, or a set of values…This persona will, it is hoped, be taken on with verve by young consumers – whose disposable income stretches into the tens of millions of dollars.”35 As already noted, adolescent girls are sensitive to hypocrisies and unafraid to point them out. However, Turpin notes that as their identities are forming, adolescents are less likely to be able to see the hypocrisies in

31 Katherine Turpin, Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith, Youth Ministry Alternatives (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 2.
33 Ibid., 99.
34 Ibid., 103.
their own personal commitments. This may be part of what is going on when Raven is not critical of the fact that there are no dresses for her to buy that would go below her knee.

Temptation

One interview I conducted had a very different tone on the subject of dress. Like the interchange between Raven, Monica, and Beverly, this conversation included girls being held responsible for the behavior or reaction of boys or men to the clothing they choose to wear. Rather than being frustrated by restrictions put on females, sexism, the damaging effects of the fashion industry and media, and being held accountable for the inability of males to control themselves, this conversation included girls who accepted this reality and were eager to take responsibility for responding to it. They did so because of how their faith and involvement in their church community had formed them.

I asked this group of five girls how they thought about temptation and how boys and girls experience temptation differently. The conversation quickly turned to the clothing that girls wear. They recounted a retreat event they had attended that separated the boys and girls. The girls guessed at what the boys had heard. One girl guessed, “I'm pretty sure it was porn, sex, and stuff.” Brooke stated, “They just told us, like, not to bother them. Like, ‘Don't be tempting’… Make sure you don't do this or, like, but I'm pretty sure they were talking to [the boys] like, ‘Don't rape them.’ I'm pretty sure.” One girl, Britt Nicole, a seventeen year old Italian American who had just completed her

---

36 Turpin, Branded, 112.
junior year, stated that when it comes to premarital sex, girls are taking advantage of boys because for them “temptation comes in all directions.” She continued:

Britt Nicole: Disclaimer - I'm not saying that guys have it harder, cause they totally don't! But, I think that for guys the peer pressure temptation is totally a source of temptation, which I think girls experience. But, I think the guys have that, sort of like, I picture it coming from the sides. And sort of like the opposite directions from girls being, you know there are some girls who act like fools and who you know don't wear the most modest clothing and, um, make themselves very available and that is another source of temptation. So I think guys tempt each other and girls tempt them and they sort of have it coming at them from all directions.

From what Britt Nicole shares here, she thinks that while girls experience peer pressure like boys do, girls do not also experience temptation from boys. Boys on the other hand, endure peer pressure from other guys and the temptation of girls who “act like fools.”

Genevieve concurred. From her experience on a work mission trip and her conversation with some of the boys in her youth group, she determined that part of her goal as a Christian teenager is to not tempt boys who are trying to be good Christians by her choice of clothing.

Genevieve: …You see these girls walking around in the tank tops but they cut all the way down to like one inch [above the waist on the side]…And they wear sports bras. So you see the sports bra or the normal bra and then you have all this skin down here and it's just like you're every day clothes! Like, I never really thought about it too much, but then last year [on the work mission trip], um, I had this really in depth talk with my brothers and the other guys in the youth group and they were like, "It's so difficult! Because we're trying to be good Christian guys but these girls..." Even just like seeing the bra is just like enough to be like, "that's temptation!" So I have been very aware of the fact that it is tough for guys who want to be good because I figure the kind of guy that I want to end up is going to be like my brothers or like these other boys and they say they don't like it when the girls tempt them so I'm like, “Alright, well.”

If the body is the “ultimate expression of the self” and the body is a source of temptation to boys, as these girls have been taught and seem to uncritically accept, the

---

implications for their sense of self are immense. Brumberg points out that women’s bodies used to be controlled externally by social mores that dictated how much of the body was appropriate to display as part of this self-expression. This changed in the 1920s when, according to Brumberg, the fashion and film industries had “encourages a massive ‘unveiling’ of the female body,” namely arms and legs.\textsuperscript{38} The freedom to display the body meant that external controls loosened and internal controls needed to arise in their place. She connects these changes to social transformations towards industry and away from religiosity.\textsuperscript{39} The girls in this interview, as well as the prior interview with Raven, Beverly, and Monica, show that they understand the need for their own internal control over how they display their bodies. In fact, Raven and Monica explicitly state that they should be trusted to exert this control and are angry at others trying to do so. Genevieve, too, sees that she can exert control over herself, but the motivation is quite different because it comes from outside, namely, from the kind of boy she hopes to one day marry and therefore does not want to tempt now.

Lena is a 16 year old whom I met with in a restaurant over lunch. She is Latina American whose parents and brother immigrated to the United States before she was born. When I asked her about temptation, she also brought up her body, though in a different way. Her response was a gesture toward her plate, which had a grilled cheese sandwich on it. She spoke with tears in her eyes about how food is a problem for her because she views herself as overweight. We had just finished talking about sin and evil, she was wrestling with trying to understand if there really was evil in the world, or if

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
everything is relative. The example we talked about was Hitler. She wondered if he was in fact evil since it seems evil to kill so many people, but that he thought it was the right thing to do. She talked about how she herself has a “dark side” that shows up when she’s in a bad mood, isolated, sad, or not her usual happy self around her friends. She said that evil is “usually what doesn’t fit in society and rubs on it the wrong way… Especially for girls who deal with it more, like society, for them being perfectly skinny so they have to probably bring out a side they wish they didn’t or a darker side they wish they didn’t, just to deal with those [expectations].” When I asked her about temptation, her answer was about food after talking about the relativity of evil and her times of depression, which she had earlier related to talking about the expectation society places on girls to be “perfectly skinny.” She said her sandwich was temptation because it was leading her away from healthy eating and losing weight, which she likened to a moral value. In this case, it seems that although she is not necessarily aware of it, society’s pressure to be “perfectly skinny” has become a moral value for her, from which food is tempting her. Although she clearly sees the challenges with defining evil as relative, she seems to accept this definition of good from society, though she also seems to see that it is a complicated sense of good, since reaching that good requires girls to bring out their “dark side.”

**Sin**

Related to the topic of temptation is the topic of sin. Although the girls I interviewed did not specifically say that temptation leads to sin, it seems a fair conclusion.

---

40 My word, not hers.
to draw based on what they did say. For example, Genevieve states that the boys in her youth group are trying to be “good Christians” but that girls make it hard (impossible?) for them to do so. The opposite of being a good Christian might be a Christian who sins. Tay defines temptation quite succinctly as related to sin: temptation is “something that is guiding you more towards sinning than not sinning.”

Britt Nicole defines sin as “just deviating from God's desires for us as his children. …[I]t's an inescapable as human beings in general and you know, sin can be as big as murdering a person or as small as telling a lie. And, um, it's just anything that speaks less than God's name.”

For most of the girls I spoke with, sin was a confusing topic. Brooke was recently grounded for sneaking into an “R” rated movie and her aunt wanted her to consider that Jesus would not have been happy with her watching that movie. She seemed unconvinced that this would be the case, which led her to define sin as something that gets her grounded. So sin is defined by what her aunt does or does not approve of. But she then went on to define sin differently for herself. She said, “But sin for me is like when I regret doing something. Like when I really want to do something and then I think back and I was like, "Oh, I shouldn't have done that." I think for me that's sin. And then, a lot of the times, I try to like twist my thinking like, oh well, I had to do that. I couldn't avoid it. So maybe it wasn't a sin. And I always try to twist my words. But whenever you twist your words, it's a sin.” Most of the girls could not figure out how to define sin according to a list of dos and don’ts. They have received mixed messages about what a sin actually is and who gets to define it. Part of this is explained by the conversation mentioned above regarding clothing – who gets to make up a rule about good Christian behavior anyway?
Part of this is because girls trust themselves more than others do. Brooke was unconvinced that Jesus would care about her sneaking into an “R” rated movie, so she determined that sin meant something different to her aunt than it did to her. She takes her clues about sin from her own feelings around an action. If she feels bad, has regret, it was a sin. If she tries to convince herself that something was not really a sin, then it probably was.

Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton conclude that the dominant faith of teenagers in the United States can be termed “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD)\(^41\) This faith is evident in the way that many teenagers, religious and nonreligious, talk about their lives and their beliefs. One of the tenets of this faith, according to the authors who base their conclusion on thousands of hours of interviews with young people from all over the country, is that “central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person.”\(^42\) These morals can be provided by most of the world’s religions, but are not dependent on them. They are general and broad and subject to interpretation. “Being moral in this faith means being the kind of person that other people will like, fulfilling one’s personal potential, and not being socially disruptive or interpersonally obnoxious.”\(^43\) For Christians, the language of something being “immoral” or “unethical” is usually something categorized as a sin. With this general definition of morality in the MTD faith of teenagers in this country, sin is therefore conceived of in incredibly broad terms, and it is relative, what is a sin to one person might not be a sin to another.

\(^{41}\) Smith with Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162.  
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 163.  
\(^{43}\) Ibid.
Many of the girls I interviewed struggle with sin being relative, meaning something different to different people. Their dissatisfaction with the definition of sin being so unclear comes from having been taught that sin is only something morally wrong. Moralisms are often a default for Christian teaching about sin – do this and it is good, do that and it is a sin. These moralisms do not engage the critical thinking that is emerging in this adolescent developmental stage. The girls I spoke with are smart and will not be satisfied with easy answers that do not engage their thinking. If they can argue their way around a moralism, then the topic a moralism seeks to counter – namely sin – loses credibility with them.

Not all the girls I spoke with thought of sin as connected to a list of moralisms. When I asked Sadie how she thought sin is, she defined it as “Something that drives a wedge between you and God.” This is a very general definition and I pressed her for more detail:

E: How did you come to think about sin like that?

Sadie: When we did a confirmation class last year, that's what [teacher] said that it was. And I was like, I like that, I like that actually make-'cause...I had never got it, like, sin is, what? Sin is adultery, like that was, sin is this, sin is that, it was like a pointing finger thing, and I like the idea that sin is...something that drive a wedge between who you are and who God is, something that like separates you from God. I don't know, but it, it's like, it's, it's more comforting that way, because it's like, sin is not something that I am, it's like me, it's like a separation, I think.

E: A separation of you and yourself almost.

Sadie: Yeah. I think. Yeah, like, like [at the Conference youth event], …there was this woman and she was like, yeah, it's a sin that all these people are atheist, and I was like, well I don't agree with that, and she was like, yeah, it's sin that all these teenagers are always texting, and I was like I don't agree with that. … I mean I feel like for some people, their phone might drive a wedge between them and God, but that's like for them. Some people it might not. Some people that's how
they talk to people, and then God comes out of there talking, like I mean, I like
that it's a personal thing, like and it doesn't have to be a universal thing. Like for
some people the fact that they have sex a lot could be a sin, or for some people it's
like a celebration, I don't know.

The definition of sin as something that “drives a wedge between someone and God” is
not like the other definitions I gathered from the interviews. This is a healthier definition
for her because sin is not who she is, instead it is something that separates her from God.
When I asked Sadie about her beliefs about God, she said, “I think God loves every
single person. More than they love themselves. And no matter what they do God will
always love them…What's great about God is it's not like a real person where…they can
love you unconditionally but they expect you to sort of love them back; but God will love
you no matter what. And you don't have to even realize it.” In Sadie’s theology, God
loves no matter what and sin separates a person from the God who loves them. If instead,
Sadie’s theology was that sin is part of who she is, then it follows that she would have a
hard time seeing herself as good or lovable.

Theologian Wendy Farley writes that traditional theologies of sin and atonement
reinforce self-hatred.44 Sadie seems to intuit this when she talks about her alternative
definition of sin. In her definition, sin is outside of a person and causing a separation
between that person and God. There is no need for self-hatred in her theology of sin
because sin is not who she is. She finds this theology to be “comforting”. This was one of
two interviewees who did not equate sin with the action of a person. The other was Tay.

44 Wendy Farley, Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation (Louisville: Westminster John
Knox, 2011), 163.
Tay had preached a sermon in her church on the topic of teen cutting. She has friends who either used to or continue to cut themselves. Cutting is a form of self-injury that is quite prevalent especially among adolescents, and as of 2009, one study determined that girls were 3.4 times more likely to self-injure than were boys.\textsuperscript{45} Self-injury is defined as “a behaviour that involves deliberately injuring one’s own body, without suicidal intent and with or without pain,” and cutting is the most common form of self-injury.\textsuperscript{46} Tay is concerned about teen cutting and supports a nonprofit organization that works to prevent teen suicide and teen cutting; she also mentioned this organization in her sermon. She related that as a result of this sermon, she received “disapproving looks” from the people in her church. She says she would not feel comfortable bringing her friends to church because they, too, would be judged. Her church used to hear sermons preached on the fact that suicide is a sin. In fact, the father of a friend of Tay’s killed himself and his mother is a member of Tay’s church. After the suicide, this woman took her grandchildren out of her will. Tay was not sure about why she would do that after their father killed himself, but she thinks it is connected with the fact that suicide is considered a sin in Christianity. When I asked Tay if she considered herself a Christian, she said, “Kinda;” because of the view that suicide and gay marriage are considered sins and she does not. However, when asked what her definition of sin is, she struggles to come up with a definition that makes room for her differing beliefs about suicide and gay marriage.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
Tay: I think sin is something that you do against God's will and that it's something that will add up to, like if you sin so much, you're gonna go to Hell. And I always feel like, I don't know why, but I always picture it being like a chalkboard, like that the Devil is sitting in Hell with a chalkboard with your name on it...

E: Like keeping score?

Tay: Yeah. Like, I always pictured that.

E: What, how do you know what is against God's will? So how would you know that something you did or thought or whatever was a sin?

Tay: I don't know, I think I always just like, pictured it in my own mind like, I always look at it on what God would think. Like, I don't think suicide is a sin because the people who are causing that person pain or whatever is causing that person pain, I feel like that was the sin and they just needed to get away with it and make sure that they were safe in their own mind. And, that things were OK. And that they could be with somebody who would care for them for eternity and not...treat them horribly like they were back down on Earth. And I feel like, like I, I don't know how to describe it, but um, I feel like a sin is something that God would not look past and be something that you wouldn't be able to get rid of if you did go to Heaven. 47

Tay has two different concepts of sins. One shows a more traditional understanding that sin is something a person does. The image of the devil with the chalkboard keeping tally of things that “God would not look past” is stark and lacking in a theology of grace. The other is that sometimes there is something behind what a person does, which is the sin, rather than the action a person takes. For Tay, this concept of sin is at work in the situation of suicide. There is something behind the action of suicide, and that is sin. This concept of sin along with Sadie’s understanding that sin is something that separates a person from God are the only two theologies of sin I heard in my interviews that were not focused on individual action or some unavoidable part of being human, or of being a girl whose body is a source of temptation for males.

47 Emphasis mine.
The more common definition of sin for the girls I interviewed can be seen in Sam’s definition:

Sam: Sin. Uh. Not doing the right thing. Uh, not following morals. Um, you know stealing and all that. I don't know if lying is necessarily sin. If it's, if it's a, if it's one of those helpful lies. … I don't think having sex is a sin or having alcohol's a sin, or getting drunk is necessarily a sin. Because it's not really against a moral. It's just you're gonna have a really bad headache in the morning. And it's your fault, so, there you go. Um, yeah. But, I also, um, I don't believe in Hell. Uh, so, you can commit as many sins as you want. You should probably not. Cause people are gonna hate you.

Sam is unsure of what a sin is. She seems fairly confident that a sin is something that goes against morals, but she also seems unclear about what makes something a moral issue. “Stealing and all that” qualifies, but she can think of “helpful lies” and sees a hangover as a natural consequence of drinking too much rather than a sin that might have some spiritual consequence. When I asked how she came to believe this way about sin, she related it back to her theology:

Sam: Well, because with the whole teachings about love and forgiveness. You know, if God really forgives you on everything, why would God put you in Hell. You know? That's a really shitty punishment. If Hell is real. So, yeah. I think everyone, if there was Heaven-I don't if there's a Heaven, but if, I think everyone goes to Heaven. Everyone, bad or good, deserves to go to Heaven. If they are forgiven. So, yeah.

Her theology consists of a God who loves and forgives. This is inconsistent with a God who issues eternal punishment for sin. She has not been taught, nor has she come up with, a theology of sin that is consistent with her theology about the nature of God. Her ability to see and point out inconsistencies between a more traditional understanding of sin and her understanding of God show that she is thinking deeply about her faith life and trying to construct a theology without what she perceives as hypocrisy. Both Sam and
Sadie mention sin as relative. Sadie mentions that what drives a wedge between one person and God might not between another person and God, therefore she is wary of declaring a certain behavior (like someone’s phone or sex) as a sin. Sam is aware that there are “helpful lies,” therefore calling lying a sin does not make sense to her.

In one of the group interviews, this question of sin as relative came up and the girls discussed it together fruitfully. This part of the conversation includes Raven, Monica, Beverly, and Dawn. Dawn is a 17 year old Caribbean American who lives with her mom and her brother. She and her brother were born in the United States, their mother was not. I include a lengthy piece of this interview to show that the girls were seriously talking about their understanding of sin, questioning and challenging each other, and engaging their religious formation with their experiences as they seek to determine a definition of sin in order to answer my question. Prior to this part of the interview, I had asked about their beliefs in God and sin had come up then as well. That part of the conversation set the stage for my specific question about sin, the response to which follows.

Monica - Doing something you know is wrong. Just, not something, just doing something you know you're not supposed to be doing, doing it anyways. Just to do it. You know?

Beverly - So I think of sin as general, it's not specific stuff like tattoos and stuff like that. I think it's like general. Like, don't, you know, murder, and stuff like that to harm other people.

Dawn - I know that, like, I don't know, it's just like, like, in the Bible there's certain rules that you should do. It's like what they said, things change with time. So you don't even know what's sin anymore. Like, besides, like, I guess the obvious. Well, it's not even obvious anymore! Cause, like, "Don't kill." But what if someone's trying to kill you and you end up killing them and then is that a sin or like, I don't know, it's just not as, it's a blurred line right now what sin is.
Raven - Same thing. Like I think a lot of things are just set for back then and then, um, I'm also a strong believer of I always have to keep in mind that the Bible's also written by men and it can also just been their idea of what was bad back then and it may be just bad because of what was going on around them. It could be completely different somewhere else and now that we have, like, more modern-day things are definitely different from what was, from what it was back then, so I mean, certain, like, certain, like, I'll say to the Ten Commandments, like certain of them I'll be like, "Okay, like, it's obvious that's a sin." Like, I can see why stealing is a sin, even if it's for the better good, I can still see why it's a sin, just cause you're still stealing. But certain of them, certain of the Commandments, I'm just like, "Times have changed and are you really...?" You know, like, it's not I don't know, like, doesn't hold the same value, but it kinda makes me confused cause it's just like, since times change, are you doing what it says not to do a sin, or is it, or is it no longer a sin because times have changed? Um, me and Pastor had a talk about that one day. We looked at each Commandment and discussed, like, whether it was a sin or not, and stuff, and what his views on it were. Some of his views actually surprised me.

E: Like what?

Raven - Most surprising was, um, sex before marriage. Um, he told, I guess from his point it's not really a sin, um, he kind of made it seem like times are more modern now and it's more, like, he didn't consider really to be a sin. He just said, like, I don't know, it was like even when he said it to me it was still a confusing thing cause I know why it would be a sin but then I also know why it wouldn't be a sin, cause it's just like, what if I... Cause I can understand why it would be a sin cause, I guess, cause God made your, made you to be with a certain person I guess, so you're supposed to share that with one person. But then again, what if you fall in love with some person and marry that person, do whatever, people get divorced all the time. And then you marry someone else, or, you know, you do something else. And like, I don't know, and also, like, back then, people were falling in love at 15, dying by 36. Like, you know what I mean, like, the love started earlier. But now people are waiting until people are, like, 25 to get married, and living to...

Monica - Like, people are living much longer.

---

48 This is a wonderful example of an adult in Raven's church (her pastor) not avoiding relationship with a teenager, but instead making himself present and available to her as she struggled with her faith. When she spoke of the context of this conversation elsewhere, she noted that it happened when she was going through a hard time in her life and pulling away from church. Taking seriously Raven's difficulties and interpreting her pulling away as contradictory to what her actual aims were, her pastor engaged her on her terms and took her seriously.
Raven - Yeah, people are living longer now, we're not having the same diseases anymore. Like, they're, like, back then sex before marriage, hello! If you're 15 years old and that's when you're gonna get married, why would you be having sex, like, before that!? Like, you just started your life! I just don't understand that. But now, people, like, waiting till, like, 30s, 20s, or late 20s/early 30s to [get married].

Monica - I agree, like I definitely agree, but it's like, that it's not a sin, but on the same note, like, what I said, like there was things considered a sin in the Old Testament to protect people, think with today with like a bunch of diseases and, like, you know, teenage pregnancy, like, I feel like, sex before marriage could kind of like put stuff like that at more of a risk. But then again, I don't see it as a sin, I see it more as a, kind of a precaution just to take to make sure you're 100% safe, but even then, like, after marriage, you know really who, like, if you're marrying is telling, like, you know, the whole truth or whatever and...

Raven - Not only sex, drinking, everything. I mean, I don't drink, but, is that really a sin?

Beverly - I don't think that's a sin.

Monica - Jesus drank, but, I guess…

Raven - People be like, "Oh, he drank wine" …

Monica - But it's like drink but don't get drunk or something like that...

Beverly - Because you can do stuff, like, my [teacher] said that you're allowed to drink. He said you can drink, but you have to know your limit because when you get drunk you don't know what you're doing and what you do might be a sin, and stuff like that. So that's why.

Raven - So basically we're not getting drunk to protect us from making sins?

Beverly - Yeah.

Raven - But then drunk itself's not a sin then.

Raven - If something's illegal, is it a sin?

Beverly - No, I don't think so.

Monica - No, because that's the government. And the government itself illegal.
Raven - But you said it yourself. You said doing a sin is doing something that you know is wrong. And by right, then, kinda it's wrong.

Monica - Doing what's wrong to you.

Raven - Under our terms...

Monica - Under your, like, values, and, I mean....

Raven - So a sin is only wrong if under your terms wrong?

Monica - Like, if you believe that you're doing wrong and you do it anyways, I think that's a sin. Like, if you believe you’re doing wrong.

Raven - Okay. Then what if you killed someone? And you wanted to believe that was right.

Here the conversation touches on sex, drinking, smoking marijuana, murder, tattoos, government, and stealing. They discuss whether a sin is sin regardless, or only if you know something is wrong and do it anyway. This part of the conversation ended with a discussion about how some people’s religious values tell them to do things that are considered sinful to other people’s religious beliefs. These girls seriously engage with the question about how to define sin and bring up reading the Bible as a document written within history and “by men” along with a conversation with a pastor. They do not come up with a definition of sin that is satisfying to the whole group, but they are critically thinking about it and wrestling with the implications of what it means if sin is relative. Perhaps Dawn says it most clearly when, at the beginning of this interchange, she states that trying to define sin is confusing and a blurred line. These girls do not know what sin is. They are trying to synthesize what they have been taught, but are not coming up with any conclusions. The questions and the conversation, however, show keen interest and engagement with the topic.
Race and Racism

Like all other people in this country, adolescent girls interact with perceptions, prejudices, and questions about race constantly. During the interviews, I asked girls to describe their ethnicity. I chose this question carefully, leaving room for the girls to interpret it according to their experience and understanding. Many girls asked for clarification of the question, to which I would reply that some people gave the answer of their race and some people offered their cultural or ethnic heritage. Some girls simply answered the question and we moved on to the next question, but for some girls, this was an opening to a larger conversation, as was the case with Sadie.

Sadie: I'm white. I wish that, I mean, I, okay, I know ... it doesn't sound good to say I wish I wasn't white, 'cause that shows a lack of understanding. Because it's a lot easier to be white. And that's why I wish I wasn't white. Which is so stupid and, like, so not thankful or whatever,... but like, at my school especially, like at the beginning of the year everybody always called me “that white girl.” And it was just like, oh my God. And it was annoying...

E: So does that mean that the majority of the students at your school are not white?

Sadie: Yeah. Yeah.

E: So what do you think they meant by that?

Sadie: Like, oh, she's rich, she's a white girl. And...[a friend would] be like, “Oh, Sadie's got a white girl lunch now,” 'cause, like, I always bring in my lunch. I'm like the only one who brings in my lunch. Because I'm vegetarian and the food is never like vegetarian. So, yeah, but, I didn't, I don't like it.

E: What do you think or imagine would be different if you were not white?

Sadie: Well, I don't like the way, like white people, I don't know. I feel like it's not a very attractive look either. For it, like that, that's just like, I don't know. That's, um, but I feel like people would treat me differently. Like I feel like
sometimes when I'm buying stuff, I like, I get certain, like, respect or reception that like my friends who aren't white don't get. And, I feel like also I can go certain places, or I can't go certain places, because people are like, oh that girl must have money 'cause she's white....[B]efore I went to my school, like, my school now, my high school. Like, I, I was just white, like, I mean, it never really like occurred to me before. It was just what I was and then my friends were, like I, I, from my old school I had friends who were not white, I had friends who were white, and it was just like we'd all sort of, 'cause we all sort of grew up in the same type of culture, but like when I got to my new school it was like there was the black culture and then like a Hispanic culture, which I already had Hispanic culture because like [I] speak Spanish. But then there was like, and then it was like a white culture and I was like, I don't really have a culture of white. And then I was like, oh, well I guess I sort of do. I don't know, and it was like, it was sort of weird for me because I'd always been people, around people who were like not, but race wasn't even an issue, not that it wasn't an issue, but it just wasn't really talked about because we all assumed … we weren't racist or whatever. And then I was like, wait a second, we probably are.

Sadie is aware of a difference in her experience going from middle school, where most of the students were similar to her in terms of “culture,” to high school where that was no longer the case. Now that she is a high school where the majority of students are not white, she feels singled out. The experience has also made her aware of white privilege and how racism was a part of her life even when she did not think it was, “we all assumed…we weren’t racist or whatever. And then I was like, wait a second, we probably are.”

For Sam, the question of race came up not in answer to my direct question about the topic, but in answer to a different question. When I asked her to describe the place that she lives, she answered, “It’s white.” Like Sadie, she attends a high school outside of her neighborhood, and one that does not have a majority of white students. She continued to talk about race, her neighborhood, and her own identity as an Asian adopted by white parents.
Sam: It's really funny when I talk to my friends at school. Because …none of them are from [this neighborhood, they're either from another area or a different neighborhood], somewhere that's not white, and they all seem to despise white people. Which is really funny to me. Well not despise not necessarily, not all of them

E: Tell me how that, how that comes out in conversation or whatever.

Sam: I don't know I just feel weird, ’cause I'm Asian, but I'm in a white neighborhood and they all know I'm just white.

E: They think of you as white.

Sam: Yeah…Especially my Asian friends.

E: I mean, your parents are white.\footnote{Here I overstepped in that I defined her parents’ race instead of asking her to do so. Because I know her family, I assumed it was part of what she meant when she said that her friends “all know she is white” and felt confident in making this statement.}

S: Yeah. My parents are white.

E: So how, I mean, what do you say to that? Like do you try to say, I'm not white I'm Asian like you are...

Sam: Well, I don't know, they nev…, I sort of call myself a banana.

E: A banana?

Sam: Yeah. Yellow on the outside, white on the inside. I don't know, I don't really see myself as Asian, though. I don't see myself as anything else.

At this point in our conversation, I did ask Sam the direct question about ethnicity because she was clearly thinking about how to define herself, given the different pieces of her identity that come together. Her answer to that question seemed the opposite of her previous comment:

Sam: I am Asian. I do like my skin color.
E: So when you hear your friends saying negative things about white people, and you know that your parents are white, how does that, like do you have to defend your parents or do you just ignore it, or…?

Sam: Surprisingly I don't feel anything. I'm indifferent to what they say.

Sam has a dual identity as an Asian person with white parents. She alternately describes herself as “not Asian”, “Asian,” and “a banana.” Like Sadie, she experiences comments from her peers about what being white means. As mentioned above, adolescence is a time of identity development. For girls, identity exploration and understanding is a contextual pursuit. A general question of identity does not recognize the reality that adolescents “must negotiate their multiple selves.”50 Sam’s challenge to describe her identity is not a simple task. She is someone when she is with her family and someone when she is with her Asian friends. Her description of being “a banana” may be one way she has found to vocalize the multiple selves that make up her identity. Ethnicity is an important factor in identity formation, one that is more complicated for someone like Sam whose ethnicity is different than her parents’. According to a study from the mid-1990s, ethnic self-identification is different for adolescent girls than for adolescent boys. Girls were more likely to claim a dual identity, like Asian American. In addition, however, adolescents who have experienced racism were less likely to self-identify as American.51 As Sam explores who she is in the different contexts that make up her life, she will develop a self-identification that responds to what she experiences in those contexts.

50 Johnson and Roberts, “Passage on the Wild River,” 11.
Two of the group interviews I held with Black girls ended with my being asked the same question by them: “Do you experience racism?” None of the white, Asian, or Latina girls asked me that question. In response to one of the group’s asking that question, I responded that as a white person, when I experience racism it is as a beneficiary of privilege because of my skin color. I gave the example of having an easy time getting a cab when a person of color standing near me would have a harder time. Monica agreed, saying that it often took her a long time to catch a cab in neighborhoods that were majority white. Beverly then asked the group if they think white people on the subway are suspicious of them because they are African American. She points out that people give her “a look,” and wonders if it is because of her skin color. Raven pointed out that she thought it was more of an education issue than a race issue, that if white people grow up around people of color, then they will act differently toward people of color than if they grow up around only white people. She related a story of some kids saying a racist comment to her once when she was at an amusement park. Trying to understand why they would say something like that, she said:

[M]aybe, like, they don't grow up around black people, it's a different look. Or maybe they heard like certain stories. It could be, like, one bad story they ever heard and that turned [them] off forever. So some people can have a stare. Some people can have a look. Some people look down at, but then you have [white] people who like love black people more than they love white people.

Monica then related an incident that happened while on the subway:

I don't really think about it like that, like the way Beverly does. But the only time, like, something like that ever happened was I think when I took a train for the first time by myself…only, like, 2 stops and like, I sat next to this guy and he called me the “n-word.” And I was like, I was so taken back, like I didn't know. I think I told Mommy, I don't, it just didn't occur to me how like crazy it was. I just I was so confused because, like, I had never heard,’ cause I don't use the word. I don't, I don't hear people, well, at the time I didn't really hear people saying it cause, like,
I [had gone to] a really like a close-knit Catholic school going into public school, so that in itself was just like a…shock. And then for something like that to happen. And the people just stared at me for like 2 stops. And I was just like, "Did he expect me to, did they expect me to, like, say something? Should I have said something? Or what?"

Although Monica relates this incident on the subway as being the “only time” something “like that” has happened to her, she already earlier had mentioned finding it difficult to catch a cab. Unlike Beverly who wonders if white people are suspicious of her on the subway, Monica thinks her experience is different because except for this one incident of overt racism (and the previously mentioned difficulty getting a cab in white neighborhoods), “doesn’t really think about it.” Like Monica, Raven says she does not think like Beverly does, but she does relate an experience in high school that seems similar to what Beverly experiences on the subway. In this case, people in her class assumed she was not intelligent because of her skin color.

Raven: I don't think about it like Beverly. I think my thinking about it was in this theory class I was in where I was the only black person and then I walked in and they all treated me like I was the dumbest of the class. Like, every time I went to answer a question, they start laughing. It's so funny cause I always got it right. But every single time they, it was just awkward and I was, like, unfairly treated but, like, I didn't really care. I kinda, like, I thank my school for that. My school opened me up to racism at its own, but also opened me up to like seeing maybe seeing the part of whites that maybe black people don't hear about. That, hey, not all whites hate blacks.

She learned about white people who made fun of her and assumed her ignorance as well as white people who do not “hate blacks.”

Issues of race affected all the girls whom I interviewed, from Sadie who wishes she weren’t white because she has come to realize the unfairness of white privilege to Sam who has difficulty sorting through her own identity because of the complexities
involved, to Beverly, Monica, and Raven who all have experienced overt racism in different social situations. Identity formation is a key task of adolescence. Therefore, issues of racism will affect how girls come to view themselves and the world around them. Race is also a part of their faith.

The church that Beverly, Monica, and Raven attend is primarily a Black church. They state that the leadership of their church often talks to them about how the Black community needs to come together to fight the racism with which they are faced. Their awareness of racial issues in the news is keen, partially because these topics are discussed within their faith community. When I asked Raven what makes her angry, her answer was, “injustice.” I asked her for a specific example of how she experiences injustice, and her response included recounting a current event of racialized violence. What followed was a conversation between her and Monica that brought up racism by name.

Raven: Um, in any situation. Within the law or just at home if your brother took something and he didn't in trouble for it. Like, the smallest thing to the biggest thing. … Like, the Trayvon Martin thing. I took it like I was part of his family. I was like, "What is this?" Like, I was very upset. Like, I don't know, cause it, like, it makes you think this is the world we're living in where you know, where...people can really get away with stuff like that. And, it's just like, especially like those classes. I don't know if anyone ever had a teacher that loved to talk about slavery and they just tell you about all the injustice. I had a teacher that he love talking about slavery but, like, we watched every video, movie made slavery-based, read every book from Huckleberry Finn all the way to Uncle Tom's Cabin. But, like, I don't know, just hearing all the type of stuff and, like, seeing it still done today is kinda just, like, it makes you not really have faith in what the generation is doing. That, too, like when the generation is just not looking up to core. Like, you know, we live in the, our generation specifically now, there are some that are so determined... make change. And then you have the complete opposite, too...Racism, I don't know, it gets me very irritated. Um, I don't know, racism is a very annoying subject for me. I just, I don't know, like, when you just look back in history and you see how things weren't even, you just see how things are going now it's kind of like, it's still here.
E: How do you see it still here? Like, in your experience?

Raven: In my experience? I mean, through case of, like, law. I'll see, like, law cases simple things like Trayvon Martin to me was a um, thing like that. Or the guy that died down the block from the church. Yeah, like they ran up in his house and shot him and the police got off for it. Or like the guy that got shot 50 times and no one got in trouble. It's just like, I want to see those things cause they're like, it's, like it's bad to say if a white person did it would they? It's just like, you know.

Monica: Well actually, did you hear the story about the guy?

Raven: Trayvon?

Monica: No…I'm talking about [a different guy].

Raven: Oh, I don't know. Say the case.

Monica: His son was being harassed by, like, this group of white kids and then like they went into his house ready to kill his son or something and then he shot the guy in face or something. The father, in defense, shot the kid in the face.

Raven: And the father went to jail?

Monica: Yeah.

Raven: It's things like that…Or stuff like in the…when they'll put more educated teachers in maybe the more whiter areas of living but then go somewhere like the projects and you catch these broken down old schools where not the top-notch education. And then they'll be like, “African Americans have the lowest SAT rate.” Well, duh. Who taught us? Like, where were the other teachers when you want to send us these teachers that barely graduated college properly. It's just like, all that type of stuff. It's almost like sometimes they set it up to fail. Like in situations like that. I don't know, like, I don't like to see it cause it's just like, they wonder why they can't progress and it's just like it's clear in front of your face. Like, some of us, like, put in a situation like um, I don't agree with stealing, but over time I've come to understand why certain poor people get robbed and why certain African Americans do rob more than maybe whites. Honestly? Sometimes believe it or not it's lack of money and they need the money for, I'm not saying, like, I feel people hear anything they just use it for drugs but some people actually use the money for good. Like, they use it to feed their family or something. So it's just like you know, you get some better education you can get a better job that way we could get more money, that way we wouldn't have to steal. You see what I'm sayin’? Like it's all a train effect. It's all a domino. But if you're gonna hit it the wrong way then obviously you're never gonna benefit us. I don't know it just, I
feel like African Americans are just already downgraded from the get-go. They, sometimes they just don't get the top notch quality. And then it's like looked upon bad…
Raven is clearly aware of how systemic racism is active in this country and in her community.

Sexism
Although the girls from that group interview report that issues of racism and current events that stem from racism are talked about in their church, they also report that sexism is not discussed. According to Monica, “It's a taboo subject. But they definitely talk about how as a race, like, you need to you know fight back and do for us.” Sexism may be off limits as a topic of discussion in their church, and in other churches as well, it is something that these girls experience regularly in their lives. Certainly this topic comes up in conversations about clothing and the body as discussed above. It also came up in other parts of the interviews as well.

Sam brought sexism up, by name, at the very beginning of her interview.

Sam: I sort of grew up hating [the country where I was born]. Uh, I don't think until now I realized why, I think I just hate their sexism towards girls.

E: Say more about, about sexism, about how you see, how you see it over there or what you know about it over there?

Sam: Well, this is what I thought and what I think, um, that they, they're expecting to get a boy because they only think the boys can work in the fields is hard. Harder than the girls kinda. And so, I don't know. I think I can work as hard as a guy. Um, I know I can work as hard as a guy. So that really pisses me off.

E: Yeah, so do you think or do you know that the reason that your biological parents gave you up for adoption is because you are a girl?

Sam: Actually, I don't know…That's what I think…I like being here, and I like my family. I'm glad I was adopted, I’m glad I wasn't raised in [that country] ’cause all the rules, but, then again I could have been conditioned that way, and I could have been happy there, I don't know. But if I was conditioned here first and then I went [there], I would not be happy.
Sam then went on to describe how she experiences sexism in her life here, rather than something she recognizes as a part of why she might have been put up for adoption.

Sam: [My mom] works from home, visits [the place that employs her] about once a month. Um, my dad hasn't worked since, I don't know when. He didn't work when we were kids. So he was, he was the caretaker. So we didn't need a babysitter….My mom was the worker. Yeah and he would cook the food. Which I like, 'cause it's the exact opposite of stereotypical stuff.

E: Yeah. Did you ever have to explain that to any of your friends?

Sam: No, but whenever sexism came up I would give them an example.

E: Right, 'cause how would sexism come up? Like people would just make assumptions and you'd say, “Not in my family.”

Sam: Yeah. Basically they're like, “Your mom should be cooking.”

In one of the group interviews, I asked the girls what makes a girl a good Christian and what makes a boy a good Christian. The five girls all agreed that there was no difference. Britt Nicole then went on to explain:

Britt Nicole: And, um, you know, it's like the same as, um, like, sports. You want to be the best athlete that you can be, and women have to train differently than men, because our bodies are built differently, but we're towards the same goal. We want to be the fastest, the best, um, the most athletic. So, you know, there's different trainings that women and men have to take in their faith journeys because we are different but we're going towards the same goal of "I want to be the best Christian that I can be."

So although she thinks the goal is the same, she thinks the way to reach that goal is different for women and men. After her statement, I asked the group what they thought sexism was. Genevieve’s answer, like Britt Nicole’s about the differences for each sex in becoming a good Christian, recognizes that there is a difference between girls and boys:
Genevieve: A lot of guys will say, "Make me a sandwich" and that's sexism like against, like, women or saying women can do things men can do or men can do things women can do or men belong in the workplace and women are "taking over." Although, like, the news is all like, "Women are now the main people in college." And the main thing, like...Anybody who says that women can or can't do something or that men can or can't do something that the opposite gender can or can't do that sort of separating the genders and then saying that they're like...cause to some extent like Britt Nicole said, there is difference you know, like, in gym obviously guys are gonna play harder than most girls and guys are probably going to end up being, like, rougher than most girls. But saying that a girl can't do that and can't play sports at that level or, you know, something like that. Like, completely generalizing, that really affects us.

When asked about the effects of this kind of generalizing, Britt Nicole brought up that she feels like she is treated differently at home than her brothers are because she is a girl.

Brooke brought up her medical disabilities as something that, when combined with her sex, make it difficult for her to be treated in a way she feels is equal to others.

Brooke: For me, like, being a girl and then being a girl with, like, medical disabilities, has also placed it on me. Because, first of all,...if a girl's isn't...a rough around the edges girl, if they think she's at all, like, I don't know dainty or, like, delicate, they'll be like, you know, like,...sometimes people make ...the boys go do the manual labor and the girls, like, sit back and, like, watch or something, like, when people do that. But then with a girl like me, having also physical disabilities, like, it's happened, I know it's out of love and stuff like that but it's, like, it's always really funny when it's happened in the youth group sometimes when like people are like...Like, I go to lift up a chair and they're like, "Oh no no no, you're going to hurt [yourself], you're gonna like snap in half!"...it's just like certain things, like, "Oh no, you shouldn't move that, you're a girl and you have [a physical disability]. You shouldn't do that."

I followed up Brooke’s remark with this comment: “Genevieve then connected sexism to racism, remarking that there are differences between skin color just as there are differences between the sexes.”

Genevieve: There is, especially nowadays, like, so much awareness...that there needs to be so much equality but I do think it's interesting because it's, like, with people who are you know, like, about racism. You do have to at some point
acknowledge that our skin colors are different. We don't have to be segregated, we don't have to make a difference out of that but we do have to acknowledge that …And I agree with equality all the way, but you do have to acknowledge that there are differences between the sexes and so, for example, um, chivalry. A lot of people who support equality are like, chivalry needs to like, is dead and, like my brothers are always talking about, "Girls say they want equality and they want to be equal to men but then they want us to hold the door open for them!" And so it is sort of tough sometimes to think, for me at least, to figure out where the line is when I need to be able to say "I'm, I can't say I'm not going to do that because I'm a girl," because that's not fair, but like, I do want a guy to be nice and hold the door open for me and I don't want to have to say that's because I'm a girl. I want it to be because it's nice, so it's like, sort of a weird line.

There was a lot of agreement in the group with Genevieve’s statement about the “weird line” that they are walking of wanting to be treated equally and also wanting “chivalry.”

In this group, there was an awareness of the complexities of talking about equality and sameness. These girls wanted to acknowledge the difference between the sexes, but did not want there to be judgment attached to those differences. Britt Nicole summed up their collective sentiments on the subject nicely, “it's annoying when it's an oppressive sexism. You know, like, yes we are different … But, you don't need to limit the things that I do because of that. And you don't need to look down on me because of it.” What this group did not express was a critical awareness of where their desire for “chivalry” might have come from. Certainly the media and marketing industries have had an impact on what girls expect from boys, like doors being held open for them.

Sadie shared several experiences she has gone through that have affected the way she views boys and has brought attitudes boys have toward her as a girl into sharp focus. She has had awareness of the way her safety might be in jeopardy as a young woman for some time. When she was in sixth grade, she started to walk to school alone, with her mother walking behind her. Her mother would then give her feedback about her walk
and, “tell me what not to do and what to do, and I wasn't supposed to walk too close to the buildings, people could push me over.” If something like that were to happen, her mother warned it would be a defining moment in her life, she said to Sadie, “I just want you to be careful because it'll be a before your life and after… You'll remember that moment.” She related one experience on the subway where her fear about what might happen to her turned into what might be termed a conversion experience. She shared this experience as she was talking about how she feels bad for making judgments about people.

Sadie: Mostly the thing that I mostly make judgments on is based on gender, like if you're a guy and I'm, like, I am terrified. I, I don't even know why, but I'm like really scared of being raped, like that scares me. Well, I mean I guess I have a good reason, I don't know. I think my mom, like, instilled it in me… [O]nce I was on the train and I was in the subway and… it always stops, like, in between [one street] and [another street]. And, so, anyway, like I was sitting there and I looked up from my book and I realized, like, it was only me and this guy in there, and I was like, “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” and that, like, scared me so much, and I was, like, I feel like that's when I decided that God existed. Because, I, I knew, I knew this guy wasn't going to do anything to me…it was a psychological fear. And he was on the other end of the car, too. But I was just like, “please God, please help me, please,” ‘cause I was, I don't know why I was so scared, but like, and, so then, I just felt like this thing like settled down on me, and it was like all the seats were full. I know that sounds kind of stupid.

E: No, it doesn't.

Sadie: I don't know, I thought like all the seats were full and that somebody was just smiling at me from all those seats and somebody was like, I don't know. But I felt like a presence, and I was like, “OK, I'm alright, I'm just being ridiculous.” And then I got off the train and I went to school.

Sadie also participates in a before school program at her high school for gifted students. She is the only girl in the program, and the school as a whole is also 70% male. She describes how they “fake flirt” with her and how she felt like she couldn’t be friends with
any of the guys in the program because they might think she likes them. She also felt for the first time that she had to “stick up for myself as being a girl” and prove them wrong for thinking she is not as smart as they are. She also gets teased in a way similar to what Sam and Genevieve report:

Sadie:… [T]hey’re always, like, teasing me about [being a] girl…it's almost I guess to the point where you think they believe it because they keep saying it and saying it. And they're like, “oh, girls belong in the kitchen, blah blah blah,” and then like all this stuff about how I should just stop take, stressing myself out because… if I stress out [then] my children won't come out well or something.

In the field of psychology, much has been written about the experience of adolescent girls as opposed to adolescent boys in terms of their development during these critical years. This time in girls’ lives has been called a time of “heightened psychological risk” when gender stereotypes begin to exert their force. As Dori Baker writes, “Subject forces operate to tie the blindfold and tighten the gag. Descriptors such as ‘vivacious,’ ‘spunky,’ and ‘willful’ give way to adjectives such as ‘nonconfrontational’ and ‘pleasing.’” Most developmental psychology studies have focused on white girls, allowing “six million girls pass into womanhood without adequate representation in our understanding of their developmental and psychological transitions.” Baker notes that when it comes to womanist literature girls are not as overlooked as they are in white feminist literature.

She writes that there is a tradition in the Black homeplace of cultivating a high self-esteem among girls as taught by women. These girls inherit and incorporate “sass,

---

52 Ibid., 142.  
53 Baker, Girlfriend Theology, 13.  
55 Baker, Girlfriend Theology, 14.
unctuousness, and healthy resistance” into their “identities-in-process.” Girls, regardless of their race or ethnicity, still have to fight against sexism, as these interviews show. Some of their struggle is exacerbated by the expectations the girls hear from people in their faith communities, especially around issues of their bodies and how they are clothed. The girls I interviewed are not from evangelical communities who have been taught about female submission as a biblical instruction, but certainly some of that theology is behind what the girls are experiencing. In fact, Britt Nicole referenced Proverbs 31, which talks about the qualities of a good wife, in our conversation. This outline of a good wife is certainly in line with the traditional female role of running an efficient household and supporting one’s husbands. Some of the struggle these girls have with sexism comes from assumptions of traditional female roles in this society. Several girls pointed to specific comments they have heard from their peers about the female’s place being in the kitchen.

**Summary**

Girls in 2013, like those in other times throughout history, experience sexism in comments from others about what is expected of them, how they should dress, and the way they are perceived by the opposite sex. Girls take notice of racism, and girls of color experience it in overt and more subtle ways. The religious topics of sin and temptation brought up particular experiences girls have been having for centuries. Despite a sexual revolution and an awareness and embrace of female sexuality since the 1920s, girls are

---

56 Ibid., 17.
still told in religious language that their bodies are sites not of celebration but of danger
to the moral and religious identity of males.

Being a girl in 2013, however, is also about being a critical thinker engaged with
the world around her. These girls do not take what they are given unquestioningly, rather
they think through situations, assumptions, and expectations with intentionality. They are
looking for support as they work within the complexities and hypocrisies they uncover.
They are aware of subjects that are off limits to conversation in their churches. They are
strong and seeking, they are truth tellers and visionaries. Their experiences, as told in
their own words, show wisdom, understanding, frustration, fear, and confusion. The
question for the church then becomes, are we hearing from the lives of these young
women and are we ready to join them in their journey toward wholeness as Christians
and as women?
Chapter 3
Waiting and Hoping for the New Creation

Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians begins with his expressing his desire to visit, to encourage one another, and to share the good news with other Gentiles in Rome. Because he has not been a part of the community of early Christians¹ in Rome, his letter has a different tone than his other letters. In it, he is not responding to specific questions or concerns he has received about the community, nor is he building on his teaching in reference to specific situations of which he is aware in contexts with which he is intimately connected. Instead, Romans addresses more general theological thoughts for a community with both Jew and Gentile members who share the same perspective on what has happened through the work of Christ on the cross and the implications of that event for life in their current time. Paul’s unique position as a faithful Jew who has had a revelation of the gospel and is called to share that gospel with Gentiles positions him well to communicate with this mixed community in Rome. This chapter will look at Romans 6-8 as an example of Paul’s apocalyptic theology whose themes are particularly applicable to the girls we met in the previous chapter. His attention to the body, sin, and the new creation in these chapters is particularly meaningful to the concerns and issues important to these girls.

Paul’s theology (including his anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology) and the implications of it for communal living and individual experience

¹ Paul does not use the term “Christian” to refer to members of communities who have been transformed by the gospel and believe in Jesus as Christ. Instead, he uses talks about these folks as being “in Christ” (for example, Romans 8:1). However, because “Christian” is the term generally used at present to describe these recipients of Paul’s letter, I use it here.
offer great resources for ministry that focuses on freedom and living in a time and space of tension. Paul expresses who God is, who Christ is, and who people are at this present time, which has been broken into by the impending eschaton. In the course of these three chapters in Romans, Paul expresses clearly and with great emotion the heart of what living in Christ can look like, the challenges of doing so, and the eagerness with which we wait for final resolution. The questions of what to say and what to do while knowing what time we are in and what is at stake in how we live in it has pedagogical implications for ministry with adolescent girls. These pedagogical implications are enhanced and informed by the exhortative leanings in these chapters of Romans.

Two scholars assist in my exegesis of Romans 6-8. Ernst Käsemann and Robert Jewett are both excellent scholars of Paul with commentaries on Romans that are insightful and important. Both scholars engage seriously Paul’s apocalyptic understanding of his world, the events that have been taking place, and the effect on humans. Their interpretations are not identical to my own or to each other, though they add significant information to my own insights, sometimes offering important correctives. Their voices, along with others and my own, help paint the picture of what Paul is doing in these chapters, offering important implications for interpreting the lives of the girls I interviewed for this project.

In the previous chapter, the themes of “Clothing the Body,” “Sin,” “Temptation,” “Racism,” and “Sexism” were highlighted as particularly important to the girls I interviewed. In this chapter, I focus my exegesis of Romans 6-8 on what Paul wrote that speaks especially well to those themes. Each chapter is taken separately and in order, so that Paul’s theology emerges naturally from the text as he wrote it and intended his
audience in Rome to hear it. The conversation between these exegetical findings from Romans 6-8 and the lives of adolescent girls as they shared them with me in interviews will take place in the next chapter.

Romans Chapter Six – What it means to be in the Body of Christ

The term Paul uses for believers in the gospel is “in Christ.” People and Christ are united in baptism. Romans 6:3-5 reads, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” These few verses convey much about Paul’s apocalyptic perspective and what it means for those who are in Christ. In verse 3, Paul uses the preposition εἰς for baptism “into” Christ. In verse 8, he uses a different preposition for the participation in Christ’s baptism, using instead “συν” for “with.” According to these verses, at baptism something happens that draws a person into Christ; and not only into Christ but with Christ in death and in life. The person has then died and been buried with Christ, who was then raised from the dead by the glory of God. Because the believer is united with Christ in Christ’s death, therefore one can assume with certainty that one will also be resurrected with Christ. Ernst Käsemann, in his Commentary on Romans writes, “Baptism is projection of the change of aeons into our personal existence, which for its part becomes a constant

\[\text{\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{2} New Revised Standard Version (NRSV hereafter)}}\]

89
return to baptism to the extent that here dying with Christ establishes life with him and
the dialectic of the two constitutes the signature of being in Christ.”3 Participation in
Christ happens in a very real way at baptism for Paul. This participation means that one is
living a new life in the present time; but it is a new life in Christ because resurrection for
believers is in the future. In some way, Christians are “walking dead” of the present time,
animated by their being a part of Christ. Baptism is therefore not only a metaphoric or
symbolic act with metaphoric or symbolic effects, it is also an actual way to participate,
personally and communally, in concrete ways in what is happening cosmically and what
has happened through God’s action through Christ.

New life in Christ is likewise not only symbolic, it is reality. In these chapters of
Romans, Paul uses language contemporary English users call metaphor. Metaphor is not
the same as pure symbolism. Paul’s metaphors describe reality. Using Janet Martin
Soskice’s religious metaphorical theory, Susan Eastman shows that metaphor is not
something like frivolous language used for “emotional appeal.” Rather metaphor is used
to “describe reality in a way that the language of abstract thought cannot…[M]etaphors
point beyond themselves to invisible realities.”4 This part of Romans is full of religious
metaphor. Unlike how we think of metaphor in contemporary usage, however, Paul’s
metaphors are a way to describe what is going on, not with symbolic language but with
metaphor that expresses deep truths. Likewise, baptism in chapter 6 is not only symbolic
death; it is actual death. It may not be physical death, but it is death, co-death with Christ.

3 Ernst Käsemann, Commentary on Romans, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B.
Eerdmans, 1980), 163.
4 Eastman, Paul’s Mother Tongue, 22.
Only actual death can completely sever the ties of Sin’s control over a person. Death in Christ severs Sin’s complete control of a person. Dead in Christ and alive in Christ’s resurrection means believers are now able to live differently now while waiting for Sin’s final and absolute demise. What dies in baptism is not the believer’s physical body, but rather Sin’s ability to imprison the believer’s agency. The reality is that the new age has not yet fully come; one continues to live in tension and the effects of baptism are mediated in the world.\(^5\)

Baptism is not an action on the part of the Christian. Paul uses the passive voice, for example, “we were baptized” (v. 3), “we were buried” (v. 4), “we were crucified with” (v. 6). Baptism happens to someone, as do the effects of baptism. Käsemann uses vivid language to describe this: “In baptism the new world initiated by Christ seizes the life of the individual Christian too, in such a way that the earthly path of the exalted Lord is to be traversed again in the life and Christ thus becomes the destiny of our life.”\(^6\) The life of the Christian is “seized” and becomes entwined with Christ’s life in the present. The Christian’s life is changed, and is now shared with Christ’s life. The sharing happens mysteriously, and is possible because of the unique way that Paul views time.

“Eschatological reservation” is the term for what Paul does when he expresses that though death with Christ is possible now, future resurrection is not yet realized. Though the work of Christ is a reality and participating in it (and its effects) is a reality, the end is not already here. Some things are reserved for the eschaton, including

\(^5\) This tension leads to some of the groaning Paul writes about in chapter 8 as creation waits for the new creation. More will be said on this later.
\(^6\) Käsemann, Romans, 163.
resurrection with Christ. Paul leaves room for his hearers to interpret their own existence in light of this liminal time. The power of Sin has not been finally defeated in this time, another reality showing Paul’s eschatological reservation. As Jewett says, “Paul refrains from treating the present moment of faith as if the threats of the principalities and powers had already been overcome.”

Although believers have died and everything is different for them, Sin still exercises great power because the eschaton has not yet occurred (as proven by their not yet being resurrected with Christ). Therefore, it is difficult to live as Paul exhorts them.

Because of Paul’s apocalyptic perspective on the current time, there are paradoxes involved with walking in newness of life with one’s old humanity having died to Death and Sin. This new mortal body, which is part of a new body (namely the Body of Christ, both as a part of a Christian community and as someone who lives in Christ), is no longer a sinful body (part of a community under the power of Sin). However, because Sin still holds power in this time, even as a new mortal body, a believer is still susceptible to Sin’s “reigning” (βασιλεύειν) in it (verse 12). Paul implores the readers and hearers of his letter not to let Sin use their members or limbs as “weapons of unrighteousness” (ὅπλα ἀδικίας). Paul sees this in-between time as a time of conflict; Sin is able to use the members of a believer’s body as weapons in this fight. This can also have a communal meaning; Sin is able to use some members of the corporate Christian body as well, something the community needs to actively guard against. The active voice is interesting; Paul is holding believers accountable for this possibility. Using the imperative, he tells

7 Ibid.
them not to present their members to Sin, rather present their members to God. Here Paul is also setting up unrighteousness or injustice as Sin’s territory, while righteousness or justice has already been defined as God’s. Sin is opposite and oppositional to God in this fight. Just as they are told not to present the members of their bodies so that Sin can use them as weapons, they are told to present the members of their bodies to God so that God can use them as weapons of righteousness. Both are actions of the person – present your members to God, do not present your members to Sin. Either way, these members can be used as weapons in the ongoing battle between Sin and God, between unrighteousness and righteousness. The paradox is that this action on the part of the believer can still take place even though the believer has died and is therefore freed from Sin. How can one who is freed from Sin and raised with Christ still be susceptible to presenting oneself to be used as a weapon by Sin against God?

Käsemann sees that grace is the way for Christians to have the power to respond to Paul’s imperatives to side with God. He writes, “the righteousness of God, which is predominantly described as a gift in the preceding chapters, is the eschatological manifestation of its Giver, so that, like sin, it has the character of a power that determines existence.” When one is under the power of Grace, one is able to “maintain the break with the world of Adam accomplished in baptism…” Sin is so powerful that it can corrupt even God’s Law; Grace is so powerful, it can even defeat Death. Once one is dead, which happens through baptism, one is in a new world, namely the world of Christ,

8 Ibid., 163.
9 Ibid.
or as Käsemann calls it, the “sphere of Christ.” This means that because of a believer’s baptism, his or her participation in the present time is through Christ and he or she operates under grace. All of this happens in community with other believers – one is not in Christ alone – and a believer also experiences this new existence personally. Personally but not individually. As a believer experiences God’s righteousness through their ability to respond to the call to act in concert with it, he or she is also experiencing God. Responding to a call to righteousness enables a believer to encounter the One who is righteous.

Time is functioning in an interesting way here at the beginning of chapter 6. Although the believer has been baptized into death with Christ, the resurrection a believer participates in with Christ is still set in the future. Walking in newness of life is possible in the present for the baptized, but resurrection with Christ is a future event, albeit one which the believer can count on with certainty. So Paul writes in verse 5 that the believer has been (perfect tense) united with Christ in his death and will therefore also be united with his resurrection. The Greek for the word translated as “united” in this translation literally means that the person has “grown together” or “become.” At baptism, Christians become united with Christ; the reason this is important is emphasized with Paul’s use of the perfect tense. As Jewett explains, “a new relationship inaugurated in the past, but whose effects continue through the present.” Participating in Christ’s death happens at the moment of baptism, but its effects are seen going forward. Käsemann finds this to be

10 Ibid.
very important. In baptism, the Christian life mimics what has happened on a cosmic scale. “In contrasting the present of believers with their pre-Christian life, it describes a definite history characterized by a break. The change of aeons is thus reflected in the baptism and the existence of the baptized.”¹² Here Käsemann is discussing what Paul writes a bit later in chapter 6 (verses 15-22) where Paul contrasts the Romans’ lives before Christ and after – for example, once they were slaves to sin but now they are slaves of righteousness. Käsemann’s point is that just as there was a shift in time (a change of aeons) with Christ’s own death and resurrection, so, too, was there a shift in the individual Christian at baptism. Becoming united with Christ is a dramatic change from pre-Christian existence. How could death be otherwise?

When Paul writes that we have been united with Christ in death and will be united with him in resurrection, he uses the word ὀμοιόματι from ὀμοίμα. This is a noun meaning likeness or image or something that has been made in the likeness of something else. In this usage in 6:5, Paul uses it to show how united the Roman Christians are with Christ in likeness of his death now and in the future in likeness of his resurrection. Paul also uses this term again in chapter 8,¹³ when he writes that Jesus was sent in the likeness of sinful flesh (v. 3). The use of this word ὀμοίμα carries weight with Paul. The likeness is complete. United with Christ in a death like his means that the baptized dies. United with Christ in a resurrection like his means that the baptized will be resurrected. Likewise,

---

¹² Käsemann, Romans, 184.
¹³ This word is also used in 1:23 and 5:14, though those instances are outside the scope of this paper.
being in the likeness of sinful flesh means that Christ lived in this sphere where Sin’s
power is great, just as every other human does.\textsuperscript{14}

Scholars have disagreed about what it means for the baptized to be united with
Christ in a death like his. Jewett traces these differences in his commentary on Romans.
Albert Schweitzer thought of it as a mystical union with Christ’s death, others have said
that Christ’s death is “appropriated by believers,” others have taken it to mean
representation. Robert Tannehill argues it reflects believers being conformed to Christ’s
death.\textsuperscript{15} Jewett himself argues that “Paul’s point is that life in Christ rests on the premise
of the death of the old self and of former relationships.”\textsuperscript{16}

Robert Jewett points out that Paul’s insistence on the efficacy of this death with
Christ in baptism is emphasized with Paul’s saying that not only did Christians die with
Christ but they were also buried with him. He writes, “Although Paul’s employment of
this term is clearly metaphorical, it conveys the idea of a ‘real death,’ since burial is the
climactic moment in the ritual of dying, the point of no return.”\textsuperscript{17} The use of this
metaphor, according to Jewett, is unique to Paul.\textsuperscript{18}

Paul’s use of the co-burial metaphor here in verse 4 points beyond itself to the
invisible reality that once one has died with Christ, one really is dead to death. Paul
writes that this co-burial happens “δυδέ τοῦ βαπτισμάτος” (through Baptism), the finality
then of death happens through baptism. This parallels how Christ is raised from the dead

\textsuperscript{14} Further discussion about this likeness of sinful flesh occurs below.
\textsuperscript{15} Jewett, \textit{Romans}, 401.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 398.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
“διὰ τῆς δόξης” (through glory). Baptism functions like glory, it is instrumental in changing the one participating in it. Through baptism, believers are both dead and buried. Through glory, Christ is raised. Paul writes that the reason Christians are buried with Christ so that they might walk in newness of life (an aorist subjunctive). The possibility of walking in newness of life is available to Christians through their baptism because Christ’s resurrection through glory conquered death.

For Paul and the believers (he uses the first person plural here), they have been united with Christ in death and will be united with him in his resurrection. This future certainty is expressed again in verse 11, Paul states that these believers in Rome must count themselves as ones who are dead to Sin but alive to God in Christ. There he uses the imperative; they must consider themselves in this way. Although the resurrection that they will participate in is in the future, they must consider themselves alive to God in Christ now, even though they have already died with Christ. The imperative only makes sense if this future resurrection is such a certainty that they are able to live in its promise in a real way now. This shows an apocalyptic sense of time – in the present it is already possible to live (and in fact it is imperative that they do) as if the future is already here, which it is not. Jewett points out that there are other ways to interpret the future tense in verse 5, but agrees that this eschatological way of reading it is a better choice. “The future tense in connection with the resurrection thus should be understood with its fully eschatological dimension: while believers have already participated in the death of Christ, their joining in his resurrected state will occur at the end of time.”

Because the future is

19 Ibid., 402.
not yet here, telling his hearers that they must live as if it is does not make sense unless they have the ability to do so. That ability comes not from their own force of will, but from the fact that their lives are connected with Christ’s because they have been baptized into him. They are free to respond to the imperatives Paul places on them because they are free from the power of Sin. This does not mean, however, that it is always done. Paul would not warn his hearers of the possibility of still operating under Sin, even though they are baptized, if it were not possible.

Like his way of talking about how this new life is available to them, Paul’s way of talking about the task of Christians after their baptism/death is also richly metaphorical. Now that they are free from Sin, though Sin remains, Paul writes that they have the choice of offering bodies or parts of their bodies (members, is the term Paul uses) as weapons in the battle between Sin and Grace. Another metaphor, connected to his metaphor of weaponry, is freedom and enslavement; now that they are free, Christians can choose enslavement to Sin or to God. Living in Christ now means they have the freedom to present themselves (“their members”) as weapons of God’s in the fight against Sin.

These choices are how Paul express that there is an overlap between the old age and the new age in which a person now lives through his or her participation in Christ. Paul writes that “our old humanity” (παλαιοὶ ἡμῶν ἐνθρωπότης, verse 6) has been crucified with Christ. This is a collective humanity. Paul uses the first person plural ἡμῶν with the singular ἐνθρωπός. Literally this means “our old person” but the sense of it can be “our old self.” Paul’s worldview seems to lack an idea of the autonomous individual in these cosmic categories set up by Christ, the individual is always connected to others and
connected to either Sin or Grace. “We” share an old self with those who are under the power of Sin. Likewise, those who are baptized and are new, walk together in newness of life in Christ. Jewett, employing Tannehill’s interpretation, points to this plural pronoun as well, as proof of Paul’s understanding that there is a collective entity of people standing under Sin or under Christ. He writes that the reason Paul writes in this way is that he “is able to include all of the believers in Rome regardless of their varying understandings of conversion, baptism, and the new life in Christ. What unites all believers, including Paul himself, is their having died with Christ.”\(^{20}\) The believers are united not only with Christ but with each other. This community with which they are united is not the same as the community of which they were a part under sin. That old humanity has died, has even been co-crucified with Christ.

The purpose of this crucifixion of the old humanity is “so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to Sin. For whoever has died is freed from Sin.”\(^{21}\) The old humanity includes the old body, which Paul calls it the σῶμα τῆς ἁμαρτίας, body of sin. The old humanity has been enslaved to the power of Sin. The old humanity, the old sinful body, is part of the old time. Because a new time began with Christ, baptized believers can participate in a new time and no longer need to be part of that old humanity that is the body of sin. Paul connects the power of Sin to the power of Death. He writes that once someone has died, one cannot die again (verse 9a). The baptized person is now living a new humanity as part of a new body that is not enslaved

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 403

\(^{21}\) 6:6b-7, NRSV. The NRSV does not capitalize “Sin” in these who instances, however, it is clear that the way Paul is using the term here is as an actor and not as an action. In order to distinguish the “power of Sin” (the actor) from “sin” (an action), I opt for capitalizing the word.
to sin. This new humanity (which can walk in newness of life according to v. 4) is part of the new time that was begun by Christ. Likewise because baptism is into death, Death no longer has dominion over or no longer has lordship (θάνατος εὕτοι οὐκέτι κυριεύει) over that person. The new body of this new humanity is a mortal body that is no longer under the lordship of Sin or Death and is no longer under law. Instead, this mortal body is under grace, walking in newness of life. The shape of this new life is still impacted by Sin.

Jewett disagrees that there is still a risk for Christian living under Sin though they have been baptized. According to him, Paul’s forceful verbs in verse 6 show that believers cannot sin any longer since they are under the lordship of Christ. His argument is based in part on verse 10, that Christ’s death was ἐφάπαξ, once for all. Jewett states correctly that “[w]hile Christ’s crucifixion was an unrepeatable moment of being subjected to the power of sin, his current life, indicated by the present tense verb ζῆ (‘he lives’) is in relation to God. The two forms of existence are diametrically opposed, both in time and in effect.” In my view, however, it does not necessarily follow that, “…what is claimed for Christ in terms of death to sin and life to God pertains in equal measure for believers…He died to sin ‘once for all’ and so do believers; their life ‘to God’ eliminates the possibility of living on under the power and lure of sin.” This is most certainly true in an ultimate sense, but when Paul uses the future in verse 6 and 8 about believers who will be resurrected with Christ, it is because in the present the possibility of Sin’s still holding sway over a believer exists. Jewett furthers his argument

---

22 Jewett, Romans, 404.
23 Ibid., 407.
24 Ibid.
by translating λογίζεσθε as a middle indicative rather than as a middle imperative, as most translators prefer. He does see that βασιλεύω is imperative. I argue that λογίζεσθε should also be translated in the imperative. Paul is presenting a view of what is happening (and what will happen) for believers. Because of this understanding, Paul then exhorts his believers to what action must follow being in this new baptized state.

Although it is true that one cannot become unbaptized, that one is no longer under the lordship of Sin and cannot fall back under that lordship once one is baptized, it is also true that while one lives in this sphere of the present time, there is still the possibility of sinning, something against which believers must defend themselves. If it were the case that believers could not fall under Sin’s allure and deception, then Paul would not need to say anything to the believers about what they should and should not do. Nor would much of chapter 7 make any sense at all. Although the hearers of the letter (and Paul himself) are under the lordship of Christ, eschatological reservation necessitates the possibility that they function as if they still fall under the lordship of Sin, though Paul writes emphatically in order to aid them in not doing so.

Paul’s forceful language does not therefore show that there is no risk of operating under Sin once one is baptized, but instead is Paul’s way to help this not happen. His metaphors in this chapter not only point to a reality beyond the words themselves, but also operate to cause the hearers of the letter not to succumb to Sin’s power now that they are free from it. Paul uses the metaphor of enslavement to sin in verses 6, 16, 17, and 20. He uses the metaphor of enslavement to righteousness in 16 and 18. In verse 22, he writes about being a slave of God. Being a slave to Sin, Paul says, keeps you free from righteousness but your destiny (τέλος) is death. A slave to righteousness, or to God, is
freed from sin and death, and the telos is eternal life. The chapter ends with his statement, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”25 Within the New Testament, this metaphor of the wages of sin is only found in Romans 6:23. In Romans 4:4, Paul talks about the wages due to a laborer and uses a different Greek word to express it: μυστικάς. There is, therefore, a different sense of “wages” being used in this verse in chapter 6. The word used in the metaphor in 6:23, ὕπερθανάστευμα, can also mean “provisions.” In Latin, the word “obsonium,” related to the Greek, means “supplies and pay for an army.”26 In this way, the wages of sin can also be linguistically connected to the provisions one needs in this war as a weapon of either Sin or Righteousness in the ongoing war between the two. Käsemann translates this word as wages being “soldier’s pay” rather than some neutral compensation.27

The connection between death and Sin in this metaphor is also quite clear. Because alliance with Sin leads to death, when one is free from Sin, one is also free from Death.28 Baptism, as stated above, is an act of death through which one breaks free from Sin. Instead of death being the outcome, payment, or provision of Sin, death in baptism operates quite differently because it is death with Christ which leads to resurrection. The power of the finality of death is conquered through this act of incorporation into Christ. Those who are in Christ have the certainty of participating in the resurrection as well as the death of Christ. Resurrection, however, is in the future, though the promise of it is in

---

25 NRSV
27 Käsemann, Romans, 185.
28 Freedom here is from the power of Death, as one as already died with Christ and is now dead to Death.
the present. Sin and God/Righteousness each offer something different for their slaves in exchange for their work as instruments in the war they are waging against one another. The telos of being enslaved to Sin or a weapon of Sin in this conflict is death. But in baptism one dies, and yet does not die. Therefore the telos of enslavement to God or a weapon of God is eternal life. Importantly, this telos is a “free gift.” It is grace, not payment or provision. Neither Death nor Sin is the telos for those who have died with Christ. Therefore, since they have freedom from these forces, Paul entreats his hearers to choose to remain free from Sin and Death using the imperatives in verses 12, 13, and 19. There are consequences for this choice, no matter whose power one operates under, Sin or Christ.

Käsemann points out that a person is never autonomous in how Paul conceives of the world. One is either under the lordship of Sin or the lordship of Christ. As we stand under one lordship or another, we both represent that lord and operate according to its dictates. The charge, then, that Paul issues for ethical action must be understood as situated in this apocalyptic scheme. Who Christ is and how people participate in his life and death, affect the way people live in this liminal time:

The premises are given in vv.1-11, and vv. 12-23 make it clear that this freedom, grounded in the act of salvation and with baptism as the coming of the change of the aeons, can be maintained only in the practice of service. What is usually called ethics goes beyond the moral sphere, as certainly as it asserts itself in that sphere, because sin has moral implications of Paul even though it is not a moral phenomenon...[T]he Kyrios remains Kyrios only for the one who serves him

29 Käsemann similarly points out that the construction is different for Paul between Sin and God. “Sin is already making the payment, death. The same image cannot be used for the God who gives...the comprehensive gift of salvation.” Romans, 185.
30 Ibid., 176.
31 Ibid., 175.
Our relationship to Christ as Lord means that our actions fall under his lordship as well. The picture of how Christians can operate in the in between time is both further explicated and complicated in the next chapter in Romans. Because death to Sin and Death has already taken place in baptism into Christ’s death, but the resurrection into Christ’s resurrection is still in the future, daily living now for those who are in Christ is difficult because Sin is still so powerful in the present. There exists the very real possibility that one who has been baptized can still fall on the side of Sin in his or her daily living. Käsemann writes, “[Christian existence] belongs to the sphere of power of the risen Lord, but it does so on earth and therefore it is still exposed to the attack of the powers which rule this aeon, is always under assault, and is constantly summoned to preserve and verify eschatological freedom in the service of its true and only Lord.”

The charge to act in concert with the lordship of Christ is real for those who are baptized. They represent Christ and show the world (including the power of Sin) that Christ has broken into it. Christians, then, are proof of Christ’s salvific action in ushering in a new age.

**Romans Chapter Seven – Living in the Body of Christ While Sin is Still a Threat**

Chapter 7 begins with Paul asserting that the Law was given for those who are living and that having died with Christ, believers are no longer under the Law. This would be a curious and disturbing prospect for the Jews hearing this letter. Baptized into Christ’s death means that one is no longer alive to Sin and no longer alive to Law. He

---

32 Ibid., 176.
writes, “you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.”\(^{33}\) The Jews in the audience hearing this letter would have been shocked by Paul’s statement that they have died to the Law, and likewise that being alive to the Law means that they may not be able to bear fruit for God, from whom the Law came. Non-Jews in the audience are then free from the Law as the only means to bear fruit for God. They do not have to convert to Judaism.

Through his argument about the Law in this chapter, the hearers of this letter are clearly to draw the conclusion that because they have died in baptism, they are no longer expected to abide by the law. They have in fact, “died to the law” (v.4). There is new life in the Spirit and fruit to bear for God in this new in-between reality in which one lives in Christ. Paul very nearly uses the same language for the law as he does for Sin. The law has been at work in them bearing fruit for death (v.5). Thus the law is connected to Death like Sin is. In addition, Paul says that “κατηργήθημεν” (we are separated from or discharged from, in the aorist passive) the law. Here he uses a different word than he does in verse 3 where a sense of freedom from slavery is clearly being utilized with “ἐλευθέρα”. A woman is set free from bondage to the law when her husband dies, and Paul writes to his brothers and sisters\(^{34}\) in Rome that they are separated from the law. Directly after this, however, he goes on to state that they, too, have been held captive. They have been set free from captivity and have been separated from the law. Note the

---

\(^{33}\) He uses the word ἀδελφοι in verse 4, meaning brothers, but I include sisters as well since Paul was following custom of his time in addressing men, though his letter is clearly heard as written for women as well.
passive voice in this section; separation from the law and freedom from captivity is not something one does for oneself. After this section of the letter where Paul is using the first person plural, he then switches to first person singular.

Verse 6 makes clear that though the Roman believers have been set free from the law, they are still held captive by something else. Paul writes that “we serve in newness of Spirit.” I take this to be locative dative, we serve in the sphere of the Spirit, which is a new reality. The word for service here denotes slavery. Our service to the Spirit is like that of a slave. Believers are not enslaved to Sin, but to the Spirit. Freedom from Sin (and from the law) is the freedom to serve in the sphere of the Spirit, it changes one’s location in this world from the old to the new. Jewett also sees this service to the Spirit as important in this section of Paul’s letter. He writes, “Under Christ a new bondage in the Spirit is established, providing a climactic juxtaposition with bondage to the law.” He points out that the beginning of verse 6, νῦν ἐτέρων, meaning “but now,” shows Paul’s eschatological sense of time. Jewett calls this the “turn of the new creation…the eschatological present in which believers enjoy a new form of life no longer dominated by the performance principle or the obsessive competition for honor.” Now, life is different for the believers. Now they are in the newness of the Spirit. As I pointed out, freedom from the law does not mean people are free from everything. Jewett writes that the “premise here is that all people are slaves…Liberation from conformity to a particular law never leaves people neutral.” Freedom from law is enslavement to the Spirit. When

35 Jewett, Romans, 429.
36 Ibid., 437.
37 Ibid., 438.
one is enslaved to the Law, there are expectations for behavior. There are also expectations for those who are enslaved to the Spirit.\(^{38}\) The newness of the Spirit is contrasted with the \(\text{παλαιότητα γράμματος}\), oldness of writing (most likely a synonym of the law). The Spirit belongs to the new age in which believers can now operate, the law belongs to the old age where Sin is in charge.

7:7-25 is one of the most emotional of Paul’s writings. Jewett recounts that there is an “immense scholarly debate” about Paul’s switch to first person singular in this section of the letter.\(^{39}\) He lists some of the key scholars’ interpretations in trying to determine whether, and in what context, Paul was writing autobiographically. Jewett himself sees Paul as writing “in character,” rather than autobiographically. He writes that it is “artificially constructed in the light of his preconversion experience as a zealot, but with an eye to the current situation in the Roman churches.”\(^{40}\) In other words, because of Paul’s stated adherence to the Law (“blameless” he calls himself in Philippians 3:2) he cannot be writing autobiographically here since he is writing about ways in which he falls short of the law’s expectations. He goes on to say that Paul’s preconversion experience does provide evidence of sin in the form of zealotry as he expresses in Galatians 1:14.\(^{41}\) Käsemann argues that Paul is using this part of chapter 7 to offer himself as a paradigmatic figure. Paul, he says, is offering himself as an example of the failure of the religious or pious person to act in accordance with the will of God. Käsemann understands that Paul is writing this section using the first person singular as one who is

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
\(^{39}\) Ibid., 441.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 444.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 449.
“demonically enslaved.” Paul clearly expresses this stance, and is using not only the first person singular, but also the present tense. Therefore, I find it unconvincing that this section of Paul’s letter (7:7-25) should be taken as only symbolically autobiographical or only referring to his life preconversion. Based on the content of the letter up to this point and its most immediate context of Romans 6, I argue that Paul is writing honestly about his own current struggles to function in the present as one who is “in Christ” when the time is before eschatological fulfillment and the cosmic battle is enacted in his own body, while at the same time believing firmly that his body is a part of a new corporate body as the body of Christ. He writes this because of the potential for it to benefit the hearers of his letter. As Eastman points out, the function of this letter for Paul’s audience is “a deepened personal recognition of both the horror of sin, and ultimately, the deliverance of God through the work of Christ.” Paul understands himself as an individual-in-relationship, both with Christ and with other believers. This relational existence comes through strongly in this section of Romans 7. Paul’s emotional expression of the difficulty of living as one with Christ in this contested time is why this part of the letter is so powerful. The emotion comes through because it is in some way autobiographical, even as the purpose behind it is clearly paradigmatic as he is teaching the Romans through this letter.

---

42 Käsemann, Romans, 204.
44 Eastman asks the question of whether the identity of the first person singular in chapter 7 even matters. The point, she argues, is to express the struggle of the present time: “In other words, the speaker who talks as if he or she suffers under the tyranny of sin (and indeed, as if he were Paul himself) makes it possible to name a slippage between the cosmic, corporate realities of sin and grace and the discrete
Using himself as an example of how difficult it is to live into the freedom which the baptized have been given, he echoes the questions he asks in 6:1 and 6:15, asking again in 7:7, “What then should we say?” He uses these rhetorical questions to help the Romans see that they actually cannot draw the easiest conclusion from the situations he has presented. In this case, the simplest conclusion to draw is that if Sin and the Law both bring death, we should see that the law is organically connected to Sin. But this is not where Paul goes. Only Sin is Sin; and it is powerful enough to use the commandment of God toward an ungodly end (death). Not only is the law ineffectual in keeping Paul from the sin which it reveals as being sin, additionally Sin makes use of the law to do the very thing through the law that the law was intended to prevent. How confusing and troubling both these realities are! Still, Paul goes on to say that the law is holy and the commandment is “holy and just and good” (verse 12). The nature of the law has not changed, but its purposes and effectiveness has been changed by Sin. He writes that Sin “seizing an opportunity in the commandment” worked to bring death to him. Jewett points out that this idiom in 7:8 “first appears with the Greek orators in the context of trade, agriculture, and war.” Specifically, Sin finds this opportunity in Paul through the commandment against covetousness. Käsemann argues that Paul chooses this particular sin because it is “absolutely the most basic sin against which the whole law is directed and which the law in fact provokes.” In this section of the letter, Paul is clearly writing experiences of Paul’s auditors. Naming that slippage prepares his auditors, in turn, to hear repeatedly and to appropriate personally the news of deliverance in chapter 8.” (Ibid., 102.)

45 NRSV
46 Romans 7:8, NRSV
47 Jewett, Romans, 449.
48 Käsemann, Romans, 194.
with Sin as an agent of action. Sin is weaseling its way into the law and changing the outcome of relationship with the law. The law does not tell Paul what sin is and bring life, but instead uses the law to tell Paul what sin is and finds a way to manifest that sin in Paul’s own life, thus leading him to death. Even the Law, which is so good, was an opportunity as a means for Sin to bring him to its end, which is death. This makes clear just how powerful and manipulative Sin is in a way that Jews hearing the letter would have quickly understood. Sin even works through what is good to bring its goal of death to Paul.

Verse 13 summarizes his theology of Sin and the law. He again uses the rhetorical question device: Did the law, which was defined as holy, just, and good in verse 12, bring death to Paul? No, it was not the Law that brought death, it was Sin “working death in me” through this good thing. This does not happen without purpose, though it is a challenging and confusing purpose. Paul writes that this is ἵνα (in order that) “φανῇ ἁμαρτία...γένηται καθ’ ὑπερβολήν ἁμαρτωλός ἢ ἁμαρτία διὰ τῆς ἐντολῆς” (sin might be exposed as sin, and might become sinful beyond measure through the commandment⁴⁹). This shows that although it seems more than unlikely, even this is helpful for those living in this liminal time. Sin is exposed by its working through the law. In fact, Sin is exposed for how utterly sinful it is.

In the latter half of chapter 7, verses 14-25, Paul shares his ongoing struggle with Sin. The first half of the chapter is comprised of Paul writing about the hearers of the

⁴⁹ Although these two parts of verse 13 are separated in the Greek, when translating them into English, the sentence structure works with them to be taken together, this is why there is ellipsis in the Greek and a comma in the English.
letter, and then going on to talk about the way Sin has made use of the good Law in past tense. Verse 14 marks a change, however. Remaining with the first person that he has used in the previous verses 7-13, Paul switches to present tense: “For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am fleshly, having been sold under Sin.” In this state of having been sold under Sin, which the NRSV translates as “sold into slavery under sin,” Paul is in a state of confusion and frustration. He is unable to do the things he would like to do and does the things he does not want to do. In this part of chapter 7, Paul expresses with great emotion what it is like to be under the power of Sin when one’s agency is directed by that power. He feels a distinct separation between himself and Sin, which does evil through him. It is not his own self doing evil, but Sin working through him. Much like Sin works through the Law.

New Testament scholar Paul W. Meyer traces the history of interpretation of this intriguing part of the Pauline corpus. He writes that the adjectives in verse 14, πνευματικός (spiritual) and σάρκινός (fleshly) have been influenced by Augustine such that “[t]hey are now made to differentiate two classes of humans: the religious person who is righteous, wise, understanding, re-born, perfect in self-knowledge and humility, on the one hand and the irreligious, the ungodly, and the sinner on the other, who is utterly devoid of genuine religious impulse.”50 He then argues that the Reformers exegeted this passage differently, “wishing to deflate such natural religious pretension in the apostle’s name.”51 They read the passage to be about the internal conflict between the

---

51 Ibid., 68.
Spirit and the flesh that Christians suffer. Meyer points out that a binary language has been imposed on the text from outside, which, “leaves no room for the historical Paul or his kind, the deeply religious Jew devoted to the God of Abraham and Moses.”

According to Meyer, Paul is writing about two aspects of the same self who is enslaved to Sin. “The symptom of this enslavement is not simple frustration of good intent, but good intention carried out and then surprised and dumbfounded by the evil it has produced, not despair but the same disillusionment so clearly described in v. 10: What should have effected life has produced death!” The cosmic battle between Sin and Grace can be seen on smaller and much more personal scales – in God’s good law and in one’s self. Paul’s purpose in writing this section of chapter 7 is to provide himself as a living example of what happens when one is under Sin. He knows this because he has lived it. Moreover, he uses the present tense; he is still living it. Though he has been baptized and is living a new life in Christ, so, too, is he struggling with the power of Sin still at work in the world and in his own life. Eastman says it clearly: “The battle is ongoing because, although those in Christ are no longer enslaved by sin, they still live in a cosmos dominated by sin and death.” So powerful is Sin that it can even try to enlist a baptized believer into its service.

Interpretations of this text have followed, as Meyer points out, a moral understanding of sin rather than an apocalyptic one. In Paul’s understanding, although there is a dimension of morality involved in what he writes about in v13-25, it is not his

52 Ibid., 70.
53 Ibid., 76
primary concern. The emphasis is not on action, but rather his inability to act in a way that makes sense with his being in Christ. As Käsemann rightly points out, the situation Paul depicts of the pious is a desperate one.\(^{55}\) One cannot do as one knows one ought, even when one is in Christ. What Paul offers then, is exactly the reason that the emphasis for living in Christ cannot be on the action of the believer who straddles these two worlds – the old and the new. Käsemann summarizes Paul’s sentiments with this succinct statement: “What a person wants is salvation. What he creates is disaster.”\(^{56}\) The point is not that humans are incapable of being righteous. The point is that when the emphasis or desire of the person is to be righteous rather than to be in Christ, then righteousness will not be the result. Sin cannot be conquered by the human drive to do good. Sin can only be conquered by Christ. Salvation is not an action of a pious human, it is an act of Christ.

Paul compares himself and his desire to do good with the law of God, which is connected to his deepest self or “inner man” (εσωνθροποποιον\(^{57}\)) in 7:22. Paradoxically in 7:18 he writes that nothing good “in me,” which he goes on to further define as “in my flesh.” He sees in the members of his body, “another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members.”\(^{58}\) Somehow there is part of him that he can identify as remaining connected to good despite his flesh being captive to Sin. There is a part of him that Sin does not have access to and cannot hold captive. It is this εσωθροποποιον. Käsemann is helpful in pointing out that this εσωθροποποιον does not mean some part of the person that is disconnected from the body.

\(^{55}\) Käsemann, Romans, 203.  
\(^{56}\) Ibid.  
\(^{57}\) This is a contrast to the old man/self of Romans 6:6 as well.  
\(^{58}\) NRSV, 7:23
“What is meant is the pneumatic who must go through suffering and death and grow therein.” This εσω άνθρωπον is connected to Paul’s mind in verse 23. There is a law of Sin and a law of his mind. Jewett argues that Paul is not presenting a dualistic anthropology here. He is instead articulating an idea that what a person does is distinct from who a person is. The difference between the inner self and the old self presented by Paul is not between the body and the mind (or soul as some will understand this εσω άνθρωπον to be referring to), it is instead the difference between Sin and Christ. Although Sin has found a way to hold Paul’s flesh captive, Sin cannot erase the fact that Paul is in Christ. The εσω άνθρωπον remains free in Christ, a foretaste of the total freedom that will come with Paul’s future participation in Christ’s resurrection. The body is not bad, no more than the Law is bad. The body is not something to overcome or reject, but rather something that will be free and can even act in freedom now, though the war rages on. Paul’s imperatives seek to make the body free in action now even with the fact of eschatological reservation.

This language of war and of Sin holding Paul captive through the members of his body echoes 6:12-14, with its military language and emphasis on the bodily experience of the believer. This is the same language that he uses in chapter 6 directing the hearers of this letter not to let their members become weapons of Sin. Käsemann also notes that 7:23 is parallel to 6:12 and following. He writes that this verse is a kind of culmination of Paul’s theology of the body in this contested time. He writes, “[t]he existence depicted

59 Käsemann, Romans, 206.
60 Jewett, Romans, 470.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 207.
here, in its bodily relation to the world with all its capacities, is the basis of the operation of the power of sin which uses our members as its instruments…Yet even under this alien rule we are still the creatures of God. Neither our power nor the power of sin can obliterate this.” 63

Paul sees that his own body is a dwelling place of sin and is in need of deliverance even though he already has died in Christ. He has become a member of the corporate body of Christ who has been enlisted into Sin’s army. The war not only rages at large between Sin and God, but also in his own body, which is part of the corporate body of those who are baptized into Christ. The body of Christ has members, body parts, who are being seized by Sin. He himself is, at least sometimes and certainly not ultimately, one of them. Here Paul speaks about the body in two ways at the same time. He is talking about the very personal way the conflict between Sin and God affects him; and he is also talking about the way the conflict affects the body to which he belongs. The mortal body in this time and space is the believer’s reality as he or she lives in between baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection into Christ’s resurrection. This in-between status offers an opportunity that Sin will try to seize upon for its own use in the ongoing war, just as Sin made use of God’s Law. Sin, taking over the body causes Paul to be unable to work the good that he wills (7:18). His very flesh becomes a dwelling place for Sin when he no longer functions as free from the corporate sinful body. Sin is the reason why he does what he does not want to do and is unable to do what he does what to do. Importantly, it is not his own body or his flesh that is the problem, rather it is Sin dwelling in his

63 Ibid., 208.
members, that has turned his body into a “body of death” (7:24), into flesh that is a weapon in the war against God. This is also true of the corporate body – if Sin dwells in a member of the corporate body, it turns the whole body into a weapon in the war against God. This is why it is the responsibility of the whole corporate body to help its members fight Sin and keep Sin from taking a foothold in it.

Because of this desperate position Paul is in, a cry for deliverance ushers forth. Chapter 7 ends with a desperate plea, recognizing Paul’s own inability to wrest himself from Sin’s grasp: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.”

Jewett writes that Paul cannot be referring to the tension between the two ages or to his yearning for resurrection. To do so would be to “reflect the experience of believers rather than of the pre-Christian Paul.” This is, however, exactly what Paul is doing. He is reflecting the experience of believers and of himself. Though they are baptized, the fact that they are not yet resurrected with Christ, though they have died with him, means that they continue to struggle with the stronghold Sin has over this time.

Paul is certain that both he and the Romans listeners are dependent on Christ for salvation from their predicament. His soteriology does not include pitting will as opposed to action in 7:14-20, as some might deduce. The contradiction does not fall on the moral plane. Instead it is that the pious person thinks he or she can act in such a way as to attain

\[64\] NRSV, 7:24-25
\[65\] Jewett, Romans, 471.
\[66\] Ibid.
salvation. Of course this is impossible, as salvation cannot come from anything other than Christ. 67 Käsemann calls this the “heart of Paul’s teaching.”68

I agree that Paul is clear that salvation comes only through Christ. However, I disagree that Paul’s main concern in writing this part of chapter 7 is to show that a human, believer or otherwise, cannot act his or her way to salvation. Though this may be true for Paul, it is not the main purpose of this emotional appeal, which is in the form of a confession and proclamation of faith. Paul writes as if praying, culminating in a statement of profound faith in verse 25: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” I agree instead with Meyer’s reading of what is happening in this section of the letter. Sin has not only found an opportunity in the good Law of God, but also in Paul’s own body. Sin has made use of the good human body, enlisting it into its service. Salvation then also becomes tied up with corporeality. In this way, this section of Romans connects the body with the spirit or soul of a person in an interesting way, rather than divorcing the two as it is so often misunderstood to be saying. The emphasis of this section of Romans is on the power and strength of Sin, rather than on the frailty of humanity. Paul is not writing to condemn the pious person, using himself as an example, and criticizing religion for trying to convince us that we are able to act in accordance with God’s will. Instead, Paul is writing autobiographically and paradigmatically to show that Sin cannot only thwart human effort, religious or not, but it can even use it for its own ends. It is this final statement of faith in verse 25 that is the example for Paul’s hearers. Even in this state, Christ saves. Thanks be to God!

67 Ibid., 209.
68 Ibid.
Deliverance from this body of death will come through Jesus Christ. Deliverance from being aligned with Sin, and realignment with Grace will come through Jesus Christ. Here, Paul changes the tense again. Although he uses the present tense to show that the struggle is taking place even though he is a baptized believer, deliverance is still in the future (\(\rho\upsilon\omega\sigma\tau\alpha\), the future middle). On a personal level, because Paul is in Christ, he is aware of the ways that Sin is attempting and sometimes succeeding in gaining a foothold in his own body. On a communal level, Paul’s personal awareness is paradigmatic: because the Romans Christians are together in Christ, they can perceive when Sin is taking a foothold in their corporate body. On a cosmic level Sin has been defeated, so the conflict is now only relegated to these personal and communal levels.\(^{69}\) Eastman terms the life of the believer as “double participation.” She writes, “On the one hand, the objective redemption accomplished by Christ’s action on the cross is sure, and the victory is accomplished (8:3). On the other hand, continued vulnerability to the powers of sin and death, entailing – this side of the eschaton – a life of double participation.”

The future promise of deliverance, or rescue, from this “body of death” is a certainty like participation in Christ’s resurrection. Chapter 7 is about the power of Sin. So powerful is it that it finds an opportunity for its goals in God’s good and holy Law and in Paul’s own body, turning it into a body of death. Sin divides the self and uses the Law, all for its purposes of death. Deliverance is promised in the future, an undivided self and the ability to not only delight in God’s law but also have the members of his body obey his will to do good. Deliverance is also promised in the future for the corporate body,

when all members of that body will be united in obedience to Grace. There is a tension here between what Paul writes about in chapter 6, the certainty that the “body of sin” was crucified with Christ and the awareness that the crucifixion of the corporate body of sin has not yet come to completion in the present because Sin is still engaged in battle with Grace. Sin’s final demise is not yet complete, though the assurance of it is clear. Resurrection for the body of sin in the future, when Sin will be conquered and all bodies will be part of the body of Christ. The body of sin is not resurrected as such, then, but transformed once Sin is defeated. Temporarily, then, Paul still struggles with this “body of death” which is at once his personal experience and his relationship with a larger body.

According to chapter 6, despite this body of death whose members are used by Sin, the baptized are told by Paul that they should present their members as slaves to righteousness towards sanctification rather than presenting their members as slaves to impurity or iniquity as they have done in the past (6:19). There is clearly a part for the believer’s will and agency to play in this in-between time, though Sin will still try to use member for its own purposes. Paul’s imperatives help call members to their freedom. Telling them they can be slaves to righteousness makes it so they have the freedom to do just that. Paul reminds them that they are in Christ, already saved and in a new body. Rescuing the body, at the same time a member of the corporate body, from Sin’s grasp is ultimately the work of Jesus alone and is a part of the promise of the future that Christians can live into in the present as they participate in Christ’s life while waiting for their own resurrected life.

Paul’s anthropology is not inherently negative in Paul’s view of reality as presented in these two chapters. Rather, there is a very real sense that the human person is
held captive by forces beyond itself and can still exercise a limited will within these confines. Captive to God, slaves of righteousness, means freedom from Sin in an ultimate sense though the penultimate reality still consists of a very real struggle where Sin can still dwell within a believer’s body, and within the corporate body of Christ, and cause members to act in a way contrary to the deep desires of that person.

**Romans Chapter Eight – Living in Christ While Waiting in Hope**

When Paul moves into chapter 8, he begins with the most hopeful statement for those who are caught in this struggle between Sin and Righteousness. He writes, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Although Sin is dwelling within the members of a baptized person and causing the person act in such a way that go against what he or she knows to be good, there is no condemnation. Jewett summarizes the meaning of this verse in this way: “For those in Christ the condemnation of sin and the flesh, whose destructive force was the subject of the preceding pericope, has no more effect.”

I disagree that this destructive force of Sin has no more effect. The struggle with the effect of Sin’s power is clearly felt in the turmoil expressed in the previous chapter. But there is no condemnation. Because of Christ ushering in a new era, though the battle between Sin and Righteousness still rages, humans are free from condemnation. The “body of death” Paul expresses in the previous chapter is not where humans stay, rather they are saved and brought into newness of Spirit. Although the baptized person’s resurrection into Christ’s resurrection is in the future, the present is not

---

70 NRSV  
71 Jewett, Romans, 479.
a place of condemnation or death, but a place of life. The believer does not lose his or her place in the sphere of Christ and the Spirit.

Käsemann summarizes Paul’s organization of chapter 8 in this way: “[v]erses 1-11 deal with the Christian life as being in the Spirit. Verses 12-17 expound this as the state of sonship. Verses 18-30 portray it as the hope of eschatological freedom. Verses 31-39 depict it as triumph.”

This description of the Christian life, what it involves, and the result of living it will conclude my close examination of this part of Romans for the purposes of ministry with adolescent girls. The description of the challenges, triumphs, and relational nature of life in Christ will be explored in this section.

According to Paul in 5:16, the gift of Christ is righteousness, not condemnation. This is echoed in 8:1. In chapter 5, the statement falls within a conversation about Adam and Sin’s entrance into the world; in chapter 8, it follows the emotional statement of how the war between Sin and Righteousness still affects Paul himself. Although he still struggles, he is not condemned because he is in Christ. This is one of the ways the future promise is in the present. Interestingly, Paul then writes about law. Jewett points out that because of the strength of Paul’s argument in the previous section where he “so eloquently and terribly portrayed” the “paralysis caused by the reign of sin,” he must be equally forceful in his expression of the new age in which believers now operate. This force is expressed through law. In verses 2 and 3, there are different laws – the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, the law of Sin and Death, and the law (Torah) which has

---

72 Käsemann, *Romans*, 212.
73 Ibid., 480.
been weakened by the flesh.\textsuperscript{74} Paul is free from the law of Sin and Death and the law weakened by flesh (Torah) because of the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

Freedom from the old age is freedom from these old ruling categories, and freedom for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ. Being in Christ means being in relationship with a new law; this time it is one that leads to life.

This work of freedom was carried out by God’s son, who was sent by God in the likeness or image of sinful flesh (v.3). The law was impotent to condemn Sin because Sin had been able to make use of it; Paul writes that it became “weak by the flesh.” The law was no longer strong enough to combat that which it was expected to, nor could it lead to life. Jewett interprets the flesh in this instance as being human frailty, saying that it “recapitulates the argument of the preceding chapter about human arrogance and the quest for honor, which corrupt the law and destroy its capacity to achieve the good.”\textsuperscript{75} He says that Paul’s use of “the flesh” “functions as a universal symbol for the crippling competition for honor that distorts every human endeavor.”\textsuperscript{76} Again, I disagree with Jewett, though it is a nuance that separates my understanding of the flesh from his. I agree that Paul is talking about the “distortion of every human endeavor,” or as Paul puts

\textsuperscript{74} Jewett, again tracing scholarly debates, points out that there is not agreement about whether there are three different laws being discussed in these verses. Paul could be equating “the law” in verse 3 with the “law of sin and death” in verse 2, meaning he is only talking about 2 laws, one of which is the law of sin and death (and is also Torah). It is my contention that there are three laws: 1) the law of sin and death, 2) the law (Torah), and 3) the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. The law of sin and death is certainly at work in the Torah. This is what Paul writes about in chapter 7; however, he does not equate Torah with Sin. By no means! Jewett argues that there are two laws: 1) The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus and 2) the law of sin and death. In both cases, the Torah is at play. In Christ, Torah is the law of the Spirit of life. Under Sin, Torah is the law of sin and death. Since Paul does not expect believers to follow Torah, I find it unlikely that he is writing about the law of the Spirit of life in Christ being Torah. \textit{Romans}, 481.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 483.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
it, the inability to do the good that he wants to do (which he shares as a paradigmatic example for all believers). However, it is not the human pursuit of the good that is the problem. The problem is that Sin has seized the human body, the human who is a member of the corporate body, and the human pursuit of good, as it has seized the law. My interpretation follows Käsemann’s, who writes, “[Paul’s] intention is clear. Only the Spirit gives freedom from the powers of sin and death. Since the Torah has been perverted by the flesh it cannot enable us to fulfill God’s will, without which that freedom does not exist.”

Paul uses “flesh” as shorthand for the human, and for humanity, under Sin. Human flesh, the body, is not inherently sinful; the problem is not with the flesh, the problem is that Sin can manifest in the flesh and can in fact create a corporate body of death. These are the ones whom Christ comes to rescue by incorporating them into his body of resurrected life.

Because Sin has exercised its power over people and the law, the law was ineffectual at leading people to life. So God did something different; he sent someone to do what the law could not. Only in the likeness of this sinful flesh can Jesus complete the task of condemning sin as it manifests itself in flesh. This does not mean that Jesus was somehow not fully human. Instead, Jesus is in the likeness of flesh under the power of Grace instead of under the power of Sin. Because of Jesus being a body, in the likeness of sinful flesh, he shows humanity what is possible – to live the human life as a part of a body that is free from Sin. Flesh as a partner of Sin is precisely what Jesus condemns when he himself is in the likeness of that sinful flesh. Although the two are linked (sinful

---

77 Käsemann, Romans, 218.
78 Romans 7:24
and flesh) in the first part of verse 3, in the later part of the verse the two are separated. Jesus condemns Sin. Not human flesh, but the Sin which has taken over flesh and has become its adjective. Just as in chapter 7, Paul is talking on different levels. On one level, there is the individual, who is always in relationship with other people and with either Sin or Grace. On another level, there is the corporate body of believers who together participate in this place and time as the body of Christ. On yet another level, there is a corporate body to which an individual belongs when Sin has made use of that member’s body – the body of death. Paul is always talking to the individual-in-relationship and the body to which that individual belongs. Based on my reading of chapter 7, once a person is baptized into Christ, they are forever a member of Christ’s body, though Sin is powerful enough to conscript that person into the body of death, something Christians need to fight against. Flesh can be taken over by Sin, when a person’s body becomes part of the body of death, but it is Sin that receives condemnation and defeat by Christ, the body (the individual-in-relationship and the corporate body made of up individuals) receives freedom and salvation. Both the individual-in-relationship and the body of death are rescued and transformed when Sin is defeated. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, because Christ is the one who does the condemning. What he condemns is not people who have died and will be raised with him, but Sin itself. Sin that takes the good human flesh and turns it into a member of its team, Flesh.

Paul writes that Jesus executes this condemnation in order “that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us.” At the beginning of this letter, Paul has already established that God’s righteousness is revealed in the gospel, rather than in the law as
would have been previously understood by Jews at the time.\textsuperscript{79} In this verse of chapter 8, it is clearly Christ’s action which fulfills the righteousness of the law. Paul’s use of the passive voice in πληρωθή (“it might be fulfilled”) clearly shows that the righteousness of the law is not fulfilled by human action.\textsuperscript{80} The law was weakened by the Flesh (verse 2); Paul identifies this as “sinful flesh” in the following verse. As shown above, this is not as simple as a dualism between spirit or soul and flesh. Sin in the flesh is condemned, which does not mean that the human body is sinful. However, those who “walk according to Flesh” are those who walk according to Sin rather than according to the Spirit. The human body is sinful when under Sin, but it need not operate under Sin now that Christ has come to free humanity by condemning Sin. In this first part of chapter 8, Paul is writing not about the human body, but about Sin, which has the power to manifest itself in flesh. Flesh, like Death in chapter 6, is a partner with Sin. In Paul’s apocalyptic understanding of reality, Flesh, having been influenced by Sin, is one of the powers with which God battles. Flesh is powerful enough to weaken the law. Spirit and [sinful] Flesh are opposite each other in the conflict taking places between God and Sin.

In this verse (8:4), the righteousness of the law is not fulfilled in the law or in people following the law. In a paradoxical twist, the righteousness of the law is fulfilled “in us” (ἐν ᾧ), that is, in those who are in Christ. Christ comes in the likeness of sinful flesh in order to condemn Sin so that humans have the opportunity to be in Christ. The righteousness of the law is fulfilled, in some way, both through Christ’s action and

\textsuperscript{79} Romans 3:21-22.
\textsuperscript{80} Jewett, Romans, 485.
through those whose bodies have been freed and are in Christ. This new life in the Spirit is righteousness.

Using these antinomies of verses 1-9, Paul defines those to whom he is referring when he writes in first person plural in this letter. He and the Roman Christians, “us”, are “those who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (verse 4). Therefore, those who are “in Christ” are those who walk according to the Spirit. Walking according to the flesh is further explicated as “living according to the flesh” which in turns leads to “setting their minds on the things of the flesh.” In this way, how one lives and walks in his or her life has a great deal to do with where their mind is directed. Setting the mind on the things of the flesh is death. Jewett notes that walking by the Spirit “entails a noncompetitive, cooperative type of behaving, guided by love and aimed at mutual upbuilding…[it] has an indisputably charismatic quality, involving encouragement, guidance, and inspiration by the Spirit, experienced within Christian groups in their ecstatic worship together.”81 There is a moral component and a spiritual component to what it looks like in the concrete lives of believers to walk according to the Spirit. Here again, Paul clearly links Sin, Death, and Flesh. The Spirit, on the other hand, is linked with God, righteousness, Christ, life, and peace. People participate in the conflict between Sin and God, walking according to one or according to the other. The conflict is not an inner conflict relegated to the individual between his or her body and his or her spirit or soul. The dualism in Paul’s theology is an eschatological dualism, not an anthropological one. “The alternative distinguishes the kingdom of this world from the

81 Jewett, Romans, 486.
The conflict is much larger, it is both communal and cosmic in scope. What is at stake is resurrection, life in the present, and life in the future age to come as well.

In verses 9-11 of chapter 8, Paul brings the implications of this cosmic battle explicitly to the bodies of human beings. He has written that those who are in the flesh do not have the power to please God. But, “you” (those hearing this letter) are not in the flesh. They are in the Spirit because they are in Christ. Perhaps most interestingly, they are in the Spirit “since the Spirit of God dwells in [them]” (v. 9). Because of this indwelling Spirit of God/Christ, these people belong to Christ. Jewett translates the ἐν in verse 9 as “within” or “in the midst of” to aid in conveying Paul’s corporate meaning. God’s Spirit dwells ἐν “the congregation, rather than merely within the heart of individuals.” I think this is an accurate interpretation, the Spirit of God is found in the community of people, but it is also the case that individuals make up that community. A community is not baptized, individuals are, though individuals are baptized into a community of other Christians and into the body of Christ. There is a both/and sense to this indwelling Spirit; it is within individuals who are in this community and it is in the midst of that community. So I agree with Jewett, God’s Spirit is not merely within the heart of individuals, and it is there as well. Käsemann similarly argues that “[o]ne cannot belong to the Lord without manifesting his lordship with one’s own existence.”

---

82 Käsemann, Romans, 219.
83 Baptized into Christ, Romans 6:3, for example.
84 Jewett, Romans, 489.
85 Käsemann, Romans, 224.
Something interesting happens with the bodies of those who are both in Christ/the Spirit and have the Spirit of God/Christ dwelling in them. Paul is aware that human bodies die. Death and Sin are coconspirators in this battle and go hand in hand. Death happens because of Sin. However, though their bodies are dead their “spirits are alive because of righteousness” (v 10). Next Paul restates what he stated in chapter 6: though they are dead, they have a future promise of resurrection. The liminal time is a contested time, a time of great struggle as he wrote in chapter 7. Jewett writes that, “The baptismal reading of v. 10 implies that the indwelling Christ allows believers to live within the tensions between body and spirit, sin and righteousness, death and life.”\(^{86}\) Paul here emphasizes to his hearers the importance of being in Christ and having Christ in them. Christ does dwell in them, so they need not fear, even though they live in the tension of this time. The truth is that when one is dwelling in the Spirit, the Spirit also dwells in him or her and the result is life. This is not some spiritual, disembodied life, it is bodily life. Here he brings in another term, body. Using “flesh” (σαρκ) until now, Paul now writes about the body (σώμα) in these two verses. Flesh is characterized as another power, something put in the service of Sin by Sin. To live according to the flesh finds expression in the body. Interestingly, death of the body is on both sides of the battle. Because of Christ’s own death and because of baptism, even on the side of righteousness bodily death and participation in Christ’s death is a reality. The bodies of these Romans have died with Christ just as Jesus’ body died because of the power of Sin; it is just these dead mortal bodies which are promised to be brought to life through Christ’s spirit. Jewett

\(^{86}\) Ibid., 492.
connects the σῶμα νεκρόν (body of death) in verse 10 with the σῶμα ἐμαρτίας (body of sin) in 6:6, which occurs during Paul’s discourse on baptism. In that section the body of sin is co-crucified with Christ, putting it to death for the purposes of life. In this instance in verses 10 and 11, something similar is happening. Echoing baptism, here in chapter 8 the body of death is put to death for the purposes of life. Sin and Death are again linked for Paul, and are linked in the bodies of humans.

Sin is clearly portrayed as extremely powerful in this first section of chapter 8. In the course of these 16 verses, Paul shows how Sin has made use of God’s law and partners with Flesh and Death to cause death to those who walk according to its partner Flesh, a death that is not one with promised resurrection. However, if in their dead mortal bodies, they live by the Spirit, then they will live though they, too, have died. Death, therefore, is a part of everyone’s experience in this liminal time, whether one dies because of Sin and then lives because of the Spirit or whether one dies because of Sin and remains dead. In this way, the liminal time is a time of death. However, ultimately this is not the case. Existing in the liminal, penultimate time is only part of what constitutes life for those in the Spirit (and in whom the Spirit resides). They have the promise of future resurrection which changes how they can operate in and how they understand life in the present. Eternal life is the ultimate outcome for all because Christ conquered Death and Sin in his crucifixion; those who are in the Spirit realize in the present that life and not death is their final destination.

Ibid., 491.
Those who “walk according to the Spirit” in this liminal time, are those who are adopted into the lineage of Christ. Here in verse 15 is the picture of what enslavement to the Spirit (7:6) looks like. It does not look like slavery; serving the Spirit is about adoption (υἱοθεσίας). Käsemann writes that serving the Spirit is an act of obedience. “Radical obedience is pointedly defined as slavery. But…it also denotes genuine freedom and sonship.”⁸⁸ According to Paul, the Romans receive a “spirit of adoption.” Then Paul places himself once again among the community of the Roman Christians. No longer is he writing about “you” but about “us.” He writes that we cry out to God as father and are children of God and heirs of God along with Christ. This cry identifies the ones crying out as children and heirs of God, and co-heirs with Christ. It comes not from the individual alone deciding to cry out to God as Abba, but instead it comes from the Spirit bearing witness to who God is with the spirit of the people. Again, this dance of cooperative agency is clear. The Spirit is cooperating with these people and bearing witness to God with their spirit. Here Paul is using the singular, “spirit,” as he does in verse 10. The spirit with which the Spirit is bearing witness to God is a shared communal spirit of these people. Though they have separate mortal bodies, these children and heirs of God are of one spirit.

Being sisters and brothers of Christ (co-heirs) is not an easy way to live in this contested time. Although baptism into his death may sound metaphorical, suffering is a reality for those who live in a way that is in conflict with the power of Sin. Paul writes that we are children and heirs “since we suffer with him in order that we may also be

⁸⁸ Käsemann, Romans, 227.
glorified with him” (v. 17). Suffering and dying with Christ is part of being in Christ and having the Spirit dwell within. Resurrection cannot happen without death, neither can glorification happen without suffering. Käsemann agrees with this interpretation of the necessary connection between suffering and glory, death and resurrection: “In all Paul’s theology participation in coming glory does not mean that the cross can be dodged.”

This is what it means to live in the world where Sin and Death are exercising their power over and against the power of God. To be sure, suffering is also part of being enlisted on the side of Sin in this conflict, suffering with Christ, however, is different suffering. Just as dying in Christ is different than physically dying.

Suffering in Christ is contextualized, temporary, and never justified. Suffering happens in a conflict, such as the one between Sin and Grace. When a war raging, there are injuries for those on the battlefield, which is where all people are located. When one is in Christ, suffering gets exposed as part of Sin’s battle plan. Suffering is not glorified or sought after; rather it is a sign of Sin’s continuing, yet passing power. Although suffering must be endured, it is not embraced. Paul then goes on to say, that although suffering of the present time is connected with the glory that is to come, these two (suffering and glorification) do not have the same value; they cannot be compared (v. 18).

It is not the case that suffering does not matter. Indeed suffering shows the power of Sin at work. Suffering can also show that a believer is living according to the Spirit, therefore caught in the conflict between Sin and Grace. In any case, present suffering is not congruous with the glory that will be revealed to or among us.

89 Ibid., 229.
Paul assumes that all believers will suffer; this is a mark of the present age. Käsemann calls this a “typical Pauline paradox” saying, “[t]hose who are already set in the state of sonship, and those who anticipate heavenly glory therein, are also those who wait and suffer, sharing the groaning of every creature.”\textsuperscript{90} According to Jewett, the assumption and expectation of suffering is in direct contradiction to the Roman view of the times. He calls this illusion the “Caesarean view about the presence of a peaceful, magically prosperous golden age.”\textsuperscript{91} The Roman Christians live in a different reality, one that has seen Christ break into the Empire and reveal that the times are quite different than the Empire would have them believe. Suffering is not, however, the only mark of the time. The time is also marked by the promise of glory, which will be revealed (apocalypsed). This glory is something for which all of creation is waiting. In some sense creation, and not only believers, knows that the Empire’s view is illusory. According to Jewett, the Christian community in Rome is the “initial evidence” of the glory that is coming for all creation.\textsuperscript{92} They have a hint of the fulfillment of the promise in their own gathering, even as together they seen that the present time is one of suffering.

Paul’s understanding that what is happening is on a cosmic level (creation, \textit{κτίσις}) is shown in this part of chapter 8. Just as the cry of the Spirit joins with the cry of the communal spirit of the children of God, so too does all creation share in the sufferings of the present liminal time and wait for a revelation of glory which will cause the present suffering to seem as nothing. Verse 19 gives creation personification. The earth takes on

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 231.
\textsuperscript{91} Jewett, \textit{Romans}, 509.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 511.
a human quality of anxious and persistent longing (ἀποκαραδοκία). What creation is waiting for is not resurrection or glory or even the revealing of Christ. Creation is waiting for the revealing of the heirs of God. “Paul implies that the entire creation waits with baited breath for the emergence and empowerment of those who will take responsibility for its restoration, small groups of ιηιοι τοῦ θεοῦ (“sons of God”).”⁹³ As the heirs of God wait for glory and an end to suffering, and for participation in Christ’s resurrection, creation is waiting for them. The responsibility of the heirs of God to their world is clear. There is no denial of creation or escapism in Paul’s eschatology. Instead, Paul makes the believers in Rome realize that when they participate in the death and resurrection of Christ, they become what creation is longing for.

Creation is in the position of longing for this revelation because it has been “subjected to its futility” (v. 20), unable to set itself free from its “slavery to destruction” (v. 21). Jewett understands that Paul is connecting creation’s yearning to the biblical tradition in what Christians call the Old Testament. He finds parallels to what Paul is writing about in Genesis, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes.⁹⁴ Jewett sees Paul pointing out the responsibility humans bear for the abuse the natural world has endured.⁹⁵ He notes that “[w]ith such clear allusions to this biblical tradition, Paul’s audience could well have thought about how imperial ambitions, military conflicts, and economic exploitation had led to the erosion of the natural environment throughout the Mediterranean world, leaving ruined cities, depleted fields, deforested mountains, and polluted streams as

---

⁹³ Ibid., 512.
⁹⁴ Ibid., 513.
⁹⁵ Ibid.
evidence of this universal human vanity.” Creation’s problems are the result of human arrogant and selfish pursuits. Yet creation is waiting for its freedom to come from humans, particular humans who are heirs of God. Creation is waiting for those who cry out to God, those who are hearing Paul’s letter. Creation cannot free itself; its subjugation was not accepted willingly and did not happen by its own will. Paul understands that creation’s subjugation to its futility was done “by the one who subjected it in hope” (v. 20). God seeks freedom for all, which is not something creation (including the people in it) can achieve for themselves. Freedom comes through Christ, it is both accomplished in his resurrection (and therefore Sin’s inability to work death in Christ) and is something for which creation (and the people in it) are still waiting.

The promise of that freedom from bondage to destruction (or to Sin and Death) is something Paul says “we” wait for with patience and hope. Creation waits. We wait; not only with patience and hope, also with groaning, as a woman in childbirth (v. 22). This groaning happens collectively as well. Creation is groaning together; and we are groaning with creation. A groan is erupting from creation together with “us.” Jewett writes that Paul “views the creation as a holistic, interdependent system with a life and developing of its own, yet anticipating appropriate human intervention to counter Adam’s fall.” Paul writes that we are waiting for adoption and that it is in (or by means of) this hope in which we are saved. Paul is using the dative case here, τῷ ἐλπιδί. There are several uses

96 Ibid.
97 This statement is a challenging one, putting God as the agent who does the subjugating. Theologically, this is necessary, God must be the one subjugating creation, otherwise Sin is stronger than God. For Paul, the purpose of God doing so is for the purposes of freedom and salvation. Käsemann points out that this verse is in anticipation of 11:32 where “all are held under disobedience in order that mercy may be shown to all.” Käsemann, Romans, 236.
98 Jewett, Romans, 517.
for the dative. When Paul writes that people are “in Christ” at the beginning of this chapter, he uses a preposition along with the dative case (τοῖς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ). In this case, he may be intending the same locative and participatory sense with τῇ ἐλπίδα in verse 24. As we are saved in Christ, we are also saved in hope. “Hope” is almost a synonym for “Christ” if we take the locative meaning. If this dative is not locative, it can also be the dative of means. By means of this hope we were saved is still conveying that there is a connection between hope and Christ since salvation happens by means of Christ’s action and our participation in it. In either case, whether locative or dative of means, salvation happens because of both hope and Christ. Christian hope, then, is an essential part of living in the liminal space of this contested time. The pains of a woman in childbirth are severe; they are also temporary and the pain is for the purpose of new birth, something wonderful. Christian hope, the hope of creation and of humans, is hope for this suffering to end with the gift of new life. This hope is for the “redemption of our bodies” (v. 23). Not the redemption of the soul separate from the body, but the redemption of the body. Resurrection for Paul is bodily because he does not have a dualistic anthropology. According to Käsemann, however, this redemption happens when the “earthly body is put off” and a “new corporeality” is conferred.99 He writes that the idea of resurrection of the flesh is foreign to Paul. Paul instead, “passionately longs for the liberation of existence from temptation and decay in favor or a mode of being in a world that belongs to God alone.”100 In a world that belongs to God, in the completion of the new creation, all will be in service to God. As Käsemann himself writes, “[s]ervice

99 Ibid.
100 Käsemann, Romans, 237.
which does not include the body is imaginary.”

It is also the case that in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes explicitly about bodily resurrection. For Paul, both redemption and resurrection are embodied realities for which humans hope.

This is another instance of Paul’s understanding that the goal of the Christian life is not the subjugation of the body, rather it is the freeing of the body. Käsemann writes that “[i]n the earthly body we are constantly exposed to the grasp of bondage.”

Therefore freedom of the earthly body is redemption.

In this place of waiting and patience for redemption, resurrection, and freedom, Paul notes that we do not wait alone. In our weakness or infirmity (ἀσθενεία), the Spirit comes alongside us with help (v. 26). Jewett translates ὁσαντως δὲ καὶ in verse 26 as “in a similar way also.” The implication is that the Spirit “stands alongside the saints as they persevere, guiding their most decisive intervention into the fallen world, namely, their prayer.”

Just as in verse 16, the Spirit does not work alone, nor do the believers. Paul uses the prefix συν- along with the root verb ἀντιλαμβάνω, which means “to help.” With the prefix συν- Paul makes clear that this help is not from outside the person with no interaction with that person. The help is cooperative, the Spirit helps alongside the weak person. The translation used by the NRSV is “the Spirit helps us in our weakness;” it is important to be clear that this help is not the surrender of the person’s agency to a Spirit who can fix something in our stead, but rather a cooperative partnership. The Spirit helps with us.

---

101 Ibid., 224.
102 Ibid., 237.
103 Ibid., 521.
This help is needed because “we do not know how to pray as we ought”.  

Somehow in this liminal time when we seek to be patient and wait with hope for redemption, Paul knows that prayer is needed. This prayer is aided by the Spirit’s intercession. The Spirit itself intercedes for us with “groans not expressed in words” (v 26). These groans echo the groans of creation waiting in pain like that of childbirth, Paul uses the same root word for both in verse 22 and in 26. The Spirit’s intersession happens “on behalf of saints according to God” (v. 27). When the person is unable to participate in this cooperative dance, the Spirit steps in to intercede, as is God’s will. Even in this situation, however, it is not the absence of the person that enables this intercession. As Jewett writes, “[t]he potentially threatening invasion of divine oversight is transformed here by a penetrating grace that accepts and sustains the deepest levels of human consciousness and unconsciousness.”

God does not eliminate human agency, rather the Spirit enhances it. Even in a state when the person cannot pray, the heart of the person is connected with the Spirit. Paul writes, “he who searches the hearts knows what is the mind (φρόνησις) of the Spirit” because of this intercession. Here we see further connection between the Spirit and the person. We learned in verse 16 that the spirit of the person is connected with the Spirit who bear witness together to our adoption as children and heirs of God with Christ. Now we also learn that the hearts of the people are connected to the mind of the Spirit. The Spirit’s intercession in times of weakness is God’s design. We also learn in this verse that these people in this cooperative dance with the Spirit are holy,

104 NRSV
105 Jewett, Romans, 524.
they are saints. Paul does not say that they are holy once they are no longer weak, rather, these people are holy in their weakness as the Spirit intercedes for them.

The next few verses, 28-30, talk about God’s action in human lives. Unlike the previous verses which focus on the work of the Spirit, these verses turn attention to God. Paul writes that all things work together for good those who love God. He then further clarifies who these people are who love God. They are those who are “called according to [God’s] purpose” (v. 28). Those who love God are called by God. Jewett points out that this love of God is active and contextual. He writes, “[t]he love of God that they have is thus a response to the event of their salvation, sustained by ongoing spiritual experiences that continue in the midst of suffering.”¹⁰⁶ Their love of God does not happen in a vacuum, nor is it divorced from their daily lives. Their love of God is connected to their experience of the Spirit within the context of their lives, which includes suffering.

Moreover, they are people whom God foreknew (v. 29) and foreknew to have the form of the image of his son. Formed in his image, confirms Christ’s place as the first-born. These Christians, therefore, are all younger brothers and sisters of Christ. He comes first as son. Paul then writes that these whom God foreknows and calls are those whom he justifies or makes righteous and glorifies (v. 30). Paul uses the aorist active indicative in this verse, stating that this justification/made righteous and glorification is something that has already happened. Although we are still waiting for redemption and for resurrection, righteousness is already available. Jewett notes that this was a “startling” declaration since it is expected in the future.¹⁰⁷ As we learn from the beginning of Romans,

¹⁰⁶ Jewett, Romans, 526.
¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 530.
righteousness is manifested in the faith of Jesus Christ for all those who believe (3:22). Being called and formed in the image of Christ, residing in the Spirit, means being made righteous now. We now know that Paul’s audience can see themselves as suffering, hopeful, patient, weak, loving God, called by God, known by God, formed in the same image as Christ, disclosing the mind of the Spirit in their hearts, justified/made righteous, and glorified. This is a complex and paradoxical portrait of those who are hearing Paul’s letter, it mimics the time itself.

The complicated nature of this liminal time is expressed quite well in Paul’s accounting of the state of things in Romans. In these few chapters addressed in this project, Paul has already written about the promise of resurrection to come and participation in the reality of Christ’s resurrection in the future. He has written about how we are already saved and yet waiting for freedom. He has written about how we are children and heirs and also waiting for adoption. He has written about our death in the present and the possibility of our life or death to come. These chapters in Romans are full of paradox and of nonlinear time. They also hold much hope and promise for those who are in Christ and those on whom the Spirit has laid claim. Ultimately, this hope is for all, though the fulfillment of this hope of resurrection, life, and redemption is a promise for which creation waits with deep longing.

Though the fulfillment is in the future, there are benefits in the present as well. The end of chapter 8 is encouraging for Paul’s audience. He writes of Christ interceding for us (v. 34) in the same way that he wrote in verses 26 & 27 about the Spirit interceding. In verses 35-39 Paul makes a list of challenges that could “separate us from the love of Christ.” Using the rhetorical question device again, he asks, who or what (τίς)
will separate us from the love of Christ (v. 35). He offers a list of what could possibly separate us from this love and then states with certainty that “in all these things we are more than conquerors through the one who loved us” (v. 37). We cannot be separated from the love of Christ because it is through that very One that all these things are conquered. As Käsemann notes, this is very much in line with Paul’s Christology: “The eschatological freedom of the children of God is, in good Pauline fashion, won by Christ alone.”

In this verse (37), ἀγαπήσαντος (the one who loved) is an aorist participle. We are conquerors in the present because of Christ loving us in the past. Also notable is that Paul is using language here that continues to define this liminal time as a contested one, these challenges and powers and principalities are things can, will be, and are conquered. More than conquered. Salvation does not happen through human will or action, nor does the conquering of things that have the potential to separate us from the love of Christ. Moreover, conquering does not happen through an act of violence or forceful subjugation, instead it happens through love. Jewett writes, “[t]his super-victory therefore derives not from the skill and strategy of combatants but from the power of the gospel, which declares the love of God shown on the cross of Christ.” Paul presents the paradox of new creation in these verses of triumph.

Summary

---

108 Käsemann, Romans, 248.
109 Jewett, Romans, 549.
Romans chapter 6 describes what it means to be a believer. Paul writes about baptism as fundamentally changing a believer’s identity. No longer is a person under the rule of Sin, but instead is living a life in Christ and empowered to fight against that power which used to confine him or her. Paul holds the tension of the in-between times in balance in this chapter, calling believers to act in a new way that reflects and is enabled by their new life in Christ. There are important implications for Christians today that come from a close reading of this chapter. Paul presents an idea of the individual that is always in relationship, invited to struggle against Sin and how it manifests itself, and always maintaining the certainty that Sin is still active, even though the believer is in a new state now.

Romans chapter 7 takes seriously the struggle of the believer to act in a way that is consistent with his or her participation in the resurrected life of Christ. Paul uses himself as an example, showing his hearers that he is in the same struggle that they are to act through Christ and not captive to Sin. He talks about himself, and modern day hearers need to be aware that whenever Paul is talking about himself (or any individual) that is never an autonomous individual. For Paul a person is always in relationship with others, a part of another body. In this chapter, Paul writes about the power and strength of Sin to attempt to keep believers in its body of death even though they have been freed into the body of Christ’s life.

Romans chapter 8 is about what comes next, when Jesus comes back and the present evil age is ended. Sin is completely and utterly destroyed by Christ. New life of freedom is for all creation. Creation waits patiently in hope because of the promise of this newness that is not yet here but coming, without a doubt. Paul understands the pain of the
present time and does not attempt to justify it, only to proclaim that it is temporary and in fact a sign that Sin’s power is going to end.

From these important, descriptive, and powerful chapters, the church has much to consider and is offered a new way to interpret the world, the time, itself, its call to action in the world, and the members who comprise it. We turn now to consider adolescent girls, as a particular part of the body of Christ, and how what Paul presents in these chapters can speak into their lived reality, especially as they describe it themselves.
Chapter 4

An Epistle to 21st Century Girls

“You’re gonna have to serve somebody/ Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord/ But you’re gonna have to serve somebody”

-Bob Dylan

What Time is It? Liminality and Apocalyptic

According to Paul scholar J. Louis Martyn, the central question in Paul’s letter to the Galatians is “What time is it?” This question is no less primary for the readers of Romans, since it is the base from which Paul’s apocalyptic worldview operates. The time in which we are situated determines what our activity in the time and response to the time can and should be. Martyn writes:

“The genesis of Paul’s apocalyptic – as we see it in Galatians – lies in the apostle’s certainty that God has invaded the present evil age by sending Christ and his Spirit into it. There was ‘before,’ the time when we were confined, imprisoned; and there is an ‘after,’ the time of our deliverance. And the difference between the two is caused not by an unveiling, but rather by the coming of Christ and his Spirit.”

This is also true of Paul’s apocalyptic in Romans. In addition to these two ages, I argue that there is a third. There is the old age and the new creation. There is also the time in between the two ages, which is where the hearers of the Romans letter, and we ourselves, are located. We are located in an old age, which has been broken into by Christ. While the new creation is still something for which we wait, we can live as its inhabitants now as we remain in this broken-into old age. The present time is neither old age nor new creation. The answer to the question, “What time is it?” for the Romans is that it is the

---

2 Martyn, Theological Issues, 121.
3 Martyn, Galatians, 99, italics original.
time in which we wait for the fullness of the new creation and can live according to its rules now. It is the time in which the old has passed away and the new is yet to fully come. It is a time of hope, pregnant and painful waiting, and power. It is a time of freedom. The implications for how to live in this time, what it means for Christians, are vast. We must be clear, however, about the time, before we can proceed to understanding those implications.

Given the clarity and urgency with which Paul writes about the time in Romans, his sensibilities must be taken seriously. There are several themes that emerge from what Paul writes in chapters 6-8, chapters which were explored in depth above. Paul’s grasp on the time is no less poignant now than it was in the first century. In this chapter, I seek to put the stories of adolescent girls, as they have shared them with me in the interviews related in chapter two, in conversation with what Paul wrote in that part of Romans. The themes that emerge from a close reading of his words are themes that can speak to similar themes that emerge out of the lives of these adolescent girls.

According to Paul in Romans 6, baptism is how one participates in this in-between time in the promise of the new creation. Baptism is about living beyond death. Once baptized, a believer is dead to death and alive in Christ. The promise of future resurrection is assured and the life the believer now lives is a life lived in Christ and with others in the Body of Christ. Teenagers are well-acquainted with living in a liminal space and time. Teenagers are not children, and yet they are also not yet adults. This is true developmentally as well as socially.  

---

4 Some of the developmental information about this liminality is presented above in chapter two.
Michael Warren warns that the liminal time of adolescence can be extremely disempowering. He writes that youth have been domesticated in society and in the church, which has been content to follow the society’s leading on the matter.\(^5\) He notes that the powerlessness and voicelessness of youth can be seen in examples such as male young people’s conscription into military service in the United States through their mandatory registration in the selective service, the inability to vote before age 18, and the control over young people’s time in school and extracurricular activities.\(^6\) He argues that adults assume that this powerlessness and voicelessness is a “normal condition of the young” rather than something that is imposed upon them.\(^7\) The experience of young people in the liminal space of adolescence is of oppression. Because they are in between childhood and adulthood, they are not considered as fully autonomous individuals by the society in which they live.

The public high school is another example of the liminal space that adolescents occupy. Historically speaking, the modern day high school did not exist until after the Great Depression. By the middle 1930s, 65 percent of adolescents were in high school, something that previously had been reserved only for a small elite group of adolescents in this country.\(^8\) Educators sought to create a safe, sheltered environment in which they could shape adolescents to “conform to adult society’s standards without a fight as long as they believed that they had made the choice to conform on their own.”\(^9\) Since there was no work for young people to be doing to earn wages due to the economic situation of

---

\(^6\) Ibid., chapter 3.  
\(^7\) Ibid., 34.  
\(^8\) Palladino, *Teenagers*, 5.  
\(^9\) Ibid.
the country, high school became what teenagers did with their time. Although teenager rebelliousness was not quelled by the educational designs of high school, their goal even in the 1930s does not sound dissimilar from the goal of high schools today: “learning to behave responsibly by keeping the future in mind.”

This focus on the future is perhaps one of the hallmarks of this adolescent stage. Young people are told again and again that adults will listen to them when they are older, that their opinions are valid when they are adults, that they get to have voice and vote when they are over eighteen. Although parents may bemoan the fact that their teenagers seem irresponsible, in practice teenagers are given very little responsibility. Not much is expected of them, besides behaving themselves and preparing for their future. Teenagers have been occupying a socially liminal space for over half a century.

Because of the socially-constructed liminal space in which teenagers live, they are perhaps in a unique position to understand Paul’s view of what time it is. The marks for Paul about this present time are that it is a liminal time and a time of conflict. God does not allow the world to remain under Sin, God invades the world as Christ. In flesh, God comes to wrest creation away from Sin, bringing the power of Grace into direct conflict with the powers of Sin and Death. Marytn uses descriptive language for how this time of conflict feels to Paul:

It follows that the basic characteristic of the present time is given in the fact that it is the juncture of the Old Age and the new creation. To use a

---

10 Ibid, 15. See also White, Practicing Discernment with Youth, chapter 1 for a helpful history of adolescence in the United States.
11 See Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), for an argument about how the journey to adulthood is now taking even longer, prolonging liminality in a person’s social development and creating a new and distinct period of life called emerging adulthood.
12 Martyn, Theological Issues, 282, italics original.
spatial image, it is the arena made what it is by the fact that God’s new creation is invading the Old Age in a kind of jungle warfare. The ‘now’ about which Paul speaks as the now of salvation is the redemptive now because it is the now of God’s apocalyptic war of liberation, not the now of a retreat from the real world. The real cosmos, then, is not a harmony, but the scene of struggle.\textsuperscript{13}

Listening to the words of the girls I interviewed, it is not a far reach for them to see that this is indeed a characterization of the present reality they can affirm. These young women give voice to a number of struggles they endure on a daily basis. As described above, these girls endure body-shaming comments at church and church events, racist remarks on the subway and from friends and peers, unwanted advances from males, assumptions that they are not intelligent, and unsupportive parents, depression, and loneliness. They struggle with regret and pressure to perform in order to have a successful future. They struggle with too much responsibility, as a sixteen year old African American girl who is largely in charge of taking care of her toddler brother related. They struggle with feeling stuck, waiting for their future to begin. They struggle with peer relationship challenges that feel anything but benign. They struggle with cutting, eating disorders, and addiction. They struggle with silence on the part of their parents and churches on issues that matter most to them. They struggle in silence because they are never asked by adults in their lives about their difficulties, successes, and faith. The time is one of both liminality and conflict in the experience of these girls, which simply echoes the time on a cosmic scale that Paul’s theology points to.

Paul’s insistence that the time is invaded by Christ and yet one in which the cosmos is still waiting for the new creation to come to fruition is partly because of his...
sensitivity to this ongoing cosmic conflict. If the battle is still raging between Sin and
Grace, if some of God’s created people still function as if they are enslaved to Sin, if
there is still suffering, then the new creation is not yet fully in place. Adolescent girls
who have been told that by being Christian their life is better than otherwise, and yet who
still suffer, sometimes because of their churches, need to hear this truth. This
“eschatological reservation” validates girls’ lived experience.

Noting that in Romans 6:5, Paul uses the future tense to talk about the believers’
participation in Christ’s resurrection, Käsemann insists on this eschatological reservation
as a “remarkable caveat.”\textsuperscript{14} He notes that “Paul is absolutely unable and unwilling to
speak of any end to history which has already come to pass, but, he does however,
discern that the day of the End-time has already broken…For Paul, [present eschatology]
is not an alternative to, but a component of, a future eschatology…”\textsuperscript{15} Martyn describes
the present time as a juncture between two ages.\textsuperscript{16} Jesus has broken into the present time,
creating a new age. Yet that new age is not yet full present. Therefore the present time is
comprised of both marks of the old age and marks of the new. Käsemann’s term
“eschatological reservation” insists that we always remember that the new age is not yet
fully here, and that there is a future eschatology even though Christ has already come.

In ministry with adolescent girls, it is essential to maintain this sense of
eschatological reservation, not only to be theologically consistent with what Paul
expresses, but also because to do otherwise is harmful. The girls I spoke with, although

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 133.
\textsuperscript{16} Martyn, \textit{Theological Issues}, 92.
they are for the most part baptized and confirmed believers in Christ who are participating members of their churches, do not always experience new creation throughout their existence. The marks of the old age impact their daily living and therefore their faith. Martyn lists some of these marks of the old age as: orb of evil and sin; sphere under the power of Satan, the rulers of this age; slavery; death; the oppressive status quo.\textsuperscript{17} In these interviews, I heard confirmation from girls that these marks are present in their experiences both inside and outside the church. Becoming a believer does not inoculate one against evil, sin, death, and oppression. Nor does being in the church provide refuge from them; instead, because the new creation is not yet fully here, girls find themselves up against these forces everywhere. Honesty about this reality not only validates girls’ experiences, but gives them the space to name what is going on in theological terms. The promise of being a believer in Christ is not the promise of escapism and the ability to live blissfully apart from the old age, rather it is to engage in the struggle of Christ for this age as he ushers in the new. The believer has hope and expectation, and the freedom to live in a new way, which includes action against those forces of the old age in the present.

\textbf{The Power of Sin}

As seen in chapter two, the girls I interviewed were confused about sin. Most of the girls equated sin with behavior. Sinning was something that was not good Christian behavior, though they were aware that there was no complete list of what was or was not

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 281.
a sin. Most girls could agree that a sin was something that was immoral. Morality seemed relative, however, because they could see instances where morality is not “black and white.” Many of the girls drew the conclusion that sin is relative, which was ultimately unsatisfactory to them. However, they did not have any other way to talk about sin.

Joyce Mercer discovered that for the girls she spoke with, religious life had more to do with relationships than with rules. It had to do with how they situated themselves in relation to the sense of vastness and mystery that is God. Their desire for connection and communion with God trumped moralistic notions of God, not because there was no place for ethics in their religious discourse but because religious life, for these girls, consisted principally of a relationship with God that fanned out into connections with family, friends, neighbors, the community, and the wider creation.\textsuperscript{18}

Sadie’s theology of sin describes this commitment to relationality well when she describes sin as something that drives a wedge between her and God. In this theology, sin is something that breaks the relationship between a person and God. Because this relationship with God fans out, in Mercer’s words, to the other relationships girls have, a break in that relationship is serious and something girls want to avoid. Tay came closest to a definition of sin that is supported by Paul when she stated that she didn’t think suicide was a sin, but rather that whatever was causing pain to someone who committed suicide was the sin.

For Paul, Sin is a power, an actor, a subject, not only an action. J. Louis Martyn sees that Paul’s apocalyptic worldview is similar to some other apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple era in which there is a pattern of “a moral drama with three principal actors rather than merely two: God, human beings and supra-human powers other than

\textsuperscript{18} Mercer, 21.
Martyn helpfully describes Sin as one of these non-human, non-divine actors: “more than an act committed by the human agent; it can be the subject of verbs; it can even be said to deceive the human agent.” Certainly this is how Paul writes about Sin in Romans 6-8. It is also true that sin is an action for Paul.

At the heart of the question about Sin/sin is the question of Paul’s anthropology, and specifically how he views the human as a subject/agent. Most theologies of sin like those expressed by the girls in my interviews, maintain an anthropology in which the human subject is at the center. The human, imbued with a moral compass and perhaps guided by the Holy Spirit, chooses whether or not to commit a sin, whether or not to do an action which is sinful. Tay expresses this when she says that sin is “something that you do against God's will and that it's something that will add up to, like if you sin so much, you're gonna go to Hell.” Britt Nicole’s theology of sin is similar: “deviating from God's desires for us as his children.” She also mentions that sin is unavoidable and part of being human. Sam said sin is “not doing the right thing…deviating from morals.” The anthropology necessary for these theologies of sin is that the human is a free agent, able to make decisions either for good or for ill. In this theological anthropology, a person can then be held responsible for making those decisions, generally punishment for deciding to sin and acceptance for deciding not to sin. This idea is usually referred to as “free will.” The human does things that are not in line with what God wants for him or her, and that is a sin. None of the girls mentioned that sin is something “left undone,” a phrase that

---

20 Ibid.
21 For example, 6:12, 6:14, 6:16, 7:8, 7:11, 7:13, 7:20, 8:2, 8:3

151
appears in two of the four prayers of confession in the United Methodist hymnal, for example.\textsuperscript{22} The girls also did not mention that sinful action can happen without intention. They seem to assume that sinful action on their part is unavoidable and a problem with their wills, motives, and intentions.

Their theological anthropologies include a high view of human agency. The human is a free agent who can sin or not. Their view of the human agent is in line with societal values in this country that laud autonomy. In addition, it gives the girls a feeling of strength and power in their own lives. If a girl can choose whether or not to sin, then she is powerful – able even to defy the will of God. Likewise, she is able to put her own will in line with God’s. The power that a girl receives from this theology, however, is outweighed by the more problematic aspects of it. This model of agency is described by John Barclay as competitive agency.\textsuperscript{23} In this model, “the greater the affirmation of God’s power (in strength or scope), the more inconsequential must be human agency…Whatever is attributed to free human agency must block or reduce divine agency.”\textsuperscript{24} In what most of the girls related about sin, their agency is great, and God is not able to stop them from sinning. But actually they cannot stop themselves from sinning. They have a negatively deterministic view of human agency. They are expected to act in a way that they are incapable of acting. God is demanding and places unrealistic expectations on them. As Britt Nicole said, “[I]t's an inescapable as human beings in general.” Certainly in this theology, God is needed to forgive humans for being human.

\textsuperscript{22} The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship, (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), numbers 890 and 891.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
God’s grace becomes something humans need because they cannot measure up to the expectations that God creates for them. Or, in Tay’s theology, there is a limit to the grace humans receive from God. If humans sin too much, they are rejected by God, period.

Much of what these girls experience is not about their own sinning, but about societal, systemic sin that plays out in their lives. Raven talked about the false promise of the American dream and Lena described her depression; Raven, Beverly, Dawn, and Monica talked about the violence against Black people in their community; Sam reflected on how she thinks her biological family would have wanted to keep her if she had been a boy; Genevieve talked about the pressure to keep boys from sinning by covering up her body; Tay shared the effects of the fashion industry on the self-esteem of her and her friends. These girls need a theology of sin that speaks into their experiences Sin is clearly at work in more complex ways than they have ability to articulate. Their limited understanding of sin, as a human-willed action includes a rather negative image of God. Additionally, their theologies of sin are unable to encompass and explain the systemic sin they experience.

Paul agrees that part of Sin involves human action; thus he tells the Roman Christians that they should not “present your members to Sin as instruments of wickedness.”25 Importantly, however, human sinful action comes in the context of Sin as subject/actor. In the previous verse, Paul writes, “do not let Sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies.”26 In that verse, Sin is clearly operating as a subject who can have dominion over (or can be the ruler of) human bodies. Now that the Roman Christians are

25 6:13, NRSV; capitalization of “Sin” is mine.
26 Romans 6:12, NRSV, capitalization of Sin is mine.
believers, they do have the freedom not to submit to Sin’s regime. This is true because the “sinful body” has been destroyed. They no longer belong to the sinful body as baptized believers, rather they belong to the body of Christ. Even with Tay’s somewhat more nuanced view of sin when it comes to suicide, none of the girls conceived of Sin as an actor, though this is clearly part of Paul’s theology of sin.

Paul’s understanding of Sin as a power, as a non-human and non-divine actor in Martyn’s explanation of the 3-actor moral drama, can provide girls with a theology of sin that includes not only human action, but also the systemic oppression of which they are objects. John Barclay explains another way divine and human agency operate in Paul in a model he calls non-contrastive transcendence, a concept he borrows from Katheryn Tanner. In this model of agency,

> God’s sovereignty does not limit or reduce human freedom, but is precisely what grounds and enables it…But divine transcendence also here implies agencies that are non-identical: God is radically distinct from human agency and not an agent within the same order of being or in the same causal nexus. Thus human agency is neither an empty shell for divine power, nor a threat to divine agency – nor ultimately identical to divine agency. Rather, created human agencies are founded in, and constituted by, the divine creative agency, while remaining distinct from God.

This model of agency comes closest to how I, and others, interpret Paul. The human agent is real and distinct from God. In this 3-actor moral drama to which Martyn likens Pauline apocalyptic, the human agent is one of the three actors. The other two are God and supra-human, non-divine actors (namely Sin and its partner, Death). The human agent, though separate from God, is able to be free because of God. When the human

---

27 Romans 6:6
28 Barclay, 7.
agent is enslaved to Sin (Romans 6:20), it is not free. When the human agent is enslaved to righteousness, to God (Romans 6:22), it is free, and eternally so (Romans 6:23).

Adolescent girls are in an oppressed situation in this country. Not only are they undervalued because of their age, they are also the victims of sexism. Girls of color, girls who are in socio-economically depressed situations, girls who are immigrants, girls who do not fit beauty standards defined by the marketing industry, and girls whose sexual identity is not heterosexual are also victims of oppression for those reasons. Paul has a theology of sin that allows them to interpret their lives theologically in a way that is freeing. No longer is sin only something unavoidable that they do with their flawed or fallen human agency against the will of God, instead Sin is also something outside of themselves that they are not responsible for and can be freed from. Additionally, this theology of sin gives them language and theology to explain what it is they experience. Girls who are already critical of what is happening to them, like Tay is of unrealistic beauty myths, can have a theology that includes these forces with which they are already uncomfortable. Now, however, instead of them being only something to deconstruct in an English term paper, girls can also have theological resources for understanding and deconstructing these forces. Girls who experience racist remarks on the subway, continue to see violence against members of their racial community, or are keenly aware of privilege they enjoy because of their white skin color can now have theological resources to explain why this happens. There is a force outside of themselves, called Sin, which

---

29 None of the girls I spoke with talked about their agency in these terms. They did not talk about “free will” or “original sin” or a notion of their created goodness being corrupted, but I think these ideas are behind the ones they did express.
exerts pressure on human agents, even enslaves them in Paul’s words. Being the victim of racism or sexism then is not strictly another human agent’s fault, *nor is it their own fault*, rather this is how Sin is manifesting itself and holding human agents captive. Freedom from this captivity is exactly what happens through the faithfulness of Christ, something these girls can live into in the present even as they wait for the final conquering of Sin, which is still in the future.

Ernst Käsemann writes that human autonomy is a foreign concept to Paul. This is a particularly challenging aspect of Paul’s theology for those of us living the in 21st century United States where the autonomous individual is the cultural ideal. As Käsemann says, “our idea of identity is alien to the apostle’s thinking.”30 Looking at Romans 6:12-14, he points out that the way that Paul talks about believers’ bodies shows this anthropology. Individual Roman Christians are members of a community; having been freed from the body of death by dying in baptism, they are now members of the body of Christ. Käsemann writes that this means “that we are never autonomous, but always participate in a definite world and stand under lordship”31 of either Sin or Christ, though Christ is, what he calls the Christian’s “true and only Lord.”32

Because a person is never autonomous, one can only speak of the Christian as a person-in-Christ. Not only is this person always in Christ, but also always in community with other Christians. Käsemann also argues that there is no continuity between the believer in Christ and the person he or she was before dying with Christ.33 There is no

---

31 Käsemann, *Romans*, 176.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 8.
development of the Christian life, rather there is a complete transformation because the “old [person] truly and radically dies; the new [person] is therefore not to be understood as something like a metamorphosis of the old.”

Käsemann uses Romans 7 as the scriptural evidence for this understanding of Paul’s anthropology because Paul writes about his own death in 7:9-10. He cautions against reading the “inmost self” of Romans 7:22 as evidence that there is some essential part of the human that does remain constant from before a believer is in Christ. Käsemann argues that Romans 7:16ff presents a picture of a person “divided and in hopeless conflict with himself.”

For reasons argued above, I do not agree that Romans 7 is about a person divided against him- or herself. Rather, I read Romans 7 as Paul using himself as an example to his Roman audience about the struggle to live in this liminal time between the Christ event (Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection) and Christ’s coming again. In this contested time, where the apocalyptic battle is not only fought cosmically but in the community of believers and even in each individual believer’s body, the power of Sin can still hold sway over a believer even though the believer is no longer enslaved to it.

Käsemann’s interpretation that there is no continuity for an individual in Pauline anthropology finds resonance with postmodern thought on human development. Much postmodern thought argues “for the existence of multiple identities that are assumed in different contexts. Postmodernity emphasizes fragmentation, discontinuity, and only local rather than general themes. In the words of Rattansi and Phoenix (1997), identity is fluid.

---

34 Ibid. 9-10.
35 Käsemann also points to Galatians 2:20, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Käsemann’s translation). Ibid., 8.
36 Ibid., 10.
and fragmented and not something that exists within the individual.”37 This postmodern idea of identity is considered “radical” and “not widespread.”38

Although this school of thought sounds similar to Käsemann’s reading of Paul, both Käsemann and postmodern thought about identity are unhelpful for ministry with adolescent girls. I also find Käsemann’s argument about this extreme discontinuity of anthropology in Paul unconvincing. Paul’s ability to think retrospectively and narrate his conversion, to see his old self dying in Christ shows that there is some continuity between his new position in Christ and his existence prior to it. When the new creation surpasses the present liminal time, there may be more complete discontinuity because the believer will share in the resurrected life of Christ through his or her own resurrection. But Paul’s belief elsewhere about the resurrection of the body (1 Corinthians 15) suggests that there is some kind of physical, corporeal continuity even then. Radical discontinuity of a person before Christ and in Christ is unhelpful for girls because it leaves them with a false expectation of what being a Christian means for them. The truth is that becoming a Christian does not solve a girl’s problems. Not only that, but girls see that Christians are not perfect people. To suggest that the old completely disappears when a person becomes a believer is not true to the experience of these girls. Sam stated that one of the biggest challenges to her faith is other Christians. She said that she noticed that Christians, “don't follow the ways of what, like, Jesus taught…Like being kind and stuff…I mean because of them, all Christians are hated on for being haters. Which is so weird…[I]f I just say [I’m a Christian], and I say it to a random person then…they're probably thinking that

37 Kroger, 6.
38 Ibid.
[I’m a hater].” Sam sees that being a Christian does not mean a person behaves the way Jesus would approve of. Moreover, Christians have a reputation for being haters. Sam is concerned about what assumptions people might make about her when she tells someone she is a Christian. Presumably, those who do these kinds of things (act in a way contrary to Jesus’ teaching or act like a hater) did these things before they became believers as well, as these are not marks of being in Christ.

There is clearly some continuity of personhood in the experience of these girls themselves as well. They can reflect on experiences of God that have been conversionary for them. Some of them remember their baptisms; they all remember their confirmation if they have gone through that process. As they tell the story of their lives, it includes both time before and after becoming the recipient of God’s grace through Christ such that they declare themselves to be Christian. Just as Sam can see the problems in behavior of some Christians, Raven can see problems in her own behavior and challenges in her faith journey. She recalls talking to a young adult in her congregation after an evening worship service about how she struggles even as a Christian:

I was telling him, like, you know, "How can you be a Christian but still do all the stuff wrong that you do?" And I was talking to him about that cause I was having, like, a issue with my faith at the time. I think I was going through some stressful things. So, um, it kinda felt worse when I didn't feel that God was on my side. And um, like I won't lie, I don't exactly remember the words of the night that had me in tears, but, like, through that, through the man's sermon and then like [the young adult's] prayer it's almost like [the young adult] just answered my question ... So he kinda, like, answered my question through his prayer and the guy had also mentioned it in the sermon so it's like my answers are being revealed and it's just like I started to have faith again. Like, maybe I'm not messing too

---

39 This is a popular slang term for a person who is jealous or hates others or disrespects others. There are varying nuances to how the term is used.
far, maybe I didn't stray too far away from God because I was feeling like I'm not as bad as I thought. [I thought I was] on my way to Hell. Like, I really was far away from my need to be. And um, then, I don't know once they spoke and stuff I started to realize like, you know, I'm still on the right path. I may be turned a little bit but I can turn back around and stuff. So, I don't know, that was like the first like, okay, "this is God moment."

There are similarities between what Raven was relating as a particularly important moment in her faith journey and what Paul writes in Romans 7. Her question to herself, “How can you be a Christian but still do all the stuff wrong that you do?” echoes Paul’s struggle with doing what he does not want to do. Like Paul, Raven’s answer came through God’s revelation in her life. Importantly for her, the answers came through worship (it was a youth-focused worship service with young adults and other adults working as mentors), through the prayer of a young adult and the sermon of another adult. This “God moment” for her was realizing that she was not beyond help, not on her way to Hell, not on the “wrong path.” She had not strayed too far away from God. Paul’s answer, too, is closeness with God. Nothing can separate him from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:39). Raven’s struggles to be on the “right path” are discounted in a radical discontinuous anthropology – a new life is a new life. Nor do Paul’s reports of struggles similar to this in Romans 7 have a place in a discontinuous anthropology.

For schools of thought on adolescence and development other than postmodernity, adolescence provides an important time in a person’s life for a sense of identity to emerge. Psychologist Jane Kroger explains identity formation this way, “an internal developmental transformation of the sense of self and consequent ways of filtering and making sense of one’s life experiences. Intrapsychic restructuring during
adolescence brings identity questions to the surface.

The adolescent girl needs to develop a sense of her “self.” Moreover, the self they develop, their sense of “I” is not predetermined. Social factors have a formative impact on this developing sense of “I.”

Paul’s anthropology offers us important theological considerations for the fact that others impact a girl’s sense of identity. If there is no free, autonomous individual, then whomever and whatever a girl associates with has a great deal to do with the person she is becoming and the person she perceives herself to be. If she is formed by people who understand her to be free from the power of Sin, then she, too, can see that she is free. If she is formed by people who understand her to be a sinner, unable to act without sin, and causing others to sin, then she, too, will see that she is connected with Sin above anything else. In this way, although Kroger uses the word development, it is important to note that it is not inevitable that an adolescent’s changing sense of self is inevitably progressing toward wholeness, health, and coherence. There are many de-formative experiences and influences that can negatively affect a girl’s sense of self.

Many of the girls I spoke with seemed to suffer from low self-esteem. Different girls doubted their worth in different areas: physical beauty or size, intelligence, ability to achieve a goal for her life, or sense of general value as a person. Emphasizing discontinuity or the lack of a “self” only aids in the diminishment that girls experience in their lives. A strong sense of self is important to helping girls stand up for themselves, value themselves, and not accept the messages that they receive from society or the church that are damaging to their wholeness. Churches who can value the selves girls

---

40 Kroger, 7.
bring to them and offer positive influences that encourage a strong sense of identity will be offering girls what they need to develop a sense of self that is in fact strong. Part of what Paul offers churches with his anthropology and theology of sin is help for a girl’s developing sense of identity. Through Paul, the church can realize the importance of its role in not only helping a girl discover her own sense of self but also to realize that self is always a self-in-relationship, both with the church community and with the power of Grace under which it operates.

In Paul’s theology expressed in Romans 6-8, it is not the case that the believer has naturally progressed to a better and more solid identity in Christ when he or she goes from not being in Christ to being in Christ. The fact that Paul uses the passive voice to express that baptism happens to a person as discussed above, shows that it is not human development or human progress that brings a person into Christ. It is assuredly, the work of God. There is an abrupt change that happens in a person when they do become a believer. The metaphor of death that Paul uses expresses this quite clearly. However, someone who dies with Christ is completely cut off from the person he or she was before, this is part of the challenge of living in the in-between time. This abrupt change is ultimately a change in epistemology. They are now able to see reality as it is – a struggle between Sin and Grace where the final outcome of the battle has been decided, and it is that Sin is defeated.\textsuperscript{41} Martyn notes that God’s “liberating invasion” is a revelation, an event that “brings about an epistemological crisis, a crisis in the way one sees and perceives.”\textsuperscript{42} Martyn calls this new perception “bifocal vision,” which is to see “both the

\textsuperscript{41} Martyn, \textit{Theological Issues}, 283.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 284.
enslaving Old Age and God’s invading and liberating new creation.” Importantly, for Paul, this new epistemology, new way of seeing and perceiving, does not stop at vision, but includes action. Now a believer knows they are free from the power of Sin and can live as subjects of their lives empowered by Grace and a part of a community in Christ. He or she can see how God is breaking in and can see the power of Sin for what it is. The believer is freed to act as God’s instrument rather than Sin’s. Once someone can see reality in this way, there is no going back. Even though one may still act in ways that support Sin in its mission, one will always see with this bifocal vision. Not only has God been revealed, so too as Sin been exposed.

According to Martyn, the Christian community is an essential part of the effects of this bifocal vision in the present time. He writes that were are two issues at stake in noting the way that Paul uses verbs of perception. “(1) whether one sees this peculiar apocalyptic war at all; (2) whether one sees its ultimate outcome.” In Romans 6-8 both of these issues are expressed clearly. Paul writes in chapter 6 that believers must not give their bodies (or members of their corporate body) over to Sin or be given a soldier’s pay from Sin in the ongoing conflict. In chapter 7 he writes about the struggle of the believer to act in a way that is consistent with his baptized participation in Christ, his freedom because Sin is still so powerful in this liminal time. And Paul writes with beautiful and poignant metaphor that creation is waiting in the pain of labor for the new creation to come in chapter 8. Woven through those same chapters is Paul’s confidence that the ultimate outcome is not the question. Paul’s words of promised resurrection in chapter 6,

---

43 Ibid., italics original.  
44 Ibid., 283.
his cry to God for salvation in the midst of his struggle in chapter 7, and his certain statement of the inability to be separate from God’s love in chapter 8 all declare that Sin does not win.

Notably, Paul’s theology of Sin does not ask believers to repent of their sin. Although they are free to operate under Grace now and not under Sin, they are not condemned for their difficulty in doing so (Romans 8:1). Nor is their absolution dependent on their asking for forgiveness, rather it is dependent on Christ’s action.

Martyn notes that Paul hardly writes about repentance.45 It does not show up in Romans 6-8. Instead, when Paul writes about Sin, he is writing about power. When he writes about humans, he writes about their freedom from the captivity to Sin and their freedom in Christ.46

The Christian community is an important part of being able to perceive the world for what it is and to see Sin for what it is. Turning to Martyn again, we see that Paul does something different than most Christians today expect when he tells Christians about what they are to do. Martyn writes that Paul does not contain any “decision-oriented ethics at all.”47 Given what the girls I interviewed shared concerning their beliefs about sin, this would be surprising for them to hear. Genevieve connects sin to decision-making:

People try to forget that sin is a simple as telling a little lie or deceiving someone or wanting something that someone else. It can be so simple as that. I think people try to ignore that and it's really easy to. Because it's easier to push that away and be like, “I'm a Christian, I don't murder

45 Ibid.
46 Interestingly, the United Methodist Eucharistic liturgies, A Service of Word and Table I and II, include Paul’s apocalyptic worldview, though it is rarely, if ever, explained as such. It includes the statement of faith that Jesus “delivered us from slavery to sin and death.” United Methodist Hymnal, p. 9, 13.
47 Martyn, Theological Issues, 233.
people so I'm not a sinner." It's hard to like remember that every day we sin 1000 times over but we can be forgiven for that, but it's tough to remember that sometimes and be like, "That's a sin. I need to not do that if I want to be a follower of God."

Tay sees sin as her action, and believes that if she sins too much she goes to hell. That Paul’s expectations for believers’ behavior is not about decision-making would come as good news to both of these girls. Martyn points to Romans 8:1-27, which shows that the community is supplied with the Spirit of Christ, 48 which continues to work within the community to form it into the Body of Christ. Humans are not called to act of their own free agency in ways that are either righteous or sinful. Instead, as persons in community, namely the community that is the Body of Christ, humans are shaped by and empowered by the Spirit of Christ given to them to act as a community living the new life of Christ.

Paul shares with the Roman Christian his perception that the community of believers is a community of the Spirit of Christ in this section of the letter. Martyn writes that when Paul is speaking to the community it is “newly addressable because it bear’s Christ’s form and is led by Christ’s Spirit. That is to say, every one of Paul’s hortatory sentences presupposes the presence of Christ and the constant activity of Christ’s Spirit, as it causes the church to be able to hear.”49 The community is newly addressable because it is now free from Sin. As a free community participating in Christ’s resurrection, assured of its own resurrection, and empowered by the Spirit, it is now able to respond from that freedom in its actions in the world. Paul does not address individual believers; he addresses the community as a whole, which has been freed from Sin. This is consistent

48 Ibid., 234.
49 Ibid., italics original.
with his anthropology, which, as mentioned above, does not include a concept of the autonomous individual.

Paul’s anthropology concerning the lack of the autonomous individual and the newly addressable community of which believers are a part along with his theology of Sin offers the opportunity for girls to denounce the ways in which their own Christian communities have acted contradictorily with their liberation from Sin. Many of the girls I interviewed had grievances against their churches. Many could point to ways their churches had contributed to them feeling shameful about their bodies. When I asked Tay what has impacted her faith in a negative way, she shared with me that former pastors of her church had acted like gatekeepers telling her she was not really welcome in the church because her opinions differed from theirs. She credits the denominational youth organization that is separate from the local church with giving her a space where she actually wanted to claim that she was a Christian: “It was basically just after realizing that [my pastors can’t control how I think], nothing else really deterred me from feeling closer to God, it was just from then on it was all the pastors and the people in my church that were giving me a bad vibe about it, and I was just like, I have no problem with being Christian, I'm proud of being Christian. I feel like it kind of makes me stronger.” In this instance, she felt that her church had made it harder to be a Christian, but this outside group helped her be stronger in her faith and stay close to God despite her experience in her local church.

When Monica shared that racism was discussed in her church but that sexism was “taboo,” she pointed to another way the church has not been the community adolescent girls have needed. Not only has the church perpetuated cultural myths that teenagers have
nothing to share and that their young, female bodies are responsible for the sins of others, but the teenagers have also heard silence on topics that matter a great deal to them. Their experiences have largely not been welcomed into their churches and their struggles are not being addressed. Churches are failing to offer girls a theological lens with which to interpret their lives in life-giving ways. The theological lens many churches do offer is one that echoes society’s values and judgments about girls.

The New Mortal Body

In the 2002 book on Christian practices for youth, Way to Live, the adult/youth team co-writing the chapter on bodies begins with a story from the adult’s (a woman) life as a young model. After receiving the news that she would not be hired for a modeling job in New York, she is crushed and calls her pastor back home for consolation and advice. She concludes this first section of the chapter this way: “When we admire God’s image within our own faces and bodies, they become something to celebrate – whether we are paralyzed, able-bodied, large, fat, small, or lean! Believing our bodies are good and claiming them as ‘holy and awesome’ motivates us to cherish and care for our bodies.”

The chapter then goes on to report what is not new information to any teenager. The media saturation of the “right” kind of masculinity and femininity to teen-oriented markets presents images of adolescent bodies that no teen can live up to and thereby creates feelings of insecurity and deficiency. The chapter then progresses to describe how bodies are vulnerable and need to be treated with care. This is summarized

---

succinctly in these statements: “Our bodies are fragile. We can damage them.” The authors warn, “Our bodies have a lot of power. What we do with our bodies, how we treat them, who we share them with – all these actions shape who we will become in the future.” The chapter then turns, predictably, to expressions of physical desire and sex. The authors write that the desire to connect with another person is normal, but that what we really want is emotional intimacy, which is not the same thing as physical intimacy. The authors bring up important points about the need to talk about sex with trusted adults and to set physical limits “before getting into a situation where those limits may be tested.” They write that sexuality is “a holy and awesome dimension of your body. As you slowly grow into your sexuality, you can learn to honor your body.”

The authors delve into questions of how to clothe the body, putting it in the context of the adolescent search for identity and the market-driven fashion industry. The authors bring up that some teenagers do not have the money to dress according to the latest trend and that some teens “feel manipulated by corporations that constantly throw advertisements at them.” They advise that the book of Colossians offers teenagers a different way of thinking about clothing by presenting compassion as clothing. “It means clothing one another with garments of acceptance. It means making sure no one feels the naked vulnerability of being left out or left alone.”

\[^{51}\text{Ibid., 36.}\]
\[^{52}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{53}\text{Ibid., 42}\]
\[^{54}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[^{55}\text{Ibid., 43.}\]
\[^{56}\text{Ibid., 43-44.}\]
This chapter offers much in the way of helpful information and re-framing for teenagers and those who love them in their families and churches. Thankfully it begins by pointing out the goodness of our created bodies, noting the *imago dei* with which we are all infused. The authors share that physical desire is normal, and that clothing the body can be an opportunity for compassionate action rather than passive consumption. They provide a helpful theological lens through which to interpret the body and offer ways to practice the Christian life in light of that theology. Perhaps due to the sensitive nature of such things or space constraints or oversight however, they do not mention some of the other negative ways that teenagers can relate to their bodies. They mention anorexia nervosa as a disease that might be able to be cured if girls are made aware of the goodness of their bodies. They do not address the psychological complexities of eating disorders that often have nothing to do with body image. They do not mention how teenagers, especially girls, may need to deal with unwanted physical touch, date rape, and the over-sexualization of their bodies by their peers, adults, and the media. They do not address how girls often choose what they wear as an expression of freedom and of celebrating their “holy and awesome” body. They do not address the fact that it is the responsibility of those who are in relationship with these girls not to treat them as if their clothing means they are asking for sexual advances. They do not address how physical desire and emotional intimacy actually are connected.⁵⁷ These oversights, when combined with how the body is often discussed in churches, lead adults and the young

⁵⁷ See also Kenda Creasy Dean, “Holding On to Our Kisses: The Hormonal Theology of Adolescence” in *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* by Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011).
people with whom they minister to view the body, and maybe especially the female body, as dangerous and shameful. Additionally, the responsibility to clothe that body in an “acceptable” way falls on the girls themselves. The implicit message is that if girls are being treated in a way that harms them emotionally, physically, or psychologically in regard to their bodies, it is their fault. No *imago dei* theological gloss can help a girl reclaim her body as good in the face of those messages.

If a girl feels that her acceptance into her church community is contingent on her dressing a particular way, she is being taught that the love of the Christian community, this compassion that the writers of the Body chapter in *Way to Live* talk about, is conditional. She also learns that God’s love for her is conditional. She does not learn that through her body she can experience God. She instead learns that her body is something to be controlled, lest she not be worthy of the compassion offered to members of the Body of Christ.

Carter Heyward, one of the foremost feminist theologians who focuses on the erotic, writes that through the erotic, people can experience liberation and be “strengthened in the struggle for justice for all.”58 This term, “erotic,” is a scary one for adults who have reached their sexual maturity; it is probably more intimidating to consider as a theological resource for ministry with adolescents. Sexual desire is something that society generally relegates to private or secret conversations. We relate the erotic to misplaced and sometimes violent sexual desire or practice. For most people, connecting the erotic to the Divine is at best confusing and at worst oxymoronic and

sacrilegious. This is not so for Heyward. She defines sexual as “our embodied relational response to erotic/sacred power” and theology as “a critical reflection on the shape of the Sacred in our life together.” 59 Further, she states that “[t]o speak of the erotic or of God is to speak of power in right relation.” 60 Because of her commitment to interpreting sexual desire and practice within relationship between people and between people and God, her theology of the erotic offers something important to the conversation of young women and bodies.

By offering adolescent girls a theology of the body that describes the body as good, but with caveats that imply instead that it is dangerous and shameful, the church denies young women the opportunity to be in right relationship through their embodied selves with others and with God. Valuing the body as sacred, physical desire as power, and embodiment not as something to control or overcome but as the primary way girls relate to their world and the people in it, provides girls with liberation and practice at justice making. Heyward is an important resource in helping to develop this theology for girls.

In chapter six of Romans, Paul writes about the body within his conversation about baptism, life, and death. Paul, too, values the human body as an important part of our connection to and participation in Christ. A believer is in a new and different state having died (and died to death) and being alive in Christ. This is not an overly-spiritualized state of being alive, but rather an embodied, mortal state of being alive in Christ. Paul offers an imperative for believers to not allow their bodies to be weapons of

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., italics original.
Sin and to instead present their bodies (of members [of the body] to God). In traditional theologies of body offered to adolescent girls, like what is presented in *Way to Live*, this may be interpreted as keeping the body pure, apart from other bodies, and clothed conservatively so that it is acceptable to God. Essentially, girls are told to keep their bodies as spiritualized as possible, to refrain from their bodies looking and acting like bodies. Paul offers something different. Moreover, the goodness of the human body is not only established at creation with the *imago dei*, but in the fact that Jesus Christ himself is embodied.

In this liminal space and time, Paul says that our bodies, our mortal bodies are part of the conflict of the age. They can be used by Sin, or they can be used by God. It is not by denying or overcoming embodiment that bodies can be used by God. Our bodies, as bodies, can be instruments for defeating Sin when they are in service to God. Through God’s grace, the believer can offer his or her body to God. Grace operates as a power that breaks the power of Sin. Christ comes in the likeness of sinful flesh, dies, and is resurrected bodily. Through baptism, believers, too, experience death of their association with Sin and life in the present in bodies that can now work together with God for the purposes of freedom in this contested time. What this looks like for adolescent girls has something to do with the power Heyward sees in the erotic. Power is a key part of how Paul sees the world. The power of Christ overcomes the power of Sin. Although the present is still a contested time, the future is assured – final and complete power of Christ and Sin’s ultimate demise. The erotic is a source of power for justice, right relation, and mutuality in Heyward’s theology.
Barbara Blodgett argues that a theology of the erotic as Heyward has constructed it is unhelpful for adolescent girls who are at a different place in terms of maturity than are grown women. She offers the following summary of the definition of the erotic as construed by several prominent feminist theologians:

[A] fair statement is that most feminist theologies of the erotic mean one or more of the following when they refer to the erotic: Love, sensuality, wisdom, or relationality. When feminist theologies name the erotic as love, they are emphasizing the closeness and intimacy of erotic relationships. As sensuality, they are naming women’s and men’s power to reach greater depths of passion and joy. Naming the erotic as wisdom suggests that it awakens greater understanding of oppression and possibilities for liberation. As relationality, the erotic is said to tighten the bonds of mutuality between people.61

She specifically criticizes Carter Heyward among other feminist theologians who work with the concept of the erotic. She notes that Heyward’s book, *Touching our Strength*, “represents the most thorough articulation to date of feminist discourse about the erotic.”62 Blodgett rightly criticizes Heyward for overreaching. “Quite simply, not all instances of erotic desire bring about blissful transcendence of self...In an attempt to affirm that we can express our love of others and of God through embodied erotic experience, Heyward ends up romanticizing women’s experience of erotic experience.”63 Adolescent girls who are just starting to get to know their bodies, whose bodies are always changing, and who are so often the object of exploitation, find that their experience of erotic experience may not be an empowering or spiritual experience.

---

62 Ibid., 44.
63 Ibid., 45.
There are, however, significant ways in which Heyward’s theology of the erotic is helpful and corrective to the experience of adolescent girls when it comes to their bodies.

Heyward presents the problem of western Christianity in this way:

I am interested in helping lay to rest the pernicious dualisms between sex and God, sexuality and spirituality, body and spirit, and pleasure and goodness, which historically the church has used to dull the edges of human and divine experience. By literally splitting us in two, the dominant ideology of western culture has rendered us – to the extent we are white males-identified – flattened facsimiles of fully human beings. We have been stripped – spiritually, physically, emotionally, and intellectually, of our capacities to delight in ourselves, one another, the creation, and its holy wellsprings.  

Paul is often seen as the biblical justification for the dualism that Heyward here condemns. In the chapters of Romans directly dealt with in this paper there are certainly instances that can be read as dualistic, and inherently anti-body, if not read with awareness of Paul’s worldview. In Romans 6:6, Paul writes about the death of the “body of sin” as the way to no longer be enslaved to the power of Sin. He states that having been baptized, the believer is alive in Christ, under the power of grace, and enslaved to God, who is righteous. His writing can be interpreted as saying that one’s body must be subjugated in order to allow a person’s sinful body to be overcome by grace.

Accordingly, when Paul writes that believers must not allow their members (body parts) to be used by Sin but instead be used by God, righteousness is then interpreted as denying some parts of the body or some functions of the body so that the person is righteous like God is righteous. Youth ministries find fodder here for teaching moralisms and condemning certain practices of the body: Don’t have sex. Don’t smoke. Don’t drink. These activities show that you are still in your sinful body. Righteous bodies don’t do

---

64 Heyward, 4.
these things; and the impulses to do these things come from the body and must be controlled or ignored. What girls need is a theology of body that honors the complexities in which girls live and heals them of the shame they have been taught about their bodies and about sexual desire.

Understanding Paul’s perspective on the world yields an interpretation of these texts about body that can be the foundation on which to build a healthy theology of body for girls. In baptism, the believer’s body no longer falls under the power of sin (is no longer a member of the body of Sin, but rather is a member of the body of Christ, to use language from 1 Corinthians 12). Dualism is not between body and soul, in other words, it is between Sin and God. To be alive under the power of grace changes the way the individual’s body relates to the bodies of others. In fact, the individual is alive in Christ’s own body. A believer’s body is a place of redemption and life. To be implored not to present one’s body to the power of Sin does not boil down to a list of dos and don’ts. Instead, it is to understand that one’s life, including one’s body, operates in a new and different space. A space of life, power, and freedom. In that space, dos and don’ts mean very little. What matters is a larger question of relating to others, oneself, and God in a way that reflects one’s position under Grace. This is Heyward’s “right relation.” The body is not intrinsically dangerous, but is intrinsically powerful. Relating rightly with that power is possible when one is under Grace. Adolescent girls can find help in interpreting their relationships and in constructing new right relationships in their Christian
communities. This happens when these communities practice their faith by seeing the body as a “site and mediation of divine revelation.”

There are several pieces of the interviews with the girls presented above that fit in with this conversation about the body. Raven pointed out that the way her body is related to by others shows overt racism, sexism, and sizism. She recalled an occasion when someone at church told her she should not wear a dress because it was too short. She disagreed that it was too short, stating that she was not going to wear a mini skirt to church anyway. She was already regulating herself and making her clothing choices based on what she felt was appropriate. She also argued that she cannot buy dresses that are longer, though she was unreflective about what that might mean about market affecting her freedom. She said that if another girl wore the same thing, but was skinny, it would not be inappropriate. Therefore it is not only the length of the dress that was considered inappropriate by adults in her church, it was her particular body in that dress. Raven stated that God is just happy she’s in church, God doesn’t care about the length of her skirt. In the same conversation, Monica pointed out the explicit sexism. Women are told not to wear certain things because it is seen as scandalous by and to men. She said female bodies are seen as temptation to men and so restrictions are placed on the women. The message these girls receive is that despite the fact that they are believers, their bodies are viewed as sinful and tempting to men. They interpret this message as coming from men, rather than from God. They do not feel condemned by God, but rather by their

---

65 Copeland, 2.
church and by other Christian believers. They are frustrated and angry about this, yet feel powerless to do anything about it.

Several of the girls from another of the group interviews, noted some of the same expectations for girls to choose their clothing in order to avoid tempting boys. However, they were not critically reflective about it.

Tay’s critique of how the fashion industry is designed to make girls feel badly about their bodies, no matter their size, also shows how value is placed on certain bodies and not others. She has been taught that her body is less valuable, less important, and less desirable than a skinny body. The church is at least complicit in this value system, as they have offered her nothing to counter it.

Girls receive similar messages about their bodies at church and at school. From Sadie who reports feeling fat because of other kids asking her about her weight and wanting to have input into where she buys jeans, to Sam who feels she was put up for adoption because of her female body, to Raven and Monica who get told explicitly by folks in their church that they reveal too much skin, to Genevieve and Britt Nicole who see the female body as tempting boys away from being good Christians, the message that bodies are dangerous and even sinful and that only certain bodies are acceptable and valuable is one heard and sometimes uncritically accepted by these girls. Many of them feel that some changes need to happen to their bodies in order for them to be accepted by adults, their churches, or themselves. None of them discuss their bodies in positive ways. None of them have received empowering messages from their churches about their bodies. None of them have been taught that their bodies are how they relate to God. They
only receive messages that interpret their bodies as under the category of sin, rather than grace.

The teenage body is powerful. Physical and physiological changes happen at a rapid rate. Parents, ministers, and other caring adults are understandably often fearful that these new hormones, sexually mature bodies, and lack of impulse control will lead to sexual activity that can damage a teenager emotionally, psychologically, and physically. Sexually transmitted infections and diseases and the rates of teen pregnancies are significant reasons why teenagers should be taught about the possible consequences of sexual activity. In one conversation with a group of adolescent girls in my own ministry, I asked what they were taught in sex education in school. They relayed that they were taught that sex is scary. The focus of their public school education was on the consequences of sex, emotionally and physically. They told me they felt they were led to believe that sex ultimately leads to death. This conversation took place in the early 2000s. The over-sexualization of female adolescent bodies is damaging to girls’ sense of themselves and distorts how adults and peers relate to girls. The theological solution, however, is not to condemn the body as sinful and caution against its poisoning the otherwise pure soul of adolescent girls. Instead, using Heyward’s theology of the erotic and Paul’s worldview of the conflict between Sin and Grace, between this age and the new creation, there are resources for a healthy theology of the body for adolescent girls.

Elizabeth is a seventeen year old who had just completed the eleventh grade when we met. She is white. She was the only girl I spoke with who shared openly about how she deals with her own sexual desires. Britt Nicole alluded to it, saying she thinks girls are tempted just like boys are (although she went on to say boys are actually tempted
more) by sexual activity. Elizabeth openly shared about how she finds sexual desire to be one of the most difficult things to deal with in terms of her theology of sin and temptation. She shared that the only way she knows how to not act on these desires is through masturbation, which she finds quite shameful. Girls are taught in school is that sexual desire is dangerous because of potential health risks and the possibility of pregnancy. The theology of the erotic they are taught in churches is that sexual desire is prohibited, and that their bodies cause this desire in others, making their bodies particularly dangerous for the church. All the while, they are being objectified by our society in the marketing of young bodies, conveying that girls’ bodies are a commodity and they can use their bodies to gain status and acceptance. Because teenage girls, like all adolescents, are experiencing their bodies and sexual desires in a new way, and because moralisms cut short their critical thinking skills and do not encapsulate the complexities they experience, a theology of the erotic for girls, one that is body-positive and desire-positive would be extremely helpful. Likewise, this kind of theology resists the dualism of body and soul. Paul’s new mortal body provides a biblical context and basis for this theology. The new mortal body is free from the power of Sin, and capable of operating in a new way, as part of the new creation now. Freedom from Sin is at the same time, freedom for living in partnership with God and in community with others.

Heyward argues that in using our power in right relation, “we participate in liberating one another from the isolation, brokenness, and despair wrought by abusive power relations in the great and small places of our lives.”66 In Paul’s worldview, the

---

66 Heyward, 92.
present time is a warzone between Sin and Grace, between Death and Life. For adolescent girls, their bodies become a battlefield in this cosmic conflict. None of the girls I spoke with talked about their bodies in positive or powerful ways.

According to Paul, the believer has a new mortal body. This body is just as real, tangible, and fleshly as any body; it is not a spiritualized disembodied existence. The difference is that this new mortal body is not subject to Sin, though Sin will still try to exert its power and deceive the believer into being on its side in the ongoing conflict with Grace. Part of a corporate body of believers, each believer’s body is free from the power of Sin: free to operate on the side of and with Christ. Each free body-in-community/body-in-Christ can work to liberate others. In other words, believers can participate with Christ and others who are in Christ in the liberation of other bodies. If a body is confined under Sin, it cannot help to liberate others. Ironically, girls’ bodies are kept under Sin by (probably well-meaning) adults in their families, schools, and churches. Heyward notes that “[o]ur power in relationship reveals herself through our senses and feelings, the basic resources of our intelligence, a relationship quality with origins in our capacities to live responsibly in relation one another.”67 This means that adolescents who are especially tuned into their bodies, with all their changes and developments, may actually have a special ability to live responsibly in relation with others. Adolescents’ senses and feelings are keen and strong, and can be a powerful source of right relationship, rather than something to be feared and denied.

67 Heyward, 93.
The fact that many of the girls I spoke with acknowledged their resistance to the body-shaming they received through their faith formation and participation in church is a sign of hope. Joyce Mercer writes that girls often participate in their own oppression by “de-selfing”\textsuperscript{68} themselves. She observed in her interviews with adolescent girls that some of them “willingly diminished themselves in order to fit their own notions of gender difference.”\textsuperscript{69} For some of the girls, notably in the conversation with Britt Nicole and Genevieve, they were clearly “participating in their own oppression”\textsuperscript{70} by accepting uncritically that they were at fault for making it difficult for boys to be good Christians. Britt Nicole felt that boys had it “almost” harder than girls when it came to avoiding sin and temptation. Genevieve said she understood that dressing so that a sports bra was showing was “too much” for boys to handle. She knew that she wanted to attract a good Christian boy to be her boyfriend, or eventual spouse, and that this was not possible if she did not cover her body “appropriately.” Sam was caught between accepting what society says about the way girls dress and wanting an alternative. She notes that it’s hard to not judge girls based on what they wear because she has been taught by society to think of girls who show their bra or wear short shorts and shirts as “sluts.” On the other hand, she

---

\textsuperscript{68} Mercer, 61.

\textsuperscript{69} Mercer observes that girls participate in their own oppression by taking on society’s expectations for what it means to be a girl or be feminine. She writes about their internalizing standards that ask them to be less than boys/men and to support gender inequality. She writes, “[i]f men were strong, women could be, too, only less so. If men were intelligent, so were women, but – at least at the level of appearances – they could not seem to be smarter than men, not if they wanted to be considered feminine.” I observed girls participating in their own oppression, as well, though not as much when I asked them about the differences between boys and girl. Instead, I found this to be the case when they talked about their bodies, sin, and temptation. Their diminishing the power and goodness of their bodies to avoid being a threat to the Christian character or behavior of men fits into this same scheme. Girls felt the need to hide themselves and make less of themselves because to be their full embodied selves was too dangerous to boys/men. Mercer, 59.

\textsuperscript{70} Mercer, 60.
says that girls should be able to wear what they want to without being harassed.\textsuperscript{71}

Censoring themselves in order to attract the “right” kind of guy or accepting uncritically that their bodies are problematic to boys seeking to be good Christians accepts the Christian cultural myth that the female body is sinful and causes others to sin. Sam is aware that she is accepting what society teaches about girls’ dress revealing something about their sexual activity, that they are sluts. However, she is at a loss to know what else girls’ dress might convey. She says that in her experience even if girls should be able to wear what they want without judgment, it seems like girls who chose “skimpy” clothes do so because they “want attention” or want to “something off something.” Diminishing the goodness of their bodies and limiting the power of their bodies results in an “abdication of [their] personhood;”\textsuperscript{72} humans are not human without their bodies. Nor are girls girls without their distinctly female bodies.

The human body is not separate from the journey of faith. Too often the kind of dualism Heyward recognizes and criticizes is taught by churches. The body is something to overcome in order for the soul to be saved. These girls have been taught that their bodies are the source of sinning for others and protecting the vulnerability of their own bodies is how they can most please God with their bodies. They have not been taught or shown that their bodies are capable of righteousness or that their bodies are powerful in a positive way, that their bodies are how they show up in the world, or that their bodies are the source of their worship of God. For Paul, participation in Christ’s death and resurrection happens with one’s body, not separate from it. The fact is that the human life

\textsuperscript{71} My term, not Sam’s.
\textsuperscript{72} Mercer, 61.
is an embodied life. Pretending otherwise, or worse, shaming the body as a hindrance to
abundant life for either the adolescent girl or others who observe or interact with her
perpetuates dualism and turns the adolescent girl’s body over to Sin. This allows Sin to
dictate the terms of acceptance of the body. It strips girls of the opportunity to use and
love their bodies as sources of strength, power, and connection to the Holy. Church takes
Sin’s word for it that the body is necessarily dangerous, tempting, sinful, and something
to be feared. In this contested liminal time, Paul says believers can dedicate their
members (their bodies or members of their bodies or members of the corporate – ecclesia
– body) to Sin or to God. Therefore, the task of liberative ministry with adolescent girls is
about helping them dedicate their bodies to God’s service.

Theology of the body and the erotic, guided by Pauline theology, is challenging in
practice in the context of the lives of adolescent girls. The reality is that while girls may
feel they are exercising the power of their bodies by wearing revealing clothing, they may
not be doing so as bodies free in Christ but instead as bodies being manipulated by Sin.
When Raven shared that she cannot buy dresses as long as the adult members in her
church think she should wear, she sees them as out of touch and as following some kind
of “manmade” rule that puts restrictions on her because men are unable to control
themselves. It is also true that the fashion industry is controlling what clothing is
available to her and is invested in objectifying and selling young women’s bodies. In
addition, girls should not be afraid of their bodies or ashamed of their sexual desires.
However, it is not the case that they should engage in sexual activities that are unsafe to
their developing bodies or psyches. Nor would that be consistent with Paul’s theology,
which is that freedom in Christ leads to life. The following chapter offers some suggestions for how all this can be held in tension in practice.

**Hope**

Romans 8:24-25 says, “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” When I asked the girls I interviewed what they hope for, I was struck by how little their hopes rested on some change for them in the present. They hoped for a good Christian spouse in the future. Grace, the girl whom I interviewed who suffered from selective mutism and whose friend became her mouthpiece when she could not speak to others, hoped that when she went to college away from her friend, they would still be able to maintain their friendship. Monica hoped for a future where she could be happy. This is one of the hallmarks of MTD, that God’s desire for people is that they be a good person and be happy. I pressed Monica to find out what she meant by being happy. She responded, “Not having to worry about bills or anything. Not having to worry about illnesses and getting sick.” Dawn echoed this sentiment,

I don't want to have to stress my whole life on bills. Like, I know, like, realistically I'm gonna have to work and pay bills, but I want to be able to work for a certain amount of time and when I retire I can just be set, like, I can just use that time to relax, I won't have to be, like, scraping up money just to pay bills or just to get some food….and be happy with what I'm doing, like, even though I have to work, I want to be happy with the work that I'm doing so it doesn't feel like such an obligation, yeah, or like that I have to where, like, I don't feel tormented going to work.

---

73 NRSV
74 Smith with Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162-163.
Raven had a specific hope about what kind of work she would like to do. She wanted to do something she felt called to and felt she would be good at; something she continued to hear was not a possibility for her, to be a lawyer.

I always want that. Like deep down inside I want that, and it's not that I don't want to go through the work of it, it's just that I don't, like, after seeing struggle, I don't have time to go through the work of it to maybe fall short. And like, I mean like, people, advisors are telling me now, like, lawyers are having the hardest time finding jobs now, and, like, you know it's not as easy as it was before and you know, the best way to be a lawyer is to go to the top, top school but top, top schools cost top, top money. You know, you go to Stanford Law, that's, that's money. What if I just wanted to go to [a public law school]? It's still a good law school but it's not the top school. But, just because you went to [public law school] instead of Stanford, you know, you may not get the good luck. It's just being happy with what it is that you have in life and not having to struggle so much and just living your life to the fullest the way that you know, doing everything that God set for you.

Dawn, Monica, and Raven all expressed not wanting to struggle so much financially, wanting to be able to pay their bills without worry. Raven and Dawn want work that is fulfilling. Raven expresses her desire to be a lawyer in terms that sound almost vocational, something she always wanted deep down inside. Monica does not want to worry about illness. Raven also uses theological language at the end of her answer about what she hopes for, that she is hoping for “doing everything that God set for you.”

In talking to these girls, I did not get the feeling that their hopes for happiness were the kind of hopes that MTD includes. They were not talking about shallow or merely self-serving happiness. For the girls whose families struggled financially, their hopes were to not have those struggles for themselves in their future. Their hopes for the future reflected the difficulties of their present situation. Hoping for vocational fulfillment in work also did not seem to be a shallow desire; rather it again was a response to present difficulties. Raven was describing why she thought her mother might
have immigrated to this country and talked about the surprises that are in store for immigrants. She said,

   I think people move here from [where I am from] in the hopes that they can make more money here but they fail to realize that the qualifications that you need for certain jobs there are less than what you need here so, I don't know, like, an associate's degree there was like everything, just to be in college. But an associate's degree here is, like, like you can't get a good enough job with that. So it's kind of like then you end up having to spend money to go to school that's loans, you take out loan money. And then before you know it the money that you make you're paying back … [while you’re] trying to make a better life so then you spend your whole life paying back for the life you're trying to get.

   Not only is this a sharp critique of the false promises that many immigrants come to the United States in search of, it is also an apt description of the reality she faces. Spending money she does not have to get an education in hopes of being able to spend what she earns in the future paying for those loans. It seems an unending cycle to her. She even said that her mother would have been better off staying in their home country. So for Raven to hope for becoming a lawyer is something that not only seems out of reach because people are telling her she can’t do it, but because of the financial burdens of such a dream, and because she has not seen this kind of dreaming and planning pan out for others in her family or community. Happiness for her then is a correction of her social situation that has so shaped her understanding of hopes, possibilities, and limitations.

   Sadie expressed a different hope than did other girls I interviewed. Her hopes reflect her social situation as well. As a white person who attends school with many racial minorities, is questioning her sexuality, and has dealt with explicit sexism and unwanted advances of at least one male, she has had a unique set of experiences both of privilege and of oppression. Her hopes for her future include an explicit desire to help others:
I wanna dream really big. If that's all I've been able to, I just wanna like, I don't know...Nobody like gets it, I just, I want to, but there's so many things that I see that should be like, fixed. And I don't really wanna fix them I just wanna ... do something impressive. And I wanna, impressive but, uh, I don't know. I don't really know what I wanna do specifically. I wanted be an ice cream truck driver when I was little. I feel like that [would bring happiness]. Or like, be the president, that would be cool, too. Sadie wants to dream big, though she gets stuck in the specifics. She started by talking about how much she sees that needs to be fix and wanting to be a part of that, “do something impressive.” She is aware that she can’t fix everything, “I don’t really wanna fix them,” but she wants to do her part. She thinks about bringing others happiness (ice cream truck driver) or something important (be the president). Sadie’s church is extremely socially active, with social issues at the forefront of their worship and outreach life. Her hopes express her formation in that community – she is aware that there are a lot of problems and wants to be a part of fixing them. She did not share what would make her happy, instead she shared that she wants to help others be happy, though her method to doing so (ice cream truck driver) would not fix the systemic problems that cause unhappiness.

Sam, who is also a part of Sadie’s congregation, at first seemed to dream for the kind of happiness that Smith discusses in his research. When asked what her biggest hopes were, Sam responded that she wanted to go to the Tony’s or the Oscar’s. As our conversation continued, however, it became clear that this was not a dream about being around celebrities, but instead about her vocation. She was talking about how girls need to know that there are options available to them that our gendered society does not show as possibilities for them, specifically more “manual labor” options. She noted that this kind of work is not seen as “girly” and that women who, for example, work in
construction, are seen as “worthless.” I asked Sam how or if she thought her church has been a part of helping her to know what kind of options are available for her outside of the traditional ones girls are often taught. She talked about how she wants to be involved in theater or film and there are people in her congregation who are involved in those fields, which shows her that those are viable career options for her. She said that the church should be able to help girls discover these alternative options because, “it's partly their job to like raise you, sort of. Um, to help you. To help anyone, I guess, is their job.” She talked about all the different ways youth are encouraged to participate in different kinds of ministry, offering them ways to experience things that not many other people get to experience. For example, Sam is more interested in the behind-the-scenes work of film and theater and the youth group at her church puts on productions. She also talked about how “we go on marches and we go do community service projects where we can do hands-on work and like use a hammer and stuff, which not a lot of people get the opportunity to do [where I live]. Or, we garden so like, [I learned that] ‘hey I like gardening!’ [And I learned that] I like helping homeless people and stuff like that.” For Sam, her hope of being involved in the Tony’s or Oscar’s is her hope of having worked on a film or theater project that reaches the top recognition in the country. The way she found that this is her vocation is through her hands-on involvement in various ministries of the church that include theater, but also marches, helping the homeless, community service, and gardening. She sees that the church has been a vital part of helping to raise her and show her different ways she can be active that other places in her life (she specifically mentioned her school) do not.
Evelyn Parker writes about the difference between emancipatory hope and wishful thinking in her book, *Trouble Don’t Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents*. She defines wishful thinking as “a desire and a longing void of possibility and personal agency.” It is fantasy, something that will not come true. Hope is different. Hope is “associated with expectancy, confidence, assurance, and faith.” Parker sees that emancipatory hope is an alternative to wishful thinking and a powerful “theological framework for congregations that are intentional about fostering hope in African American teenagers through ministry with them.” Emancipatory hope looks for transformation of social systems that are unjust. It means “freedom from domination” and is “to expect that hegemonic relations will be transformed and to acknowledge personal agency in God’s vision for human equality.” Not only does this theological framework speak into the experience and needs of many of the girls I interviewed, this concept of emancipatory hope is also consistent with Paul’s theology of hope, sin, human agency, and new creation.

Of the girls whose voices feature prominently in this section, Raven, Dawn, and Monica are Black. Monica is African American, Raven and Dawn are Caribbean American. They expressed their hopes in terms of what will make them happy in the future. Their hopes for meaningful work and economic security reflect their experiences based largely on their position in society as Black girls. Although these girls all expressed awareness of and frustration with the racism of our society, which they have experienced

---

76 Ibid.  
77 Ibid.  
78 Ibid., 15.
throughout their lives, the hopes that they shared with me were not hopes for dismantling racism. In fact, Raven expressed needing to edit her hopes for her future into something she can attain given the constraints of her socio-economic position and racial identity. Emancipatory hope as Parker envisions it being fostered in African American congregations would help them to confront the systems that limit and form their experiences and their hopes with powerful expectation and action for dismantling them.

Paul’s worldview as expressed in Romans 6-8 offers biblical supports for just this kind of expectant hope. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, Paul writes about hope explicitly in chapter 8, though it is also implicit in chapter 6 and 7. Explicitly, Paul writes that hope is for that which is not yet realized, something that cannot be seen, and that hope is a soteriological recognition of Christ’s action (“in this hope we were saved” 8:24). He also says that we wait with patience for our hope to be seen (8:25). This hope is for the new creation for which creation waits, groaning for it with labor pains. Therefore this is not futile patience or wishful thinking; it is deep hope for that which is coming, which is already in the process of being birthed. This is how believers know that this hope is not wishful thinking; it is already in the process of being fulfilled, though its birth is still in process. The childbirth pains are not yet done.

Parker critiques apocalyptic theology as defined as “expressing hope in the end of history, impending judgment, and permanent arrival in Canaan.” She cautions that this theology has been critiqued by James Cone as having an “otherworldly ethos” that is prevalent in Black churches. Parker noted that in her research, apocalyptic thinking

79 Ibid., 16.
80 Ibid.
was a central motif in for the African American teens she interviewed. She argues that this thinking includes “dispensational beliefs usually [that] are pessimistic and negative about the present and see the world ending before earthly dehumanizing conditions are transformed.”

Quoting from James Cone, Parker argues that her concept of emancipatory (or Christian) hope “on the other hand, is a verb creating active expectation of the coming presence of Jesus and requiring individuals ‘to live as if the vision is already realized in the present.’”

New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa agrees that there are significant concerns over using the term “apocalyptic” to describe Paul’s worldview. As noted in chapter one, she notes that often apocalypticism brings up images of violence, destruction, dualism, and escapism. However, this is not Pauline apocalypticism. As Gaventa writes, “Pauline apocalyptic theology concerns the unimaginable size of God’s actions on behalf of the entire cosmos, including humanity itself.”

In fact, Paul’s apocalyptic worldview supports Parker’s emancipatory hope and Cone’s commitment to live as if the liberative vision of the kingdom of God is in the present.

In this largely paranetic section of Romans 6-8, Paul’s use of the imperatives outlined above show that Paul, like Cone, expects that believers can live into the vision of the new creation even though present creation still waits for its arrival. This is the hopeful expectation of Paul for the Roman community and for adolescent girls in this century.

Being in Christ means believers have the ability and the imperative to live in the present

---

81 Ibid., 17.
82 Ibid., 17. Quotation of James Cone is from his God of the Oppressed.
83 Gaventa, Our Mother St. Paul, 82-84.
84 Ibid., 84.
as if God’s hope for creation is realized. The ability to do so comes because, although
believers are not yet resurrected, through their baptism they can participate with Christ in
his resurrection, which has assuredly already happened.

The hopes and dreams that the girls I interviewed gave voice to were hopes and
dreams about their future. As they grappled with the challenges of the present, the hopes
they voiced were delayed. Dawn’s hope was probably the most delayed as she, at age 17,
was hoping that she could retire someday after a career that would enable her to pay bills.
For these girls, their hopes are pinned in the future, rather than in the present. This was
true for girls regardless of their race or class. Pauline apocalyptic places hope in the
present, pairs it with patience and with action. Paul’s theology is not that believers wait
for the new creation with patience while waiting for God to act; rather it is that while in
the present and waiting for the new creation, believers act as if the new creation is
already here. Although the battle between Sin and Grace still rages, believers are firmly
on the side of Grace. They are able to be instruments of that Grace now; there is no
condemnation now; they are slaves to righteousness now; they are free from Sin now.

For adolescent girls today, there are important implications for the believers’ call
to live in the present as if the new creation is already here. Girls can realize that the
power of Sin is outside of themselves, thus sin is neither only immoral action on their
part that deviates from God’s will nor something inherent to their female bodies. Girls
have the power of Christ, as part of the body of believers who are in Christ, to confront
the systemic Sin that tries to enslave them and to know without a doubt that this Sin is
ultimately defeated. Paul’s apocalyptic theology gives them power to partner with Christ
in defeating the racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism that is constantly telling these
girls lies about themselves. They are no longer objects of oppression, but subjects in Christ in defeating the very powers that try to subject them to dehumanization. The hope in Paul’s apocalyptic is that these girls can live as fully free human subjects now, as they wait with patience and promise for Sin to be finally and fully defeated.

**Righteous Action**

Käsemann writes about the necessity of action on behalf of God, which he alternatively calls “service to God” and “bodily obedience.” Because of the absence of an autonomous individual in Paul’s anthropology, there “arises a dialectical understanding of Christian existence. It belongs to the sphere of power of the risen Lord, but it does so on earth and therefore it is still exposed to the attack of the powers which rule this aeon, is always under assault, and is constantly summoned to preserve and verify eschatological freedom in the service of its true and only Lord.” This awareness of how believers can act in their freedom-in-Christ is another way that human bodily existence is valued in Paul’s theology. Käsemann, in reflecting on Romans 6:12-23 where Paul writes that the community of believers is now slaves of righteousness who must yield their members to righteousness for sanctification (6:19) writes the following:

Sanctification means a being for God manifesting itself bodily in the secular world and in the face of temptation, because Christ God graciously sets us in his lordship and is there for us…The holy person is the one upon whom God looks and who stands in the presence of Christ. But his sanctification means that the world around perceives the service of God in earthly secularity reflected in his bodily (social) expressions of life, as in a

---

85 Käsemann, *Romans*, 177.
86 Ibid., 176.
mirror, and it thus catches a glimpse of the God who looks on his creature.\textsuperscript{87}

The only way that humans can show up in this world is bodily. A popular quotation from French philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin states, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.”\textsuperscript{88} Paul would adamantly disagree with this statement. In fact, Paul would argue, the human being is a spiritual being rather than the two being diametrically opposed. Believers are a part of a corporate body of those who have been baptized with Christ, having died to Sin and Death, they are now free to operate in this world as people saturated with Christ’s Spirit for living righteously. In Romans 8:27, Paul refers to the believers as saints because of the Spirit. They are saints in the present, living lives made sanctified by the Spirit. They live bodily, physical, and social lives in the present time, the time where Sin still threatens them, bearing witness to God. As Käsemann states, it is through the believers’ living that others can see the God who loves them.

As mentioned above, Paul’s expectation is not for believers to make the right ethical decisions and thus live a righteous life. His expectation is for them to live a free life enslaved to righteousness that will show God in that living. The terminology of enslavement is challenging for several reasons. The history of the United States offers devastating proof of the lack of righteousness when we consider the slavery of Africans and African Americans for generations and the ongoing effects of slavery in a society that is founded on inequality and abuse of other humans. When Raven was considering racism

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 183-184.
and this country’s history of slavery, she said, “I don't know, like, when you just look back in history and you see how things weren't even, you just see how things are going now it's kind of like, it's still here.” Although there is no longer state-sanctioned or legal slavery now, Raven notes that things are not that much different. She specifically was reflecting on violence against the Black community in her city. Not only do we have historical and current reason to bristle at the term and reject it, but also to think of enslavement, even to God, as a positive goes against our culture’s aspiration for an individual’s autonomy and freedom.

Given Paul’s anthropology, however, there is no way for a human to exist without falling under some power or lordship, as Käsemann wrote. Because Christ has invaded this realm, humans can now be free from the power of Sin and instead operate under the power of Grace, humans have been released from their slavery to Sin and can now be enslaved to righteousness. Freedom from Sin is freedom to be in Christ and live accordingly, which Käsemann calls bodily obedience. To live in this way, however, is not based on a person making a decision to do so. Recall that in Romans 6, baptism happens to a believer; Paul uses the passive voice. Christ invades the present age and wrests humans away from the power of Sin. When under Sin, humans cannot free themselves. As a result of this freedom, humans can live free lives, though in the present they continue to struggle against the power of Sin cooperating with Christ now in the ongoing battle that will come to conclusion in the second coming of Christ when Grace is finally victorious and Sin completely defeated. The freed believer is, like before, never a freestanding individual. He or she is now enslaved to righteousness, a part of Christ, and
a part of a community of other believers that is corporately able to bear witness to God in their living and action now.

Paul’s anthropology also confirms the experience that some girls have about the Christian friendships of which they are a part. Kaia is a 17 year old Caucasian who just finished her junior year. She shared with me the importance of her friendship with the girls in her church. In our interview, she shared that her friends who are not in her youth group are a source of temptation for her but that her youth group friends are a source of strength. She said, “Because people really do some horrible things. But luckily we have each other and I don't think, like, any of us do, like, bad things, like, we all hang out with each other on Friday nights instead of partying and everything.” Genevieve shared that while she was away at a “pre-college summer course thing,” she found herself thinking differently than when she was with her youth group friends and voiced surprise at how she saw herself changing in different company:

I stayed in the dorm and it was for a week and the people in my dorm were all very nice people. I don't think that any of them were specifically Christian, or if they were they were sort of silent, you know, quiet about it. Um, on like the third day, my roommate and this other girl across the hall, the two people I was actually closest to throughout the whole week they started talking about hooking up and going really far with guys and they were actually really talking about it! They were like, 'Oh I've had way too many hook ups to even like count.' And I'm like, “You're 17 years old! How many is way too many?” They were like, "Oh when you get really far into a hook-up you don't know the guy's name..." I'm like, "Never had a first kiss!" Okay, like, it's just really, it was a huge sign of difference; but the thing that really got me was that when I'm with these girls I'm proud and I say, "I have God and I'm proud of that and that's awesome and I'm, you know, like, I know that I am worth something to God and that's okay. I don't need guys. I don't need this materialistic thing. But when it was the three of us walking, the two of them having a bonding experience and it was like they were bonding over this mutual, "We've hooked up with all these guys, we've made out" and one of them had to buy a pregnancy test for a friend and there was this whole pregnancy scare and they were, like,
laughing, and I was awkwardly standing there, like, silently, like, the one who can't relate. And I was embarrassed about it! And I felt for the first time, like, ever in my life, "I was like, oh my gosh, I have to go do this!" I felt like if I do this, I'll be friends with them. And I think that is a huge temptation that we have never felt before really because we have each other. And at school, people know that we have each other and people really sort of understand that we're not going to get into that because we're just not into that. But at, you know, at this college experience where these two girls don't really know me and they were talking about it and bonding and I felt like, "I have to go do this." And I was like, "I'm embarrassed. I'm not going to tell them that I've never had a first kiss because that's so embarrassing." But I had to take a step back and go, "Wait, I'm proud of this. I have friends who are also doing this and I'm not alone in this and it's okay."

Genevieve had to remember herself and her group of Christian friends while she was away from them in order to remember her values and her worth as defined by God instead of by the number of boys she had (or had not) hooked up with. She notes the safety net that her youth group friends provide at her school. Because the others in her school know that she and her friends are Christian and are not “going to get into that,” she is safe from feeling left out by girls who do not share her values. She makes it clear that it is because of her Christian values that she does not hook up with guys, and that she thinks these girls in her pre-college program are getting their self-worth from their physical relationships with boys. As girls confront the power of Sin, their Christian friendships provide a safe place from which to gain freedom from that power.

Not only are believers in Christ, they are also connected to each other. In the present time where the power of Sin is still active and the conflict between Sin and Grace is ongoing, these connections are important sources for maintaining a believer’s righteous action. There is no way for humans to act in a righteous manner unless they are free from Sin. This freedom comes because Christ has invaded the world, revealing Sin for what it is and engaging in a battle against Sin. Righteous action on the part of humans is action
on the side of Grace against Sin. This is exactly the kind of action girls are both looking for from their churches and are capable of themselves. As I have noted several times in this paper, girls are the victims of the power of Sin, which is at work in systemic oppression and the personal ways it is operating in the lives of teenage girls. It is also true that these girls have many gifts to offer the church and society when they operate under Grace. The girls I spoke with are articulate, strong, critical, passionate, energetic, truth-telling, perceptive young women who are free in Christ and ready to be welcomed into the church as it struggles as a community and institution against the power of Sin.

Sadie is an example of a girl who has gifts for the church and is at a church that welcomes those gifts. At age 15, Sadie is aware of her white privilege, critical of it, and conflicted by how to understand her white privilege while still suffering from sexism and heterosexism. She gets some of the highest grades in her school. She looks with wonder at the world around her, and appreciates learning new things about her surroundings. She is strong and outspoken, while also being sensitive and careful. She values strength in others and appreciates those who are just comfortable being their unique selves. She was raised by her mother to be aware of her surroundings, in particular when it comes to the possibility of sexual violence and men. She has endured a particularly scary experience with a male peer trying to force a kiss. Aware of this fear, when she found herself feeling threatened because she was alone in a public space with a stranger who was male, she was also aware enough of the presence of God to find solace and strength to overcome her fear. She knows about many ways this world is broken and wants to be a force for change in it. Her church has been a powerful and positive part of her life and has shaped her own faith greatly. She says that her church “is good because it, um, it sends the
message of love. Almost overpoweringly, and sometimes a little bit oof, but like there'
like the message of acceptance and love and sort of action, and, oh, like that we are in
this world to change this world, and as Christians were should do what Jesus taught,
which is love and forgiveness, and helping.” She is able to identify her own gifts, which
she has come to learn about through her involvement at church:

I also like [in my church] the idea of, we sort of have a responsibility or I think I have a responsibility as somebody who's been given so much in
their life, to sort of like give back almost as much as I can, and I, I do think I've been gifted with the ability to see when people are upset or tell
when somebody's not actually comfortable with a situation, or something and, so, like I feel like that's a gift that God has given me. And that then I
can, so that I might have a responsibility to sort of use it.

Sadie’s gifts are great for Christian community and she is grateful to have been raised in
a Christian community that acts out of the love they believe in from Jesus. Interestingly,
she contrasts her church to other churches she has heard about from her friends saying, “I
have friends who, um, go to different types of churches where all they do is, like, go to
church. And like talk about, talk about sins and stuff.” Sadie has not been taught, or has
at least not absorbed, a theology of sin like Paul’s that would connect many of the
injustices of which she is aware. She sees that focusing on “sins and stuff” is the opposite
of her church’s teachings about acceptance, love, forgiveness, and action. Paul’s
worldview, including his understanding of Sin and the Christian community’s freedom to
join in the fight against Sin would offer her a powerful theological lens through which to
see the importance of the action of her church and how her self-identified gift from God
can be used in this fight. Although Sadie is aware of privilege, her church focuses on her
position of privilege, teaching her that she should give back as much as she can because
she has been “given so much in [her] life.” As she talked about her challenges, she did
not have theological language for them. For adolescent girls, it is important that they can theologically contextualize their own difficulties and struggles, which they all face. All of the girls I interviewed shared with me these difficulties and struggles due to their sex and gender. Like Sadie, they did not have a theological lens like Paul’s through which to view them.

Tay is an example of a teenager whose church does not welcome her gifts. In fact, she has been able to embrace her gifts in spite of her church and the pastors she has experienced in church leadership.\textsuperscript{89} Tay is bright and passionate about her love for music and photography. She is in touch with her emotions and a fiercely loyal friend. She cares deeply about people and about the church; though she is not shy of being critical of both, offering truths that need to be taken seriously if our churches are to fulfill their calling to be a community that welcomes all members of the Body of Christ. She is quick to notice hypocrisy, in herself and others. She is self-aware. She expects more of the church than it offers. Although she has found Christian community through the denominational ministry of which she is a part, she is still disappointed by her local church and wants them to be more accepting and loving of her and the ways God speaks in her life. She is one of the young women I spoke with who is aware of societal pressures, especially as it relates to female body size and clothing, but has not heard these issues discussed or criticized in church. Paul’s theology about Sin would be of great use to Tay to offer her a way to explain theologically what these pressures, as well as other issues that are close to her heart like self-injury and suicide. In fact, much of what she experiences is decidedly not

\textsuperscript{89} Tay’s current pastor is a welcome change. She finds him approachable and welcoming of her, though her church community at large is unchanged.
welcome in the church, as she has received harsh pushback when bringing up these experiences in the church. Tay is looking for action from her church on matters of great importance to her, but it is missing. Paul’s theology of eschatological reservation may help her understand the limitations of her church community and remain connected with them as they struggle to remain the church in these times. However, in the absence of engaging seriously with this kind of theology, Tay is left seeing her church as impotent around what matters most to her and inviting her in only on the condition that she leave her criticisms, her gifts, her experiences, her body, in short herself, outside.

**Violence**

The fact that Paul uses language of conflict and violence is at least as disturbing as his use of slave language. Paul does not see that the present time is a neutral time where someone can choose whether or not to operate under Sin or under Grace. His language clearly reflects not only that it is not a person’s individual decision about which power they fall under, but also that the present time is one of violent conflict between the two powers of Sin and Grace. Death is on both sides of the battle. Sin’s partner is Death; but when one falls under Grace, one has already died (in Christ). Death is also not neutral. Its power over humanity is broken by Christ, who offers eternal resurrected life. Life is on the side of Christ, Death is on the side of Sin. Humans are also not neutral. As ones freed from Sin by Christ, they can either present their members to Sin’s forces against Grace or they can present their members to Grace’s forces against Sin.

For girls who endure violence in their own lives and whose communities suffer violence, Paul’s words about the present time being one of violent conflict ring true. It is
important that in reading Paul’s account of reality, we are aware that he is not suggesting that believers create violent situations or interact with their world violently. In telling the Roman Christians about the world around them and the cosmic conflict in which they play a part, Paul is not prescriptive, rather he is descriptive. The truth is that Sin is a powerful, violent force. Sin seeks death and makes use of what should have been life to cause death. Sin is against life. Paul’s understanding of the implication of Christ’s invasion into this world makes sense with the experience of adolescent girls.

The clash between Sin and Grace can offer a theological lens for girls to understand and interpret their experiences of violence. All that works for death is on the side of Sin. Being enlisted in Sin’s army means being paid in death. The Black girls I spoke with who shared with me about racial violence in their community and around the country know what Death looks like. It looks like unarmed Black teenagers being killed by white men. It looks like a man shot in his own home by police who were not punished. It looks like death down the block from their church. It looks like excessive violence. Raven related the stories of the death of Black men in her community listing off several cases, ending with the question about why it seems inappropriate to point out that those who are killing Black men are white. This conversation took place before the shooting death of Michael Brown and the choke-hold death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, though I am certain if I had conducted this interview after those incidents and the protests that followed, these girls would have had much to reflect on and share with me.

Sadie also told me about an experience of violence, which I make mention of above, about the violence of a boy she knew trying to force a kiss with her. This boy was a part of one of the outreach ministries of the church and had started coming to the youth
group, too. He had run away from home, and Sadie and her mom found him on the subway. They had gone up to her room to use the computer and she said he was not acting like himself, he was talking fast and “crazy.” She tells what happened next like this:

He got up and then he, like…lunged towards me. And he tried to kiss me and it, I was like, “Oh my God, what’s this kid doing?” So I was like, “No, stop.” And so he was like, “Okay, whatever.” So he just sits back down and he goes on the computer and then he like turned around again and he like, like held my head and I was like, “Stop, don't!” and I like pushed him away. And, like that, [sigh], I, it's like stupid because people actually get raped and that scares them, but that like actually, like this kid wasn't acting normal and it freaked me out and he was violating my space and I was like, what’s he doing?...and I went downstairs to my parents… And then I just sat down on my dad's lap and I just stayed there, and I couldn't move and I was like, like I don't know. … I told and my mom, my mom got really mad... And then sort of he just like got mad and like left and, I don't know, it was really weird. And apparently my mom saw him again a few weeks later and he was like…on drugs or whatever… But then, like after that happened, like every single person who looked anything like him, like I would like [get scared], like on the subway…And then, my friend [Ben] who's like my best friend in the whole world, and I was just like hanging out with him like laughing or whatever, we were joking around about [how that guy] always like “gel-ifies” his hair…But anyway then Ben liked pulled [his hair] back like that and for a second he looked like [that other guy] and I was like oh my God! And I was what is wrong with me? Because I shouldn't, I mean, I don't know. But that, that's also made me really scared. Of getting attacked.

Sadie describes the traumatic event in which a boy she knew and was invited into her home tried to kiss her and hold her head. Thankfully, she was able to leave the situation, largely because her brother showed up, and she sought her parents’ help. Eight months after the incident, when we had our interview, she was still dealing with feeling afraid when she saw someone who looked like him on the subway, or when a friend she trusts made his hair look similar.

---

90 In other words, he puts a lot of gel in his hair and slicks it back, as Sadie explained to me.
Girls experience the violence of the world; these two examples of what Raven and Sadie shared, do not exhaust their exposure to violence. Paul’s understanding that this present time is a time of conflict is descriptive not only of what is happening in the cosmos between forces of Sin and Grace, but also in the lives of these adolescent girls. Violence is a fact of life for these girls, a fact Paul understands quite well.

Theologian M. Shawn Copeland locates this current time as a time of empire, of dominant white, male, wealthy, heterosexual culture in the United States. She connects violence to bodies in her theology:

Given the location and conditions of bodies in empire, the virulent global persistence of racism, xenophobic reactions to “illegal” or undocumented anti-bodies within the body of empire, the bodies maimed and slaughtered in wars mounted by clients of empire, the bodies done to death by AIDS and hunger and abuse, and above all, that body broken and resurrected for us, theological anthropology can never cease speaking of bodies.91 Paul is deeply interested in bodies as a part of his theological anthropology. He sees that the “new mortal body” is the body under new lordship, not a spiritualized body, but a fleshy body operating under Grace, in Christ, and by the Spirit instead of under Sin, subject to Death, and according to the Flesh. The new mortal body is a corporate one, connected to other believers and addressable in its freedom from Sin. These are the bodies (and this is the corporate body) that experience and endure violence in this contested time. That Jesus himself endured the violence of the cross yet was resurrected in his body shows girls that the outcome of this violence is not death, but is life. In the end. But it is not the end yet.

91Copeland, 57, italics original.
In the meantime, in the present time, as Paul writes in chapter 6, believers are to yield the members of their corporate body to God. This is where his prescription for dealing with the violence he has so aptly described comes in. In the conflict, which is as large as the cosmos and as personal as the very bodies of believers, there are no innocent bystanders. According to Paul’s anthropology, humans are either on the side of Sin or on the side of Christ. Paul’s charge is not for believers to combat violence with violence, but to be aware of the violent battle raging around them and through them, and to recognize their freedom to be alive in the face of death. Paul tells the hearers of his letter to be on the side of Christ, the side of life. Life is the opposite of death, the opposite of the violence these girls experience that diminishes or ends life.
Chapter 5
Confronting the Powers in Community

“Let me paint a picture for you then I’ll have to teach you to see it” – Sara Bareilles¹

Twice in Romans 6-8, the part of the letter explored for this project, Paul asks this question: “What then shall we say?” (Τί οὖν ἐρωμεν, Romans 6:1 and 7:7). Having listened to the stories of teenage girls who are active in United Methodist churches in the New York Annual Conference, having read through closely Romans 6-8, having seen the ways that Paul’s theology as expressed in those chapters can speak and listen to the lives of these girls, what then shall we say?

Paul’s theology offers empowerment to adolescent girls; it is a theology that includes anthropology, sin, hope, grace, and a worldview that can help girls understand their lives in a new way. If I may conjecture about what Paul might think about what I have heard in their stories, I believe he would be sympathetic to their critiques of the culture in which they live and the churches in which they worship. He would also hear with a keen ear their experiences of the Holy and the ways they are seeking to connect with God in their lives. There are three important findings with which I come away from this project of girls speaking to Romans 6-8 and Romans 6-8 speaking to girls: 1) Adolescent girls will greatly benefit from being taught Paul’s theology and its implications for their individual experiences; 2) the stories of adolescent girls can greatly benefit the churches of which they are a part; 3) the entire church needs to be converted

¹ Sara Bareilles, “Eden” on The Blessed Unrest (Epic, B00CF7PG5U, 2012), compact disc.
to seeing the world as Paul does in order to interpret these stories in ways that will lead to freedom for the whole community.

What then shall we say? This kind of conversation, between Paul and adolescent girls, should continue. Another possible translation of ἐροῦμεν is “shall we teach.” What then shall we teach? Paul’s apocalyptic theology. The question of how to teach it is perhaps more intriguing and is the topic of this chapter. I see the above quotation from Sara Bareilles’ song, *Eden*, as a kind of guide. Both girls and caring adults in their churches can say it to the other. Girls need space, encouragement, and invitation to share their stories; to paint the picture of their lives for adults in ministry with them. Moreover, adults need to be taught how to see that picture with openness and acceptance. Adults need to listen and to learn how to listen. Adults need to help paint the picture of Paul’s worldview for girls. Adults need both to learn and then to teach the world the way Paul sees it, with its challenges and its promises. Painting the picture of the world as Paul sees it for adolescent girls shows them why the struggles they face are so real and offers them a clear understanding that sin is not only about bad decisions they make or an inherent part of their makeup as a female human. Paul’s worldview offers a particular perspective. Both adults and girls need a perspective shift. Listening to the lives of adolescent girls will help adults see the world as Paul does, something they can speak back to girls in ministry. This is a journey of discovery for girls and for the adults who minister with them. There is much to see in the world that has not yet been taught in churches.

Learning how to see it is the hard part.
Girls Who Paint

I interviewed these 24 girls over a period of 4 months. I left that process feeling incredibly honored that these girls had been so open with me and honored to become a keeper of some kind of their stories. What I heard was honesty, struggle, spirit, critique, hope, humor, love, pain, joy, and thoughtfulness. Adults in ministry with young people often feel they have a great deal to share. This is, undoubtedly, true. However, hearing from young people is at least as important as speaking to young people. As noted above, when I asked these girls if they had been asked these kinds of questions before, they mainly responded in the negative.2

In Nelle Morton’s 1977 essay Beloved Image, she tells the story of a small group of women who had come together to listen and share their stories. Morton writes that the experience of women of deeply hearing each other happens repeatedly when women share with one another. In recounting the story of one woman who was listened to in just this way, Morton describes this kind of listening as “A hearing engaged in by the whole body that evokes speech – a new speech – a new creation. The woman had been heard to her own speech.”3 Hearing one into speech is empowerment, Morton says:

We empower one another by hearing the other to speech. We empower the disinherited, the outsider, as we are able to hear them name in their own way their own oppression and suffering. In turn, we are empowered as we can put ourselves in a position to be heard by the disinherited…to speaking our own feelings of being caught and trapped. Hearing in this sense can break through political and social structures and image a new system.4

---

2 This is consistent with the findings of the NSYR (Smith and Denton, Soul Searching, 267), the research conducted by Joyce Mercer with adolescent girls at Emory School of Theology’s Youth Theological Initiative (Mercer, Giriltalk/Godtalk, xx), and the theoretical background to Dori Baker’s religious education model (Baker, Girlfriend Theology, especially chapter one).


4 Ibid.
Morton sees that deep listening can do something, transcend structures and “image a new system.” What is drawn out of someone who is being listened to in that way is something new, a new creation. Hearing someone to speech is empowering, embodied, and creative. In what I have quoted of her essay, it is clear that Morton maintains a kind of “us/them” view. “We” on the one hand who are hearing another to speech and the other, whom she calls “the disinherited,” who is being heard. However, there is some melting away of those differences in that this kind of hearing is empowering for both parties. In ministry with youth, there is (and should be) a certain amount of “us/them” thinking. Adults are not the same as youth. Adults have power and status granted to them by society that youth will not have until they grow up. But despite these differences, adults and youth are both members of the same churches, both are members of the Body of Christ. If adults, especially adult women, can hear young women to speech, both adults and youth will be empowered and transformed.

Dori Baker, in her book Doing Girlfriend Theology, looks to Nelle Morton’s “hearing to speech” as foundational to her own practice of girlfriend theology. Girlfriend theology is a practice of opening a space for girls to share important stories from their lives and as a small group community seek to connect those stories to God’s story in a way that is generative of new images of God that help create new relationships with God. Like with Morton’s example of a small group of women sharing stories, Baker finds that in a small group of women and girls sharing stories, both the speaker of the story and her hearers are transformed. Baker writes, “[A]s in Morton’s case, it is often the student who

---

5 Baker, Girlfriend Theology, 30.
does the teaching.

She agrees with Morton that what is created in these instances of hearing to speech is something new, “Being called forth to speech is not a solitary act of personal devotion, but a political one; it names and new reality and creates a community with the potential to effect change.”

Michael Warren wrote about the silence of youth in his *Youth, Gospel, Liberation*. He writes that youth have been silenced in their public life. He offers this observation:

Youth in our society are not only silent. They are a step beyond silence: they are mute. It is almost as if they have no significant life experience of which they themselves can speak. It is only later as older adults that they are able to look back and speak of the earlier period, the period of silence, the period of systematic inarticulateness….Very few young people are ever encouraged to take their life experience seriously enough to want to articulate it.

Warren’s book was published in 1987. As noted in chapter one, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton observe in their 2005 book *Soul Searching* that when young people are asked about their lives, they are quite articulate about their lives, just not about their faith. The voice Warren notes as missing is specifically a public voice, one he notes does show up in “the original depictions of their own lives which they write for the literary magazines published each year by most high schools and colleges.” Since the time of Warren’s work, and since Smith and Denton’s as well, the way that young people communicate has changed vastly. For example, Facebook began in 2004, as a social network for college students. In the more than ten years since then, however, many other

---

6 Baker, 31.
7 Ibid.
8 Warren, 14.
9 Smith with Denton, 131.
10 Warren, 14.
parts of the population, including many teenagers. In October of 2014, Facebook released their quarterly report, which included that there are 1.35 billion monthly active users, about the same number as the population of China.\(^\text{11}\) Although social networking can seem private, and certainly has well-documented drawbacks and dangers, through it young people do develop a public voice and public persona both as individuals and as a group. Social media provides a new public space for youth to author these “original depictions of their life.”

Perhaps the practice of social networking has aided young people in gaining a public voice and the ability to become more articulate. What I observed in my small sampling of girls in the New York Area was that they are articulate about their lives and their faith, when they are asked to do so and given space to answer. When they did not know what they believed, many of them wrestled with the question in conversation with me; in those instances, it was clear that they had not really thought about it before. Young women cannot be expected to be articulate about something they have never had practice voicing.

Morton and Baker note that when someone is heard into speech, something happens. They note a new community, a new reality, a new creation is formed. Warren writes that the lack of a public voice in young people leads them to “assume that they in fact can have no significant impact on the world. The centers of power are inaccessible; the wielders of power are anonymous persons in these centers; the issues relating to

power are so complex as to be incomprehensible. These assumptions lead to political silence, a conviction that one has nothing to say about the issues of one’s time.” If girls are to be welcomed into the Body of Christ that is the church, they must be welcomed with their voices, not in spite of them. Inviting girls to share their stories in their churches and welcoming those stories as holy is a challenge for churches who are used to ministry with young people involving informational teaching and moral education. Youth ministries that assume youth need to learn about the Christian faith do not honor the fact that youth have much to teach.

Although the issues of our time did not come up in all my interviews, in several it did. In particular, these issues came up with the girls whose churches were confronting these issues in their worship services or in their outreach ministries. When I asked questions that led to conversation along these lines, or when they brought up topics along these lines, these girls were articulate about the problems they saw, possible solutions, and the role of the church in either helping or not. They were self-reflective and involved in these issues. For example, I interviewed a total of four girls from the church Sam and Sadie attend; the other girls are named Sarah and Katie. All four of these girls talked about issues like poverty, racism, sexism, and sexual exploitation. Their church is socially active, they have been formed as their church marches in protests against war and against police brutality, cooks meals for a program that mentors girls who have been sexually exploited, and hosts a food pantry and homeless shelter. I interviewed one girl, Evelyn, from a church that is extremely active in ministry and advocacy for those who

---

12 Warren, 17.
identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ). She had well-formed opinions about the issue of LGBTQ people in the church and understood her faith to be comprised of social activism, which she also saw as reflective of the faith of her congregation. The group interview I conducted with Monica, Raven, Dawn, and Beverly was full of voiced opinions about the issues of our time. They talked about immigrant issues, racism, violence, and the challenge of negotiating generational differences. Their church has a large number of immigrants and is predominantly people of color.

Therefore, I draw the conclusion that when a young person’s church is talking about the issues of the day in worship and participating in ministries that address those issues in ways that include youth, the youth will in fact develop a public voice about those issues. When a church in its ministry and self-understanding is a community of faith with a public voice, the young people in that church will also form that public voice, when young people are included in the full life of the community.

In the examples I mention above where girls have a voice beyond their Facebook timeline that directly addresses the issues of our time, there is a notable lacuna. Young women are not hearing about sexism at church. Tay brought up issues about the fashion industry and sizism and the issue of self-mutilation. She did not see her church addressing these issues at all; and in fact she brought them into the church amid some resistance from other church members. Monica, Raven, Dawn, and Beverly talked clearly and passionately about the issue of sexism and how they experienced it in their lives, and noted the silence of their church on the issue - beyond the rebukes they received for their own clothing choices by some members. Genevieve and Britt Nicole were vocal about issues of girls’ clothing and the messages it sends. They certainly received messages from
their church about what their behavior and clothing should be, explicitly through programming and in informal conversations with boys in their youth group. However, they are not taught about the issues in a liberative way, rather they are taught in a way that helps them internalize messages that are damaging to their sense of self and equates their bodies with sinfulness. In addition, they have been taught that their goal is to control their desires in order to not be sinful, the reward for doing so is to marry a good Christian man sometime in the future. Elizabeth, whom I introduced in the last chapter, was likewise taught to control her desire. In order to not act on her desire with another person, she turns to masturbation, which causes her shame but seems to be more acceptable in her understanding about sexual prohibition than is sex or intimate touch with another person.

Girls have not, for the most part, been encouraged to have a public voice about themselves as girls. Churches are hesitant to explore the complexities of being an adolescent girl, defaulting to moralisms (don’t have sex before you’re married, cover your body, don’t tempt boys) or to ignore these complexities all together. In lieu of hearing about these issues from their churches, girls like Tay find these issues addressed outside of the church and attempt to bring them into the church. Girls like Dawn, Beverly, Raven, and Monica take the opportunity of a research interview to discuss the issue at length with one another, learning from and sharing with each other.

Michael Warren writes that he began his writing project because he was concerned about the “place of youth in the church. But to understand their situation fully, one must examine their position throughout society.”13 According to Warren, not only do

---

13 Ibid., 27.
adults assume that the voicelessness and powerlessness of youth is a natural and normal occurrence as mentioned in the previous chapter, churches have taken this view as well. He writes that churches “tend to foster passivity and reward predictability in young people…Church leaders set out trivial, even mindless goals for young people.”

Although Warren wrote his book in the mid-1980s, looking at youth ministries today, this is still often the case. Youth are not included in decision-making of the church, their presence in worship tends to be somewhat condescending, relegated to annual “Youth Sunday” worship services or worship “entertainment.” If silence is presumed a positive quality for all youth in general, it is even more so the expectation for girls who are not only young but also female. As a sex, society (including the church) still values the female voice less and does not concentrate on helping girls develop a strong voice so that they will be strong women. The recent campaign drawing attention to how girls are often called “bossy” when exhibiting leadership skills shows that this is an ongoing problem.

Given Paul’s understanding of the present time being one of conflict in which Sin seeks to take over people’s agency and make use even of God’s law, what girls need are peer and adult companions in the fight against Sin. They need sisters-in-arms. The truth

14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
17 I chose to use this term to be consistent with reality as Paul expresses it and girls experience it. The present time is one of conflict between Sin and Grace, people are not neutral in this fight, nor are they removed from it. Rather they are caught in the middle and through Christ are free and empowered to be instruments of Grace, which requires combating Sin. Use of this term, like Paul’s own words about the violent nature of the present time, is not intended to be prescriptive but rather descriptive. Girls need adults, and especially adult women, to fight the forces that threaten their humanity and wholeness alongside them as members together in the Body of Christ.
is that even as Sin is operative in society and the ways girls are treated and expected to act in their schools and with their peers, so too is Sin operative in the church. Paul does not say that Sin is relegated outside of the Christian community. In fact, his admonishments to the Roman Christians show that he sees the ways that Christians in community can still be conscripted into Sin’s army if they are not careful and intentional about their participation in Christ. Not only then do girls need sisters-in-arms who will help them confront the ways that Sin is active in their experiences outside the church, they also need those who will acknowledge the existence of and join their fight against Sin in the church. Paul implores his readers and hearers in Rome to be instruments of righteousness in the ongoing war. Girls also need to be instruments of righteousness. They need help knowing what that means and discerning how they can be a part of tackling Sin and being on God’s side against Sin. They also need other women fighting alongside them: sisters-in-arms.

From these interviews, I have learned the importance of creating youth ministries and churches that are welcoming of adolescent girls’ stories and experiences. The critical eye they bring to the church can help hold the church accountable to be who they say they are. Girls who are encouraged to leave their critical eye outside of the church are being done a disservice. They are being taught to divorce their gifts and skills from their life of faith. Girls can identify where Sin is active in the church and can help the church to turn against it. The church needs this. These girls want to be active. They want things to change. They want to be a part of making changes in the church, their school, and society at large. Many of them are inspired to do so because of their faith in God. The
perspective that girls bring to the church is an important way the church can develop its own bifocal vision.

Girls need to be invited to paint the picture of their lives for the adults who are in ministry with them. As they paint, using vivid colors, expressing their vulnerabilities and questions, brushstrokes that look strange to adults and maybe a little scary, adults need to hear these girls to speech. Encouraging their expressions of self, validating their experiences, and reserving judgment. The conversations I had were interviews, not pastoral conversations, yet these were holy conversations. I greeted these girls with only the agenda of hearing their stories. I told them there were no wrong answers. I told them I knew they were experts about themselves. When they brought up difficult things, death of a parent (or in Brooke’s case, of both parents), ruined friendships, depression, ways that racism and sexism hurt their understanding of self, frustrations with the church, and violence, I did not offer anything except listening and follow-up questions. This facilitated their openness and encouraged them to continue to voice what they were experiencing and to continue to think through their beliefs even if they were not yet fully formed. Opening a safe space and inviting stories without judgment is one of the main tasks for ministry with adolescent girls.

Doing so can be as simple as meeting with a small group of girls and adult women around the table at a coffee shop, asking questions, and listening for the answers. During the group interviews, I sometimes became a witness to the holy conversation between young people and adults.

---

18 Dori Baker and Joyce Mercer give voice to what can happen when listening deeply turns into a holy practice with young people even in the context of interviews in Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007), chapter 4.
Christian friends as I stopped asking questions and observed the conversation flow between the girls. They challenged each other, affirmed each other, and asked questions of each other. Adolescent girls have stories to tell, they have a picture to paint for those who will listen and they need support when their stories are not welcomed as or trusted to be the holy stories they are.

I suggest a two piece strategy of welcoming girls, and therefore welcoming their stories, in churches. One is small group open conversation, specifically asking girls to share with each other and with the adults who are present. Importantly, the adults involved in this kind of conversation should be women. These are the adults who help girls paint the picture of their lives by being present as the painting is being created. These women are the ones who can hear girls to speech. Part of painting the picture of their lives involves girls helping adults to learn how to see it. As Warren points out, the church has adopted the ideas of society concerning youth. Adults who will be allies to girls must be open to re-learning. Part of being in community with the girls means they must become aware of their assumptions about girls and see the pictures the way the girls paint them.

Recently, the story of Martin Pistorius has received a lot of attention. At age 12, Pistorius entered a vegetative state for reasons unknown to his doctors. For the next 12 years, his family cared for him, assuming that he was in that vegetative state and completely unaware of what was going on around him. He was not – he began to wake up by the age of 14 or 15. National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* quotes Pistorius as saying "Everyone was so used to me not being there that they didn't notice when I began
to be present again.”\(^{19}\) This is true for adolescent girls in the church as well. Adults assume that youth are silent, have no power, and should not interrupt what adults are used to experiencing and knowing. Adults are so used to youth not being present that they may not notice when they begin to be present. Theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson calls the not-seeing of other people “obliviousness.”\(^{20}\) She observes that this obliviousness is “not primarily intentional but reflexive. As such, it occurs on an experiential continuum ranging from benign to a subconscious or repressed protection of power.”\(^{21}\)

Part of the perspectival shift needed in the church as a whole is to see youth.

Adults assume that youth have nothing to bring to the church as a whole. However, these strong and faithful young women are in their churches. In many cases, youth have been limited in their participation in churches. They have been confined to youth rooms, youth groups, and youth worship services. This is another way that the church has functioned under Sin rather than under Grace. Assuming youth did not want to be a part of the larger church, and knowing that youth in the larger church can be disruptive to the status quo, the church has ghettoized its young people then criticized them for not being active in their faith lives once they are old enough to be welcomed into the larger church. This critique of youth ministry practice has been criticized by the field of youth ministry since at least the mid to late 1980s, though in many cases it is still how youth ministry functions.


\(^{21}\) Ibid., 19.
Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster published their book, *The Godbearing Life* in 1998. They trace the history of youth groups back to the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the YMCA.\(^{22}\) Church youth groups since then have provided some “degree of protection from risky behavior.”\(^{23}\) However, these programs have not helped youth develop their faith. They use the term “one-eared Mickey Mouse” (see Figure 1), a term introduced in a youth worker magazine in 1989 by Stuart Cummings-Bond to illustrate this model of youth ministry:

![Figure 1](image-url)

The result of youth ministry done this way is “a deepening chasm between youth ministry and the theology of the church as a whole. When youth graduated from the “youth group”

---


\(^{23}\) Ibid., 30.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 31.
– the only form of ministry many young people had ever experienced – they effectively graduated from church as well.”25 Dean and Foster are concerned about this model of youth ministry because it does not help the youth develop a faith that will sustain them into adulthood. When it comes to adolescent girls and the reality in which they live, my concern is that they are not given the theological resources and community support they need to combat Sin. They need to perceive and have the resources to counter Sin as it is operative in their lives through the systems in society and the church which are intent on not only silencing them but also confining their agency, limiting their power, hurting their senses of self, and being closed to the many valuable gifts they have for the Body of Christ.

Warren helps in understanding that young people are silent in the church, even when they are not off in their separate youth spaces. For those churches who still keep their youth separate from the church at large, this silence is not only of voice but also of presence. In either case, whether the youth are separated from the church as a whole or are there but expected and formed to be silent, the churches do not notice the girls who are a part of their faith communities, effectively not welcoming them into the Body of Christ as expressed in these churches. This is why the above quotation from Martin Pistorius is such a good analogy. In what I am proposing, girls will need the help of their sisters-in-arms in order for them and their stories to be noticed and welcomed into the faith community. The church is so used to girls not being there, that without these sisters-

25 Ibid., 30.
in-arms being a kind of mediator between the girls and the rest of the church, they will not notice when they begin to be present.

Womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland is concerned about who is absent from churches. She writes about the power of the Eucharist to constitute the Body of Christ:

In the very act of nourishing our flesh with his flesh, we women and men are made new in Christ, emboldened to surrender position and privilege and power and wealth, to abolish all claims to racial and cultural superiority, to contradict repressive codes of gender formation and sexual orientation. In Christ, there is neither brown nor black, neither red nor white; in Christ, there is neither Creole nor mestizo, neither senator nor working in the maquiladoras. In Christ, there is neither male nor female, neither gay/lesbian nor straight, neither heterosexual nor homosexual (after Gal 3:28). We are all transformed in Christ: we are his very own flesh. If my sister or brother is not at the table, we are not the flesh of Christ. If my sister’s mark of sexuality must be obscured, if my brother’s mark of race must be disguised, if my sister’s mark of culture must be repressed, then we are not the flesh of Christ.26

What Copeland so powerfully states is that when we come to the table as the church and do with without all the members of humanity present as their full selves, we do not receive from the table all that is possible. We are not the Body of Christ. We are incomplete, an approximation. In Paul’s words, we can say that we are not living in the present as a people who have been baptized into Christ. Instead, we remain operating under the power of Sin. Therefore, although the field of youth ministry since the introduction of the one-eared Mickey Mouse critique has largely been encouraging churches to include youth into the life of the congregation and end the segregation of prior practices of youth ministry, it is not enough to have youth physically present, they need to be fully present as their fully embodied selves.

26 Copeland, 82.
McClintock Fulkerson argues that seeing others and being seen by others in the community of faith is essential. She writes,

What is needed to counter the diminishment and harm associated with obliviousness is a place to appear, a place to be seen, to be recognized and to recognize the other. Being seen and heard by others, being acknowledged by others—these are said to be essential to the political life; my point is that they are also essential to a community of faith as an honoring of the shared image of God.27 The church needs to be a place to appear for adolescent girls, both for the benefit of the girls and for the benefit of the church. McClintock Fulkerson expands what she means by “place” by drawing on postmodern thought: “When understood as bodied ingress into the world, place is truly fundamental in generating knowledge. For it is the body, with its corporeal bifurcation, that provides orientation in the world (left-right, up-down, front-back) and thus the basic ingredients of place. The world takes shape through our bodies.”28

Nelle Morton’s idea of being heard to speech is part of being fully human, of appearing in a place. She writes, “While I experienced this kind of hearing through women, I am convinced it is one of those essential dimensions of the full human experience long programmed out of our culture and our religious tradition.”29 Listening deeply to the lives of adolescent girls, hearing them to speech, is about hearing them into their full humanity. Listening in this way, asking for stories, being open to hearing whatever experiences the girls have – the beautiful and the broken – is a way to acknowledge, welcome, and encourage them to embrace their full humanity. Without

27 McClintock Fulkerson, 21, italics original.
28 Ibid., 24, italics original.
29 Morton, 128.
welcoming the full range of the adolescent experience through the stories of these girls, we are not welcoming them. Without welcoming them, we have no chance of coming to the table as one community for the purpose of being nourished into becoming the Body of Christ.

Girls bring with them amazing gifts for the Body of Christ; gifts the church misses out on if they are not welcomed, not noticed, or not welcomed fully. One of the strengths that many the girls I spoke with have is a critical eye. They see the ways the church has let them down, and the ways that the church has perpetuated problems like sexism, racism, and homophobia. Young women learn critical thinking skills in school; they need to apply them everywhere, including the church. The group I interviewed with Beverly, Dawn, Monica, and Raven had clearly learned how to think critically in terms of their faith. I suspect this is due in part to their church’s commitment to confronting racism as a part of their faith. These girls had learned that their developing critical thinking skills were needed in the church and were a part of how they express their faith as they thought about the problem of racism in their community. This skill was not, however, invited by the community as they tried to understand sexism and expectations placed on them as girls. Their frustration at not being able to use these skills in respect to something that so deeply affected them was clear. These girls, with their critical thinking and vibrant faith, are prophets.

Walter Brueggemann writes that the prophetic imagination consists of two equal parts, one of which is critique. Brueggemann interprets the Mosaic tradition as a

---

30 Marin and Halpern, 1, 11.
prophetic one. Moses was looking to dismantle an oppressive regime. His focus, however, “was with the consciousness that undergirded and made such a regime possible.” Adolescent girls, with their critical eye to culture and the church, have the makings of prophetic imaginations that can change the consciousness of our society. Currently our society’s consciousness makes possible oppression of girls and women. When the church adopts current cultural consciousness, the church fails to see that youth have a voice the church should hear. Brueggemann suggests that “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.” He notes that this alternative consciousness both criticizes the dominant culture and energizes people “by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move.” After my interviews with these 24 girls, I am convinced that adolescent girls have a large part to play in the church’s call to prophetic ministry. I asked Tay what helped her develop her critical eye towards society:

E: So I want to know how you got it, and if the church helped or hindered you getting it.

Tay: Um, I got it pretty much on my own, I guess, I don't really understand how I got it. But, as I grew up, I realized that, I'm, I don't really know how to describe it. As I grew up I realized I was not the image of beauty that is considered a lot to most people. And I kind of, like, came to terms with that. And by avoiding looking at fashion magazines and things that have hurt me in the past saying like, “Oh, I wanna be her size”, it's made me look more towards trying to figure out what all of those messages are and to avoid them, and to try to find a meaning like the thing about [if someone kills themselves trying to be thin and there’s a] commercial five minutes later [showing this expectation for thinness]...I posted that on Tumblr and a lot of people actually agreed with it, which kind of made me realize I'm not alone,
there are people who feel the same way, and it's kind of messed up in my mind that people still look at that saying, “Oh, that's so sad, but wait, let me go shopping for a size lower than I actually need.” And it's kind of like, I don't really think the church has gotten me to realize that, but I feel like my friends in [the denominational youth organization] have also agreed with me in that point of view. Like, they've realized more, as I talk about, they realize that, yes, that is what is going on and it's wrong.

Tay clearly is critical of society’s expectation of beauty as thinness and the havoc it can wreak on girls. She is a kind of prophet, though she would not articulate that identity. She did not learn about these issues at church, but she finds support for her criticism in social media and through conversations with her Christian friends outside of church. Raven was critical of her church’s unwillingness to address the issues that were most important to her and her girlfriends:

[I]t’s time to change. That's what I'm sayin’....talk about it in the sermon, so kids know like what are they doing and, like, where I can understand why you don't want to talk about it in the sermon, but at least, like, have a little group for it so say like... Let's talk about sex with the pastor after church on Sunday. I bet a lot of people would come!

These girls are equipped by their formal education to think critically, yet feel hindered by their churches from discussing the issues about which they are both most curious and most critical. Sometimes they are critical only of how they are perceived without seeing the multiple layers at work, as when Raven rightly complained that some in her church criticize her for wearing a dress that is too short but doesn’t criticize the fashion industry for only offering short dresses for sale. The energy when talking to these girls about sex, body image, clothing, temptation, sin, and racism was palpable.

Some of the girls were critical of their own experience, like Raven’s critique of how members of her church criticize her for wearing a dress that is “too short” when there are no places to buy longer dresses for girls her age. Some girls were critical
beyond their own experience, like Tay’s critique of the fashion industry and its effects on all women. Some of the girls have had critical thinking nurtured in their churches as a way to criticize “the world” but not “the church”, as I think is evident in some of the comments from Genevieve and Britt Nicole about clothing choices that they as Christians make. In any case, it is clear that their ability to make use of their critical thinking skills informed by their faith and applied to the situations and issues that matter most to them is a gift.

Another gift these girls bring with them when they are fully welcomed into the church is that their ability to quickly point out hypocrisy when they see it. A book published based on research conducted in 2007 by the Barna group found six broad themes that came out of their asking young people who do not identify as Christian what they think of those who are Christian. These themes are: hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, antihomosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental. For the most part, I heard these same themes in the interviews I conducted with girls who do identify as Christian. Sam even shared with me that she sometimes has trouble calling herself a Christian because of what it can mean to others. In addition to the criticism they offer, both of society as a whole and of the church, these girls are energetic, optimistic, passionate, and funny. Despite the challenges they face, those they can clearly identify and those they cannot, despite the struggles with which they are engaged, they smile and laugh and are committed to being a part of the church even though it often overlooks their deepest needs. They are extremely loyal and forgiving, just what the church needs. When

the church welcomes girls fully into the community of faith, the church welcomes those who can help dismantle the very consciousness that damages its relationship with these same girls. Welcoming girls begins with these sisters-in-arms but cannot stop there.

Once they have found their speech, been heard to speech by their sisters-in-arms, these girls need the entire congregation to see the picture they have painted. These stories need to be welcomed not only into youth groups or small group conversations with trusted adult women advisors. Girls also need to be invited into the full life of the church with their full selves. This is the second piece of welcoming and inviting girls’ stories into their churches. Although the reception Tay received after preaching in her church was not positive, her pastor gave her a powerful message of acceptance by inviting her to do so in the first place. Girls should preach from the pulpit. Pastors should be involved in ministry with them, even when they have a separate adult who is their youth pastor. Raven’s conversation on her stoop with her pastor was extremely important to her faith formation. She was able to ask questions of him and hear his answers, many of which surprised her. Girls need women allies to help them teach the congregation to see the picture of their lives through the same lens with which the girls themselves do. The adult women who have been taught by girls to really hear what they are saying, to see what they are painting, become instrumental in helping the girls speak to the wider congregation in helping the congregation listen in a new way.

There will, undoubtedly, be instances in which the congregation will not be receptive to stories girls tell, will judge these stories with an “old age” knowing, or will be uncertain of how to respond to the new truths they bring to light. The adult women who have heard them to speech are the girls’ allies in the challenge of bringing girls and
their lives into the Body of Christ. When Tay was criticized for preaching about cutting, she needed a trusted adult woman with whom she had already shared her story to stand up for her. This adult could have shown the church how their response was in line with Sin rather than with Grace. When girls hear members of churches criticizing their dress, girls need to have trusted women to whom they can bring this problem to and find help in addressing it.

Beverly shared with me that when she brought difficult questions from her life to her mother, her mother often suggested calling the 700 Club for an answer. Her mother’s response shows how unprepared she felt to help her daughter understand her experiences from a faith perspective, but also shows that she did not really know who to tell her daughter to turn to in their church.

Dori Baker argues for the need for girls to have mentors. She points to several scholars of the young women who draw the same conclusion. “In much of the literature regarding contemporary American adolescence, especially female adolescence, one conclusion is pervasive: adolescents need adults who are willing to enter into relationships with them.”

In analyzing the data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, Kenda Creasy Dean emphasizes that the biggest influence in an adolescent’s faith is his or her parents. Others in the field of youth ministry emphasize the need for youth to have adults who are not their parents be actively involved in the faith lives of teenagers. In Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry, Andrew Root argues that the

---

35 Baker, Girlfriend Theology, 164.
36 Dean, Almost Christian, 112.
37 For example, Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), and Mark DeVries, Sustainable Youth Ministry: Why most youth ministry doesn’t last and what your church can do about it (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).
popular method of youth ministry created by Young Life and adapted for church youth
ministries, called “relational youth ministry,” encouraged adults to build relationships
with youth as a means to an end, rather than realizing that these relationships were the
end in and of themselves. Root notes that it is in authentic relationships with youth
(called place-sharing) Christ is present. He writes, “Place-sharing takes shape when we
place ourself fully in the reality of the other, refusing to turn away even from its darkest
horror. Just as Jesus incarnate, crucified and resurrected was fully our place-sharer, so we
too, as Jesus’ disciples, must ourselves become place-sharers, suffering with and for
young people.”

Not only are adults needed to be in relationship with adolescent girls in order to
deepliy listen to them as they learn to tell stories of their lives, the kind of relationship
also matters. Root argues for the relationship between an adult and a youth to be one of
place-sharing. This relationship between an adult and a youth incarnates Christ: “we
should enter deeply into each other’s lives for only their sake, knowing that in so doing
God in Christ is present to us both.” Dori Baker argues for a particular kind of
mentoring relationship. She defines the mentor relationship that adolescent girls need as a
“mentoring circle” with a feminist consciousness. She notes that a one-on-one
mentoring relationship can be risky to both the girls and the women in those
relationships. Mentoring circles are “groups composed of two adult women and between

---

39 Ibid., 83.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 125.
42 Baker, Girlfriend Theology, 167.
two and four adolescent girls...Adults share responsibility with each other and with the girls for the relationships that form and the content of the sessions. Mentoring circles are mutual and reciprocal, acknowledging that women need the companionship and insight of girls as much as girls need the companionship and insight of women." In addition, these kinds of group mentoring allow for the adolescents to offer companionship and insight to one another. In the group interviews I conducted, often times the girls would talk to each other as they developed their answers to my questions. They challenged each other, asked for clarification, and affirmed each other. These small groups of mentor circles that Baker created and advocates for in practicing “girlfriend theology” leave space for peer-to-peer mentoring as well.

Root says that part of the place-sharing relationships involved knowing what outside of the other person affects that person’s humanity. Specifically Root mentions, “economic systems, family structures, governmental policies, societal perceptions, and religious background.” He writes, that part of place-sharing is to take responsibility for the other’s experience. He uses psychological trauma as an example. The place-sharer takes responsibility for the trauma, “not in order to heal it but to feel the full depth of the trauma; being responsible to the point of not allowing the trauma or neurosis to determine the humanity of the other.” In this way Root is very similar to my own suggestions for women to form an alliance with girls against the forces that threaten their well-being.

---

43 Ibid., 168
44 Baker defines girlfriend theology as being “about girls and women creating spaces in which it is safe to share [their] stories – the good, the bad, and the ugly – so that we might discern the trace of a living, breathing divine presence who seeks our companionship as much today as on the fresh new dawn of creation” (Girlfriend Theology, 3).
45 Root, 131.
46 Ibid.
Sisters-in-arms are certainly place-sharers with girls. They are fulfilling their call to be in the Body of Christ with girls and to be instruments of Grace against Sin (in whatever ways it manifests) with girls.

Root also argues, however, that our “cultural systems and psychological situations may be powerfully threatening and affect us greatly, but they are not real because they have not bowed to the person of Jesus Christ, who is the real One.” On this Paul and I disagree with Root. These dehumanizing systems and situations that threaten all people, youth included, are very real. They are part of the ongoing struggle of the present time, waiting for final obliteration when the new creation is completely birthed into the world at the eschaton. Because they are real and really threaten a young person’s humanity, each young person needs someone to take them seriously and in partnership with Christ work to destroy those threats. This is what these sisters-in-arms do. They hear girls’ stories and see them from a Pauline perspective. This perspective means that the forces that threaten girls are real, need to be destroyed, are not an essential part of the girls themselves, and, most importantly, will not win. Paul helps girls, sisters-in-arms, and the church know that these forces will be eliminated because Sin will be ultimately conquered. This is not up for debate and it is a great source of hope for girls who are constantly struggling to reclaim their full humanity from systems that are bent on their ruin.

Beginning with these sisters-in-arms and continuing through to the rest of the church, the experiences of young women in our society at large and in our churches are

47 Ibid., 133.
stories that will inevitably be difficult to hear. Sometimes the difficulty will come like growing pains as adults learn to hear the stories girls tell and take them seriously in a way that we have been conditioned against. Sometimes the difficulty will come as truths that are hard for adults and as the church to accept. Taking the lives of adolescent girls seriously, welcoming stories, means welcoming their struggles and seeing just how pervasive the power of Sin is. Sisters-in-arms are tasked with hearing girls to speech and listening deeply enough to girls to see the picture the way the girls do. They are then tasked with being allies with the girls as they bring their stories to the broader church community, which includes identifying and combating Sin as it is at work in the church. Sin deceives even the church into thinking it is free when it is not. Sin uses the church as an instrument in its war against God. The stories of girls and their alliance with their sisters-in-arms can confront Sin where it is and help the church live into the freedom it is promised. In this partnership and process of bringing the stories of girls into the church, interpreted through a Pauline lens, the fight against Sin takes place. And grace wins.

**Paul Revealed: Seeing from the New Creation Perspective**

Churches as a whole, and especially girls and the women who are allies with adolescent girls need to see the world the way Paul sees. They need the bifocal vision that J. Louis Martyn describes. They need to see the old age, the present time, and the new creation, and to see the struggle between God and the powers of Sin and Death. Listening to and welcoming the stories of adolescent girls is about seeing the picture they paint of their lives as they do, without the assumptions that come along with being adults formed
by a society who oppresses its young people. The next picture that needs to be painted and seen is the picture Paul paints so that we can use Paul’s apocalyptic theology in ministry with adolescent girls.

Paul’s letters are pedagogical and inspirational. He trusts that by writing these letters, along with connecting in person with these fledgling Christian communities, he will be able to evoke new creation knowing in those communities. Part of his pedagogical strategy is to tell his listeners about the world as he sees it. By showing them the signs of the present time, the powers of the old age, and the coming of the new creation, they, too, begin to see it this way. He uses powerful and descriptive language to help the readers of his letters see the way he does. He paints a vivid picture of the present time and the struggle taking place. The way he uses language teaches people how to see the picture as well.

Michael Warren looks to Paulo Friere as he interprets the silence of young people. In working with the poor laborers of Brazil, Friere created a method of critical pedagogy to help these laborers see their lives differently. Using images from their lives, he invited them to interpret what was happening to them critically, seeking to free them from oppression and free their oppressors from their position as oppressors as well.48 As Warren summarizes, the “elites try to control the very naming of the world in a way that abolishes any language that might expose the true situation of oppression…Thus the

---

undeniable task of such oppressed silent ones is to claim and then achieve their right to a
voice, the right to pronounce their world."\textsuperscript{49}

Paul understood the power of naming the reality of one’s world and one’s
experience in it. The Bible has many of his words that were not intended to be read by
one person as a traditional letter in our time might be. Instead, Paul’s letters were
addressed to communities gathered to re-present Christ in the world. They were intended
to be read aloud and to transform those who listened. Paul understood that when Jesus
died on the cross and then rose from the dead, a death knell for power of Sin was
sounded. On the cross, the power of Sin was defeated, even as the battle against it in the
present liminal time continues to rage. New Testament scholar Alexandra Brown
suggests that when Paul writes about the cross, which gets proclaimed through the
reading of his letters to the gathered Christians, he moves his audience from old age
knowing to new creation knowing.\textsuperscript{50} This happens because when Paul preaches about the
cross, it happens again in the present. The power of Sin is broken on the cross, again and
again as the cross is powerfully preached and made present in the ears of the hearers. The
language of the cross exposes the situation for what it is and frees those who are
oppressed by it. How this happens for Paul can give us insight into how we as sisters- and
brothers-in-arms can make it happen for the girls in our communities today. Brown
writes:

One way to talk about the effects of Paul’s Word of the Cross is to use his
own language, the time-honored language of apocalyptic that is sounded
whenever despair of the present order meets the hope of a new beginning.

\textsuperscript{49} Warren, 13.
\textsuperscript{50} Alexandra Brown, *Cross and Human Transformation: Paul’s Apocalyptic Word in 1 Corinthians*
In these times, apocalyptic language may work not only to predict destruction but to elicit hope, to create new forms, to inspire new vision. In these times, apocalyptic language not only says something, but does something in the saying. It does not merely describe a state of affairs, it produces hope.\(^{51}\) Like the prophetic imagination that Brueggemann describes, Paul’s writings both critique and energize. They show the world for what it is, revealing the powers of Sin and Death and revealing the power of God to conquer them.\(^ {52}\) They inspire hope by revealing, too, that the new creation is partially here and that those who are in Christ are already in the new creation, able to see and act from a place of freedom and with the power of Grace. Adolescent girls are gifted with a critical eye and with passion.\(^ {53}\) Girls are uniquely positioned to join in naming the world in a way that does what Paul’s naming of the world does: describe reality as it is and produce hope.

Nelle Morton asserts that hearing someone to speech brings forth a new creation.\(^ {54}\) Girls sharing their stories and adults welcoming them are new creation acts that change perspectives – both of those telling the stories and of those hearing them. Christ invades the old age creating a new present time where the new creation is

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 15.

\(^{52}\) Christian education scholar Richard Osmer also uses Paul as a resource for Christian education in the church, and he looks to J. Louis Martyn’s explanation of Paul’s bifocal vision as a helpful way to describe what Paul hopes his hearers will understand from his ministry and letters. However, Osmer argues that the most useful take away from what he calls Paul’s teaching ministry is discernment. “At the heart of Paul’s understanding of discernment is learning how to live and think eschatologically, discerning the circumstances of everyday life in the light of God’s promised future for creation” (44). Osmer fails to understand the nature of Pauline apocalyptic. For Paul it is not about thinking, it is about seeing the world for what it is. This happens through the revelation of Christ, which happens not through thinking but through the Christ event being made present resulting in believers seeing themselves as part of a new body. To know the world for what it is, to know from the new creation, is the work of Christ, aided by the power of Paul’s words and the mystery of baptism. Richard Robert Osmer, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), especially chapter 2.


\(^{54}\) Morton, 128.
undeniably on its way. So, too, does our current way of knowing need to be invaded. Old ways of knowing need to be broken apart, revealed as insufficient and even misleading, and replaced by new ways of knowing. This can be both painful and disorienting, as it is a break with the old and the beginning of something new. It is also not neutral, as it is part of the struggle between Grace and Sin. This perspective shift will inevitably be difficult. There are also several layers to this shift. Girls need a shift, their sister-in-arms need a shift, and then the congregation at large needs a shift. For Paul, this shift happens through an encounter with Christ, as he describes in Galatians 1:15-16. Just as baptism is something that happens to a person, so too does the revelation of Christ and the new perspective that comes with it. One cannot make it happen for oneself, though one actively participates in it through and with community. At the same time, because Christ has invaded this present time, this revelation is available to everyone. It is the job of the Christian community to offer opportunities for this shift to take place. When the church does not facilitate and encounter with Christ, the church is not functioning with the freedom in which it was formed.

Kenda Creasy Dean describes the kind of perspective shift that can happen through mission trips as being “decentering encounters with ‘otherness’ – the human other and the Divine Other” that allows us to “momentarily view ourselves and others from a new vantage point as we watch God work.”55 When adults listen deeply and openly to the stories of adolescent girls, this is what can happen for them. Adolescent girls are “others” for adults in the church. Decentering encounters with girls, facilitated

55 Dean, Almost Christian, 159.
by their sisters-in-arms, can shift the perspective of those who encounter the girls. Their stories, their full selves and the pictures they paint of their lives, are necessary for the adults in the church to see in a new way. In some way, adolescent girls are a mission field for the church. They are the ones who have been left out of the church, silenced by the church, objectified, blamed, and absent from power and decision-making in the church. They have been objectified and exploited outside of the church as well. Part of the strength of welcoming girls’ stories into the church is that those in the church who do have power and do make decisions will be changed by their presence. We need not embark on trips outside of our congregations to experience the kind of decentering encounter that can shift perspective.

Dori Baker agrees that something new happens when hearing to speech occurs in her work with adolescent girls. Baker noticed that the transformation that happens is political; turning to Sharon D. Welch, Barker saw that a community of resistance was formed which “enables and sustains transcendence of multiple oppressions that cripple human life.”56 What these women scholars and allies of girls and women fail to realize is that this practice of hearing other women and girls to speech actually does not bring forth the new creation. Instead, hearing to speech is a way to live into the new creation for which we wait but in which we also participate through our baptism into Christ’s resurrection. When girls are helped to interpret their lives through Paul’s theological lens, they can see that their lives are in the new creation and not the old age. Because these girls have been baptized into Christ, this lens will feel like the right one through which to

56 Baker, Girlfriend Theology, 31.
interpret their experiences and the world in which they live. Being heard to speech and encouraged to see in a new way changes the way girls know themselves and understand their lives. Transformation happens because there is a dramatic and irreversible perspectival shift.

Paul carefully holds in tension that the old age is gone and something new has happened while the universe and all of us in it still wait for the new creation to be birthed. Living in the liminality of the new creation means seeing from the perspective of the new creation now, as it has broken into the present. When the experiences of girls are found, shared, and interpreted according to the new creation it is a practice of the new creation. Therefore what is created in that community of women and girls hearing one another to speech is the apocalyptic community about which J. Louis Martyn writes: the corporately addressable, free community that is part of the new creation for which the universe is waiting. In that community, new ways of acting and being in the world are expected and possible.

In chapter two, I shared Dori Baker’s statement that especially white, middle class girls often lose their voices as their progress through adolescence. Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown’s research was foundational for Baker’s seeking a theological response to this problem which they identify. Baker also noted that Black girls are often formed in their homes to develop a voice of resistance in ways that White girls are not. In a follow up to the research conducted by Gilligan and Mikel in the work to which Baker

57 Ibid., 13.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 14.
turned, Mikel then researched girls who raise their voices in active resistance against a culture that would prefer girls be silent. She notes that,

“In a dominant culture that has such difficulty with girls’ straightforwardness, the question of creative resistance to stereotypes and various forms of oppression becomes central to girls’, and ultimately women’s, psychological health. Encouraging girls’ strong feelings and taking seriously their social critique invite them to participate in the social and political world around them, a radical act with potentially transformative consequences.”

When girls are encouraged to develop a public voice, they participate in the world outside of themselves, which changes the world. Girls cannot do this on their own; they need a community to help them, and it needs to be a community that is invested in cultivating its own public voice, one that includes the voices of all its members. Paul tells the Romans to participate communally in the world in a way that is consistent with who they are as baptized believers who have died to Sin and are alive in Christ. What he tells them to do is public and active, being enlisted in God’s direct challenge to and defeat of Sin. As girls share their experiences and use their voices and bodies alongside other Christians’ against this dominant culture, they are doing what Paul asks of the believers in Rome. They are living as those who are alive in Christ. They are living in the new creation for which they wait, which is possible because Christ has been resurrected and they have been incorporated into him. The result of this kind of living has definite transformative consequences.

Paul writes that believers can align themselves with Sin or with God now that they are free from being enslaved to Sin. Speaking their lives from the silence that the

culture in the United States inflicts on them is one act of resistance on the part of adolescent girls. The church participates in this resistance when it actively asks for, encourages, and support girls in doing so.

Welcoming the stories of adolescent girls is one of the steps toward creating a church that operates from new creation perspective instead of from old age knowing. Sisters-in-arms create a primary safe space for girls to paint the picture of their lives and teach adults who are their allies how to see the stories without assumption or prejudice. With sisters-in-arms standing alongside the girls functioning as allies against the forces which threaten the girls’ humanity, these stories can help the church become a place to appear, not just for adolescent girls but for all members of the Body of Christ. This kind of church knows itself, the time in which we live, its members, and the whole world from new creation perspective. Being heard to speech, something new is created. Community is formed, girls are released from captivity to the ways Sin oppresses them, and adults are graced with decentering encounters that help re-center them in God. However, there is more to seeing and knowing from new creation perspective than hearing stories. To have this new creation epistemology, stories and their reception (or rejection) by the community must be intentionally interpreted in light of Paul’s worldview.

The quotation at the beginning of this chapter reads, “Let me paint a picture for you then I’ll have to teach you to see it.” Thus far, I have been sharing the importance of girls painting the picture of their lives and teaching their allies, first sisters-in-arms and then the rest of the church, to see it the way the girls do, without the assumptions and judgments with which most adults come to teenagers. The intentional interpretation of
these stories from Paul’s apocalyptic perspective involves adults painting a picture for teenagers and teaching them to see their stories, their paintings, within it.

Like others who look to critical pedagogy as a foundation, I begin with the lives of girls and the assumption that those who tell those stories are struggling under societal and ecclesial oppression. I assume that it is not only the girls who stand in need of liberation, but so also do those who participate in their oppression. I also begin with the firm belief that these girls and the stories of their lives are gifts for the church that the church is incomplete without these gifts. An additional assumption is that the worldview that Paul presents, expressed in this project through Romans 6-8, has something important to offer to the church and to the girls who are a part of it. Paul’s perspective can help girls interpret their lives in light of this liminal time when the Old Age is over but the struggle between the new creation and the old age is still active as we wait for the new creation to fully emerge. Not only does there need to be a perspective shift in those who hear the girls’ stories, the girls themselves need a perceptual shift as well.

Churches, including adults and youth, need to hear and interpret Paul’s words in a new way, listening to the way his language presents a different reality. Kenda Creasy Dean understands teaching the Christian tradition to young people to be an act of translation akin the translation of Scripture into the languages people speak as an act of mission.61 She writes that “Translation requires communities that embody the tradition in three-dimensional form, and adults who can connect these traditions to daily life...”62 Sisters-in-arms need to listen to Paul’s words and let them transform the way they see the

---

62 Ibid., 117.
world. The letters that Paul writes cannot be a performative speech act unless they are performed today.

We adults who intend to be allies to our teenage girls need to hear Paul’s words, identifying the anti-God powers and promising their defeat in the time that is to come. We adults need to hear Paul’s words telling us how we can act differently now because we are in Christ now. Just as we need to hear girls to speech, we need Paul to talk us to action, just as he did for the first hearers of his letters. Paul’s letters were meant to be read aloud, not in a monotonous reverent tone, but as passionate discourse that not only said something but did something. We need to listen to the words of Paul, read aloud, not only in our sanctuaries during worship, but in a space where we are free to hear their power and feel it change us. One of the benefits of looking so closely at Romans is that it offers us a letter from Paul that is not responding as specifically to the contextual experiences of the hearers as his other letters since he had not founded the Roman church nor visited the Roman Christians in person. Paul trusted that his words would convey something in his absence, just as they can for us in the 21st century.

Thomas Groome with his *Shared Christian Praxis* offers a pedagogy based in critical pedagogy and shaped by interaction with Scripture and the vision of the Kingdom of God expressed through Scripture. Like others who rest on critical pedagogy, Groome begins with the lived experiences of the learners. According to Groome, the point of religious education is that it “encourages people to interpret their lives, relate to others, and engage in the world in ways that faithfully reflect what they perceive as ultimate in
life, that is, from a faith perspective.”63 The church, however, being that it is not immune from the power of Sin, is not always the best community to encourage people to “interpret their lives, relate to others, and engage in the world” in ways that reflect a faith that is consistent with the hope of God for the freedom of God’s people. Two key movements in his pedagogical strategy are to make the Christian story and vision accessible and to dialectically appropriate that story and vision to participants’ stories and visions.64 The way the Christian story and vision are told, the interpretation offered, will affect how the story and vision are appropriated and in what way they affect the participants’ understanding of their own lives. Groome’s method is to begin with participants’ stories, facilitating them in reflecting on those stories, and then interacting with the Christian story and vision for a lived response, which is then reflected on as the cycle of learning continues.

This method is extremely helpful as a way to connect participants’ stories to the story and vision of God. Groome’s commitment to a faithful lived response to how one’s story connects with God’s, and his insistence on careful reflection are important pieces to how a church can work to fully include girls into their communities. However, offering God’s story and vision is not a neutral activity. Paul has been presented to and interpreted in such damaging ways that, especially for young women, how this story and vision are presented needs to be carefully examined and changed. For example, almost any Christian reader of Romans 7 will find it difficult to avoid resorting to interpretations that

64 Ibid., chapters 8 and 9.
involve the inward struggle to act in the right way and the nearly hopeless struggle between the body and the mind.

The church has not been a purveyor of Paul’s worldview and therefore has not characterized the struggles and sufferings in light of the time into its ministry with young women. Girls have not had the opportunity to see the world for what it is; they have not been taught how to see in this new way. Churches are caught in interpreting Romans 7 as an internal struggle of a divided self, or as the struggle of someone before becoming a believer. Girls do not need help internalizing sin, they need help interpreting their lives through the apocalyptic lens so clearly used by Paul. Therefore, Groome is right that the goal of Christian education is to encourage “people to interpret their lives, relate to others, and engage in the world in ways that faithfully reflect what they perceive as ultimate in life, that is, from a faith perspective;”65 and this interpretation must itself be guided by the Spirit that moves Paul to see reality in the way that he does. The Christian story and vision itself needs to be shared with Paul’s worldview, which is apocalyptic, guiding the interpretation so that the Spirit can change girls’ way of knowing the world as the story and vision is shared.

*Modeling Perspective*

Once sisters-in-arms have experienced their own perspective shift, they are available to help girls see from this new creation perspective. Sisters-in-arms, having a new perspective themselves, can help girls see in a new way through talking about the

---

65 Ibid., 11.
world as it is and guiding girls in interpreting their own stories in light of this new perspective. As a starting place, sisters-in-arms can share their own stories from this new creation perspective with girls. This is something Paul does with his letters many times; he shares about his own life. Girls may find it easier to see from a new place by hearing someone else’s story as told from the new creation perspective before trying to interpret their own stories. Sisters-in-arms can model new creation perspective as they tell the story and interpret it for the girl with whom they are allies.

Movies, memes, current events, song lyrics, advertisements, and television shows are also excellent ways to practice interpreting the world based on Paul’s worldview. The goal, however, is to help girls interpret their own lives in this way. When girls can see from a new creation perspective as they are living their daily lives and interpret their experience with this lens, they will be free to flourish as full humans in this challenging time. Knowing the world from the new creation perspective is not easy. The guilt, remorse, and low self-esteem that comes from interpreting the world from the old age perspective run deeply. Helping girls to see the powers at work in the world will be liberating but can also be extremely disorienting. This perspective shift, a conversion of how one sees and knows the world, happens because of the Spirit through other members of the Body of Christ, just as it happened in the first century.

Interpretation of lived stories from the new creation perspective is not something that happens on one’s own. Sisters-in-arms need a community of co-interpreters just like girls do. They need the support of others, sisters- and brothers-in-arms who are members of the Body of Christ, to help them hear Paul’s words in new ways and allow his worldview to transform how they interpret their own stories. Girls, too, can be co-
interpreters of each other’s stories and of sisters’-in-arms stories. Sisters-in-arms need the critical eye of girls as they seek to continue to see from new creation perspective. The power of Sin is so strong that it will attempt to maintain old age knowing, it is part of the struggle of the present time to see Sin at all. Part of Sin’s strategy in this time is to try to keep people from seeing it for what it is. A community of co-interpreters can help focus each other’s eyes to seeing reality. Like Paul, they can tell each other that they are free to act different. They, too, can tell each other not to be enlisted into the force that is amassing on the side of Sin.

Question Posing

As sisters-in-arms help girls to interpret their stories in light of Paul’s worldview and effect perspective shift, intentional ways of asking questions of girls’ stories will help guide girls to that interpretation and new perspective. Dori Baker constructs a practice of theological interpretation of girls’ stories in her book, Doing Girlfriend Theology. She describes this method of religious educations beginning with the voices and life stories of adolescent girls, engaging those stories with the stories of adult women, and translating the “resources of women’s theological thought into the context of female adolescence.” My method and Baker’s are clearly very similar in these areas. I see Paul’s expressed worldview as an unknown and unused resource for women’s theological thought. Baker relies heavily on the resources of feminist, womanist, and mujerista theologies for women who are mentors to adolescent girls participating in the Girlfriend Theology method.

---

66 Baker, Girlfriend Theology, 17.
Similarly, I rely on women whose perspectives have shifted to help guide girls to their own perspective shift as they seek to interpret their stories and their lives in real time. I trust the Body of Christ to already include women like this, just as it includes Paul and his powerful letters. Baker also suggests that “unorthodox” images of God that are particularly freeing for girls in connecting their stories to God’s story from Scripture come largely from within both girls and women. For Baker, these grassroots images of God are key to helping reinterpret an oppressive religious tradition into something with which girls can connect in life giving ways.67 This new interpretation of Paul and the perspective shift that comes with seeing the world as he sees it does not come from within a person in the same way that these different images of God do. Part of what Paul teaches us is that we are in Christ.

The following questions will help guide girls in interpreting their lives from new creation perspective. These may be helpful when sisters-in-arms are interpreting their own stories as well:

- What is going on in this story?
- Where is the power of Sin in this story?
- Where is the grace of God in this story?
- Where is God in this story? Is there an invitation from God to you in this story?
- In what way is Sin trying to use you for its purpose in this story?
- In what way is the Spirit empowering you to fight against Sin in this story?

---

67 Ibid., especially chapter 8.
In what way can your community of sisters-in-arms come to your defense against Sin in this story?

What is the promise of God present in this story? Where is the hope that we can count on?

What will help you maintain your hope in that promise being fulfilled?

How can we (your sisters-in-arms, peers, church) help you keep your hope and fight against Sin?

None of these question is about “good” or “bad”, “sinful” or “grace-filled” the actors in the story are acting. The emphasis from a New Creation perspective is that the human agent is free in Christ to side with God against Sin and Death. That freedom is not a moral choice, but rather a reality created by the grace of God enacted in Christ’s work on the cross. Seeing themselves as free in Christ and empowering them to live into that freedom is what happens when a girl knows the world from the new creation perspective and is supported by her sisters-in-arms. An important part of shifting perspective is to be asked and to answer these kinds of questions. These questions help girls to use their developing critical thinking skills as they examine their lives, and shows them that these skills are welcomed by the church and important for their growth and transformation in faith as well.

Naming the Powers
Paul is an example\(^{68}\) sisters-in-arms can follow in how to help others see in a new way; this is what he does with his letters. Having experienced a transformative revelation of Christ in his life that shifted his perspective,\(^{69}\) he sets out to help that same transformation occur for others. In addition to whatever preaching, teaching, and baptizing Paul practiced in his visits to newly forming Christian communities, his letters remind hearers of the Gospel and make the Christ event present again through his written word read out loud (proclaimed) to the communities in his absence. His letters change the perspective of those who hear them; they see in a new way. Romans is no different in that the gospel of Christ is proclaimed in it and the revelation of Christ’s breaking into the world is made present in the words Paul pens.

Sisters-in-arms can employ Paul’s pedagogy by calling the power of Sin, and its partners, as the powers they are. Paul tells people again and again what time it is and what the powers are. He describes their world to them explicitly. He also tells them who they are, reminding them that they are in Christ and empowered in their actions because they live Christ’s life now. He uses imperative statements to call his readers and hearers to action in the world on the side of God. Sometimes girls will need their sisters-in-arms to describe what the world looks like through these apocalyptic lenses. Girls might need the help of their peers and their sisters-in-arms to explore together where Sin is located in

\(^{68}\) In several of Paul’s letters, he tells his hearers to become like him or imitate him so he clearly sees himself as paradigmatic. In what way he sees himself as paradigmatic is up for debate. Elizabeth Castelli sees that he sets himself up as an unreachable goal that is especially damaging for women (Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation, eds. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991). Susan Eastman argues instead that his call to imitation is about shared existence of those who are together in the Body of Christ that is about transforming the status quo as Christ has transformed Paul himself (Recovering Paul’s Mother Tongue, chapter 2).

\(^{69}\) Paul shares this transformative experience in 1 Corinthians 15 and in Galatians 1, though a more descriptive account occurs in Acts 9 and Acts 26 neither of which were written by him.
their stories, especially because Sin can even work in these sisters-in-arms. A community of girls and women searching together and shifting perspectives together will help expose Sin wherever it is and to work on the side of God against Sin when it is found.

Through this process and with the commitment on the part of adults who ally themselves with these girls, they will see how powerful God is to defeat these powers of Sin and Death, along with their help as those who are baptized into Christ for a different and liberated life now and a resurrected life to come.

**A Call to Arms**

Based on my interviews with these 24 girls, and my experience in professional youth ministry over the past 16 years, I have noticed that there are a few areas which call for sustained, intentional attention to help girls to live into the freedom they have as those who are baptized into Christ and live in the promise of the coming new creation. These are the areas of concern voiced most clearly and passionately during the course of these interviews. These are the areas where sisters-in-arms are most needed. These are the areas in which the power of Sin is most clearly at work and needs to be destroyed.

Certainly there are other areas of concerns for these girls and for other girls who live in different contexts and have different relationships with their communities of faith. Here I highlight those that were mentioned most often, had clearly been thought deeply about, and are not addressed in helpful ways (or not addressed at all) by their churches. I call this a call to arms because in Paul’s language this struggle between Sin and God, or between God and anti-God powers (in Martyn’s language) is a violent one. As expressed above in chapter 3, Paul tells the Romans not to let members of their community, their
body, become weapons of Sin, but to become weapons for God. We ourselves, members of the Body of Christ, are the weapons God will use to defeat the powers of Sin and Death that threaten these girls’ humanity. What we are armed with as allies, as sisters- and brothers-in-arms, is the power of Grace, the Spirit of Christ, the knowledge of where Sin is active, and the freedom to act righteously in a time where Sin is still powerfully deceiving and confining people who do not yet have the bifocal vision those who are in Christ do. I offer the following as an example of reinterpreted stories from the girls’ lives. I am using the body as the broad category for this example because of how often it came up during my interviews and the depth of emotion that was expressed when conversations around bodies took place.

The Body

Bodies, and specifically the adolescent female body, were clearly something of great interest and concern to the girls with whom I spoke. Everyone, and so every adolescent girl, has a body. Most of them were conflicted over whether this was a good or bad thing. Recall these stories: For Elizabeth, body meant sexual desire that her faith prevented her from satisfying with another person. So she masturbates, which helps her to satiate some of that desire, but still involves shame. Raven and Monica are confused about whether God finds their bodies problematic for the ethical behavior of men, or whether it is only men who consider them so. Raven is also aware of the different expectations of how a body should be clothed depending on its shape or size. Skinny girls can wear something she cannot wear because her curves are what the real problem is. Tay and Sadie are attuned to their body and jeans size. Tay is consciously telling herself that
her value is not in the size of her jeans, Sadie can see how peer questions about her jean size has led her to think of herself as fat. Tay, Sam, Raven, Genevieve, Britt Nicole, and Monica are all very aware of how clothing says something to the other members of their communities of faith.

When girls are taught, whether explicitly or implicitly that their bodies are sinful or cause sin in others by being sexually tempting, they will inevitably feel badly about themselves. The truth is that in Paul’s worldview, Sin is clearly at work in churches in the way that they talk about girls’ bodies and relate to girls. This is why maintaining eschatological reservation is so important. If the church is where the new creation is already fully realized, then the church becomes beyond critique. Maintaining eschatological reservation means that Sin is still at work everywhere, even in churches, and it is imperative on believers to fight against Sin together, even when it manifests in the Christian community. Paul does not devalue the body, nor does he see the human body as the source of unrighteous action. Sin is always to blame. Focusing on the body, on any body, distracts from rooting out Sin. The culture of the United States has often focused on the female body as a target of marketing and of control. Not only is this part of the sexism that is part of the make-up of this country, it is also part of the heterosexism and heteronormativity of it. Girls’ value is often equated with how they look, a message that is well-received by the time a girl reaches adolescence. Christian girls are also given two opposing messages – they are to be attractive, and yet being too attractive means they are causing someone else to sin.

The girls I interviewed are not only female bodies and differently-sized bodies, they are also marked by their race and culture. Immigrant girls and first generation
American girls struggle with feeling as if they do not fit with their families or with the culture in this country. They see differences in expectations placed on them by their communities and families who carry with them a culture different from the one in which they are immersed. Girls who are bilingual are marked by accents. Race is a powerful social construct that affects the way these girls interact with the world around them. Girls like Sam struggle to know what their race means to themselves and others when they are parented by those of another race. Girls like Sadie are aware of their white privilege but unsure about what to do about it beyond feeling guilty. Girls like Raven and Monica give voice to the explicit ways racism against Black bodies shows up in their lives and in the ways their neighborhoods and neighbors are treated by individuals and society as a whole.

In revisiting two stories from this project, I offer an example of how interpreting them according to Paul’s apocalyptic worldview can become essential in helping girls see their power and freedom in the situations expressed and offer a response that depends on communal involvement. In the first of these stories, we hear about the body as connected to race, in the second we hear about the body as sexualized.

In chapter two, I shared the following story from Monica:

But the only time, like, something like that ever happened was I think when I took a train for the first time by myself...only, like, 2 stops and like, I sat next to this guy and he called me “the n-word.” And I was like, I was so taken back, like I didn't know. I think I told Mommy, I don't, it just didn't occur to me how like crazy it was. I just I was so confused because, like, I had never heard,' cause I don't use the word. I don't, I don't hear people, well, at the time I didn't really hear people saying it cause, like, I [had gone to] a really like a close-knit Catholic school going into public school, so that in itself was just like a...shock. And then for something like that to happen. And the people just stared at me for like 2 stops. And I was just like, "Did he expect me to, did they expect me to, like, say something? Should I have said something? Or what?"
Interpreting Monica’s story from a new creation way of knowing begins with understanding that in this present time, suffering is expected. The fact that there is hatred, racism, and a man verbally attacking a young woman on the subway is proof that at this time, Sin is still an active power. Monica mentioning that her close-knit Catholic school helped to protect her from this kind of hatred shows that even in this time in which we wait for the new creation, a Christian community can give us the freedom to live in a hate-free space. That this was a shock to Monica shows some righteousness breaking in, that the old age is not the only way to define the time. No one came to help Monica, no one spoke against the man for using the hate speech he did, in fact, Monica felt like the people on the train expected her to do something. She questions herself and her own reaction. Monica felt alone and as a victim with no power. Not only because of the power of the word the man on the train used, but because she was not armed to fight against that power, that word, that man. The man who called her “the n-word” and other people on the subway became partners with Sin, exposing itself as racism. Interpreting the story like this helps Monica see that she was not at fault for not responding. Had her community (her Catholic school) provided her not only with a safe space but also with weapons to fight against Sin in that kind of situation, she may have been able to respond differently, but this is not her fault. In fact, Sin is at work in her community, attempting to prevent them from gaining the tools to dismantle Sin. Grace is present in her knowing that this was not acceptable. Grace is present in her recognizing her own shock. Grace is present in that she was able to share this experience with a trusted ally, her mother. The call to arms for her peers and adult sisters-in-arms is to also join with Grace in disarming Sin. If
the interview where Monica told this story was instead a small group of girls gathered for
the purpose of sharing stories in order to interpret them according to Paul’s worldview
and discern action in response on the side of God, after interpretation would come a call
to righteous action. Sin is using the people on that train as instruments in its war against
Grace. These people need to be freed from Sin, from sinning by participating in racism
and in complicity. Monica needs support as she confronts these situations, attempts to
make sense of them, and finds empowerment instead of paralyzing shock and self-doubt.
A group of sisters-in-arms who have heard Monica to speak this story and helped her
interpret it can help Monica share with the rest of the church and discern together action
the community can take in response to her experience. Her community misses the
opportunity to become instruments of God against Sin if they miss hearing her story and
helping discern a course of action that responds to it. Just as Paul tells the hearers of his
letters to be instruments of righteousness to live new lives dead to death, so, too, can
sisters-in-arms and a community of those open to hearing Monica’s story call Monica and
each other to act in righteousness knowing that Sin is not in control of this world. Monica
does not need to let self-doubt and shock be the way this story ends. Instead, this story
leads to action on the part of Monica and her community, knowing that Sin and how it
expresses itself in racism against a teenage girl on the train is losing to Grace and they are
a part of making that happen.

Genevieve’s telling of the story about how she learned from her brothers and
other boys in her youth group that she should be sure cover up her body well if she is
going to attract the right kind of Christian man is a clear example of the confusion about
the need to attract a guy and yet the caution to not attract the wrong kind of guy, all based on how she chooses to present her body. She shared this story:

You see these girls walking around in the tank tops but they cut all the way down to like one inch [above the waist on the side]...And they wear sports bras. So you see the sports bra or the normal bra and then you have all this skin down here and it's just like you're every day clothes! Like, I never really thought about it too much, but then last year [on the work mission trip], um, I had this really in depth talk with my brothers and the other guys in the youth group and they were like, "It's so difficult! Because we're trying to be good Christian guys but these girls..." Even just like seeing the bra is just like enough to be like, "that's temptation!" So I have been very aware of the fact that it is tough for guys who want to be good because I figure the kind of guy that I want to end up is going to be like my brothers or like these other boys and they say they don't like it when the girls tempt them so I'm like, “Alright, well.”... it's just kind of, it makes it easier for me to know that if I do that I'm going to attract that kind of guy that I don't want so I'm not going to do that. I'm going to dress the way I want to dress and it's, I think it's not too tempting.

On the one hand, she clearly wants to attract a Christian guy, though she expects this to happen in some way controlled by God. On the other hand, in order to attract the right kind of guy, she knows she cannot dress like the girls who show their bras at work camp because these boys have told her that it prevents them from being good Christian guys.

Paul would support Genevieve’s feeling of responsibility toward her fellow brothers in Christ. However, the fact that they and she believe that it is the female body that causes sinning is not something with which he would agree. It is not Genevieve’s body that is the cause of sinning, rather it is Sin itself. In this example, Sin is working to convince boys that girls’ bodies are the problem. Sin is working to equate girls with how their bodies are received by others. Sin is working to convince Genevieve that her body causes sinfulness in others and that she is responsible for making that not happen. She ended her story with the statement, “I'm going to dress the way I want to dress and it's, I think it's not too tempting.” On the one hand, the boys in her youth group have given her
permission to not dress the way that she sees other girls dressing. Because they have seen girls’ bodies as tempting, she has permission to dress more conservatively and trust that she will still be able to attract the right kind of guy. This can certainly be seen as positive: she is given an alternative to the media’s expectation that girls should dress their bodies in ways that capitalize on sexual appeal. Because of this conversation, she knows that displaying her body in a way that makes her uncomfortable is not the way to attract the kind of mean she knows she wants to attract. On the other hand, she is not convinced that it is possible to dress in a way that does not cause guys to sin. Her statement, “I think it’s not too tempting” shows that she is uncertain, but she imagines it is still at least somewhat tempting.

I disagree with the messages, both explicit and implicit, that these girls receive from their churches or from members of their churches about their bodies and about what it means to be a girl, especially when sin is taught as somehow inherent to their selves as girls. Dawn, Beverly, Raven, and Monica were critical of those messages they received. Genevieve and Britt Nicole were accepting of them. Sam was aware of her own assumptions about girls who dressed in a way she thinks exposes too much skin, but is also aware that these assumptions are not fair. Many of the girls were critical of the messages they received about beauty and femininity from the culture in the United States. Genevieve and Britt Nicole believed that the messages they received from church telling them to not tempt boys was consistent with critiquing the culture that says they should dress in ways that do just that. They were not aware of how the church also needs to be critiqued in the messages it is sending them about their bodies. The messages girls receive about their bodies and how they are related to sin are reflective of an “old age
knowing.” Therefore, a call to arms against the power of Sin and how it is effecting girls’ perception and acceptance (or rejection) of their bodies is needed as a way to seek toward new creation epistemology instead.

New creation epistemology sees the power of Sin at work in how the boys see themselves in relation to girls, in girls seeking to get guys’ attention by dressing in revealing ways, in girls thinking their bodies are a tool for attracting guys, in girls who are unable to choose their clothing without it being perceived as a message to guys, and in Genevieve’s uncertainty that her body can be anything other than tempting. New creation epistemology calls girls, boys, and their communities to reveal the power of Sin where it is found and work against it. The entire church needs education about how girls bodies are unconsciously and consciously perceived by all members of the community. The entire church is called to arms against the exploitation of girls’ bodies, the interpretations of their bodies as sinful, and the way that boys perceive themselves as captive to their own sexual interest. New creation epistemology includes the knowledge that the teenage girl body is good, that it is a place where Grace can be revealed, that the body is a source of strength and action against Sin, and that the desire for intimacy is not in and of itself sinful.

Through the sharing and interpretation of this story with sisters-in-arms and then with the whole church, all are invited to discern righteous action against how girls and boys relate to and understand the teenage girl body. Girls are free from seeing their bodies as inherently sinful and free to act in ways that free others from that damaging assumption. Additionally, girls can learn that their power is not in how sexually appealing their bodies are; and boys can learn that their power is not in whether or not
they succumb to sexual temptation. Power for boys and girls lies in the fact that they are located in Christ who conquers Sin. Their bodies are a tangible, positive, and powerful way to experience their being-in-relationship. That they are in relationship with others in Christ actively working against Sin will help them discern healthy ways to relate to themselves and others through and with their bodies.

**Conclusion: Hope that is seen is not hope.**

Paul ends his eighth chapter in the letter to the Romans writing about hope and confidence. We wait with patience for what we know is coming but is not yet here. We trust that the Spirit intercedes on our behalf because we are in Christ. And we know, without a doubt, that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, no matter how strong the power of Sin appears. Brown writes that, “for Paul, the cross is the pivot between the ages.”

Having dealt with Sin so completely in this chapter of Romans, Paul does not discuss it as a power any further in the letter. Paul knows that although the new creation is yet to fully be born, the fact that it is inevitably on its way, as the labor pains of creation clearly indicate, our hope rests firm in its impending arrival. Our adoption into Christ’s own family and participation in his own action of death and resurrection prove that we who are in Christ can operate now in the power of Grace and work along with Grace against the aspects of Sin that remain in this liminal time and space.

Sisters-in-arms and brothers and sisters in Christ of adolescent girls benefit from new creation epistemology when they are changed by the stories that adolescent girls

---

bring with them when they are heard to speech. When Sadie describes her subway ride when she found her fear of being attacked by a man confronted with the powerful presence of the Spirit, she is describing an encounter with the Holy. She went from paralyzing fear to comfort, even joy, and then to movement off the train and into her school day. She felt the presence of God and knew, for the first time, that God was real and really involved in her life. This story that she shared with me has enriched my life. I felt her fear when the boy from her youth group tried to force physically intimacy with her. I felt anger that she judged her fear as unnecessary since she wasn’t “actually raped.” I felt relief that she was able to get away from him. I felt peace when she curled up in her father’s lap and told her mother what had happened. I again felt her fear as she realized she was on a stopped train car with only one other person, a man. And when she told me about the seats filling with smiling faces and a presence settling on her fearful heart, I, too, experienced the presence of God.

Sadie’s story both said something to me and did something in me as I experienced the power of God to conquer Sin. Sadie offered critique and energy, pain and hope. She is a prophet and an instrument of God. She described the current contested time where a boy invades her space and tries to force intimacy, creating deep fear in her about men and boys. She experienced the Spirit filling the subway seats, giving her confidence and hope, and releasing her from paralyzing fear so that she could get up from her seat and enter her school day. Sadie’s church community and the support of her parents in a scary and difficult time formed her into being receptive to the Spirit when it came, transforming a moment of deep fear into a moment of holiness.
As we wait for the new creation, stories like Sadie’s show us that it is both on its way and already here. As adults who are called to minister alongside adolescent girls in this present time it is in hope that we wait for that new creation to fully be here, when Sadie is not attacked by a friend and when she does not have good reason to fear for her safety on the subway – when Sin is not at all present. We wait patiently, not because the struggles of the present time are not real or should not be confronted, but because we know with absolute certainty that these struggles will end. Sin does not and cannot win. We wait patiently knowing we are called and empowered to act in righteousness against Sin now. We wait patiently because of our certainty in the future that is resurrection and the complete and utter defeat of Sin. We wait patiently because girls like Sadie, and the other 23 girls with whom I spoke live lives that create stories that can do for the church community now what Paul’s letters did then – show us the way the world is and facilitate the Spirit in producing hope through this new way of perceiving the world.


Mercer, Joyce. Girltalk/Godtalk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls – and Their


Peck, Dawn H. "101 Ways to Fail School." Lecture at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, November 1988.


Biography

Emily A. Peck-McClain was born in Morgantown, West Virginia, on October 28, 1980. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Religion from Washington and Lee University in 2002, and with a Master of Divinity from Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York in 2005. Emily was commissioned as a probationary elder in the New York Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in June of 2005, and ordained an elder in June of 2008.

In seminary, Emily was named both a Union Scholar through Union Theological Seminary and a Ministry Fellow through The Fund for Theological Education (now the Forum for Theological Exploration). While pursuing her doctorate, Emily was awarded the John Wesley Fellowship from A Foundation for Theological Education and the American Dissertation Fellowship from American Association of University Women. She was also a fellow for the New York Education Society for three years. Her article “Agency in Paul and Implications for Adolescent Girls” was published in volume 110, issue 1 (January-February 2015) of Religious Education.

Emily is married to Andrew Peck-McClain, an ordained United Methodist pastor. The couple has two children, Zoë Harriet and Phoebe Nell. They live in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where Emily is the Instructor of Christian Formation, Preaching, and Worship, and Director of Formation at Eastern Mennonite Seminary.