



# Youth identity discovery: A theological journey

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## Abstract

Any discussion on youth identity would have its focus on identity formation during the adolescent years. Adolescence is universally considered a transitional stage of physical and psychological development that commonly occurs during the period of one's puberty from to lawful adulthood. Adolescence is thus usually associated with the teenage years, however its physical, psychological, spiritual or cultural expressions very often begin earlier and could end later. This identity formation has always been closely linked to the developmental theories used in the various disciplines of the social sciences. While it remains important to collaborate with the social sciences as dialogue partners as part of the interdisciplinary nature of practical theology, practical theology has unfortunately become subservient to the social sciences in this regard. The social sciences argue that identity is about formation through various tasks and phases resulting in the individuation of the person. The journey of youth identity, however, is primarily a theological journey seeking answers to existential questions, 'Who am I?', 'Whose am I?' and 'What is my purpose?' In practical theology, adolescence is viewed as a journey where identity should be a discovery and not a formation as youth identity is found in the person of Jesus Christ. This article, through the theory and methodology of James E. Loder, attempts to address the theological significance of already having an identity in Jesus Christ and it argues that the adolescent journey is not a process of forming an identity, but rather a journey of discovering that identity.

**Keywords:** Youth, youth ministry, Loder, identity discovery, adolescents.

## Introduction

When studying youth ministry in theology or as part of a theological degree in a higher education institution, it is necessary to conceptualise one's understanding of adolescence and youth ministry in relation to one's context. When students enroll for a postgraduate study program that has either youth ministry or adolescence as the primary subject, part of the conceptualisation of adolescence will invariably include adolescent identity. During this discourse, students will invariably need to conceptualise adolescence by using theories primarily from developmental psychology as their primary texts. Formal study in youth ministry has unfortunately prioritised developmental psychology above theology when addressing adolescent identity. While it may be necessary to have the social sciences as dialogue partners, it has created a clumsy relationship between theology and the social sciences and has in effect relegated theology to a secondary place in a self-imposed hierarchy. There seems to be an overreliance on the social sciences in youth ministry especially when it informs the development of the identity of youth through the various developmental stages and tasks with the outcome chiefly aimed at adulthood and little reflection on the theological (Ellis, 2015:125).



Youth work, however, is a broad category and can include any type of work and interaction connected to the well-being of young people. Youth work includes but is not limited to governmental agencies, non-governmental agencies, and religious organisations that have a dedicated focus on youth. Christian youth work as a religious organisation and Christian youth ministry<sup>1</sup> is therefore classified under the general category of youth work (Shepherd, 2014:2-8). What makes youth ministry unique and different from other forms of youth work is that it has the message and mission of Jesus Christ as a foundational point of departure (Root & Dean, 2011). Youth ministry must be explicit at this point of departure. Furthermore, youth ministry's primary focus and purpose are to help the young person have an intimate and meaningful relationship with God through Jesus Christ through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. This, however, does not mean that youth ministry should avoid the other areas that constitute youth work, such as youth and human rights, active citizenship, and circumstances that affects their lived realities such chemical substance abuse, violence, unemployment and the likes that are administered through governmental agencies, NGO's, and community forums. These areas would include but not be limited to the socialisation of youth through the auspices of the family and society, the protection of the human rights of youth, and the access to socio-economic resources and the protection of those rights. In a sense, youth ministry would be incomplete if it does not address all of the matters that concern the well-being of youth. What should be a significant and intentional practice is that these areas as highlighted above must be anchored in Christian theology in the person and mission of Jesus Christ (Root & Dean, 2011).

Youth ministry as it currently exists is an age-segregated ministry to adolescents, often even subdivided further into children, youth, and young adults. In the American context, youth is sub-divided into junior and senior high, whereas, in a South African Context there is a general categorization of children, youth, and young adults (Nel, 2000: 8) until the age of 35 (National Youth Policy of South Africa, 2015: 10). These divisions are based on the idea that youths are in different stages of their lives and should, therefore, have age-appropriate ministry based on their particular stage of development. The developmental model, which is based on the various stages of youth development, has become a common approach to youth ministry and 'prioritises the outcomes of progress and spiritual maturity' (Ellis, 2015:120-122). Ellis (2015: 123) further argues that the presence and dominance of the development-based youth ministry model is a direct result of developmental psychology and has as its aim 'Christian adulthood into which they (the youth) are being developed'. While developmental psychology remains an important dialogue partner, it cannot offer theological answers to the existential questions that the youth may have that are prevalent during adolescence. Furthermore, developmental psychology cannot articulate the relation between the identity discovery of youth and a relationship with God through the Holy Spirit (see Ellis, 2015:126).

In this article, it is argued that identity is more a discovery than a formation, especially during adolescence. This discovery is experienced in a dynamic relationship with God through the Holy Spirit who reveals Himself to the youth. It is in this relationship with God that the youth discover their identity in God. The researcher utilised the theory and methodology of James E. Loder in an attempt to build up an apposite an argument. Loder, who spent most of his academic journey in Christian education at Princeton Seminary posits that in order to understand the human spirit and human development can only take place when one understands the relationship between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit (Loder, 1998).

This article will, therefore, raise the need to re-prioritise theology as the primary voice when dealing with adolescent identity by reflecting on James E. Loder's theoretical framework. Furthermore, this article will attempt to raise concerns over the use of language when

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<sup>1</sup> For the rest of the article I will be utilising the term "youth ministry" as the accepted term when referring to Christian youth ministry.



discussing adolescent identity especially in relation to ‘development/formation’ as opposed to ‘discovery’.

## Background

Practical theology has to be interdisciplinary as it reflects on the individual, context and theology and therefore requires multiple sources and disciplines to inform practice (Dames, 2013: 5; Jacober, 2011: 23; Swinton & Mowat, 2011: vi). It is not only an accepted practice for practical theology to be interdisciplinary, but it is also expected. Practical theology has become well versed with the social sciences as dialogue partners and rightfully so. It is widely accepted that practical theology’s point of departure lies in the human experience (Heitink, 1999, 7; Heyns & Pieterse, 1990:1, 19; Smith 2008, 204). When dealing with the human experience, it becomes essential to have dialogue partners in the social sciences – partners like psychology, anthropology and sociology, just to mention a few. Jacober (2011:16), in affirming the relationship between the social sciences and theological disciplines, states, ‘social work let me put flesh on my theological bones’.

The same relationship between the social sciences and theology therefore also applies to youth ministry, which is a sub-discipline of practical theology (Clark, 2008:10; Dean, 2001: 19; Jacober, 2011:16; Nel, 2003b:73; Strong, 2014). Youth ministry must not only attempt to be interdisciplinary, it is interdisciplinary.

Jacober (2011:16) does caution against an overreliance on the social sciences. This is especially true when discussing the identity of the youth. Youth ministry tends to use Erikson and Piaget extensively when addressing the area of youth identity development (Ellis, 2015: 123). Youth ministry, Jacober (2011:16) argues, cannot be a social science as much as the social sciences cannot be theological. She further argues that youth ministry, as part of practical theology, also has to consider the traditional theological disciplines in its pursuit of truth (Jacober, 2011:19). Jacober (2011:17) states that ‘theological convictions often take a back seat to cooperation, leaving theological convictions necessarily shallow’. Strong (2014: 2-3) too argues that the answers for youth ministry lie in theology and not the social sciences. This is especially true when considering the identity of youth. When Santrock (2007:17), a developmental psychologist, states that adolescence is ‘the period of transition between childhood and adulthood that involves biological, cognitive and socio-emotional changes’ he clearly shows a point of view in which there is no room for the spiritual. It is essential to note that the ‘spiritual cannot be *confused* [emphasis added] with the psychosocial’ (Jacober, 2011, 20).

Bixler (2017) in her article ‘Reframing the self(ie)’ highlights the intense reliance of youth ministry on developmental psychology and social constructionism when dealing with adolescent identity development and formation. The thesis of her article is to investigate if it is at all ‘possible for youth ministry to reframe, on the basis of theology as its primary starting point, its existing conception of the adolescent self’ (Bixler, 2017:28). Bixler (2017:26) argues that this overreliance ‘resulted in stage-based developmental assumptions about the self that has, in turn, shaped our theological understanding of adolescent faith formation’.

Furthermore, Bixler (2017:26) contends, this overreliance of youth ministry on the psychosocial theorists resulted in the definition of the adolescent self in terms of the psychosocial instead of the theological. While Bixler (2017:28) explores the reframing of the adolescent self in the theological disciplines and not guided primarily by the social sciences, she does not attempt to discard the psychosocial; instead, she sees the need for them as dialogue partners. Bixler (2017:28) argues as follows:

[W]hile insights from developmental psychology and social constructionism are essential for understanding adolescent identity formation and observing common experiences of faith, they are no substitute for a robust theological understanding of



self. When it defines the adolescent self solely in terms of a psychosocial quest for meaning or identity, youth ministry attempts to solve the psychosocial challenge of identity resolution by applying a solution that is a curious mix of theology and psychology.

Bixler (2017:29-30) uses Loder's view of transformation significantly in her own argument, in terms of the 'reframing and reordering of experience [which then] provides for the ego's transformation into the spiritually attuned self'. Bixler (2017:30) places Loder's argument of the adolescent's need for intimacy created by the separation from primary care givers in the transforming power of God. These transforming moments are a revelation of who one already is in Christ, 'in other words, I don't find myself, my self finds me' (Bixler, 2017:35). Bixler (2017:36-37) further explains from the theoretical perspective of Merton that 'the self is not something we can craft or even discover of our own volition ... the self is received as it stands before God'. This 'self finds me' experience is only realised through the revelation and transformation brought about by God.

Theology has to be central to youth ministry as youth ministers attempt to connect the story of the youth with God's story (Clark, 2001:60). This connection of stories between the human and the divine is what Nel (2000, 11) refers to as God coming to his people. This coming of God is a continuous reality through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in his people. This indwelling of the Holy Spirit in his people is confirmed in many passages of Scripture, for example, Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 3:16; and 2 Timothy 1:14. Understandably, God approaches youth differently than he does adults (Nel, 2000:11); in fact, we might even be so courageous to argue that God approaches youth differently depending on their context, life experiences and gender. Even so, God approaches any person, including the youth, in a way that it is unique to every individual. God approaching youth is clearly seen in the call of the shepherd boy David (1 Samuel 16-17), the little servant girl in the Namaan narrative (2 Kings 5:2-3); the rejected little boy Ishmael (Genesis 21:17), and the unmarried daughters with the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9) are but some instances of God's interaction and approaching of young people.

### **The theory and methodology of James E. Loder**

In clarifying the theological implications for his theoretical framework, Loder (1998:33) declares that the social sciences have their place and serve a specific function in addressing the human spirit. However, he continues stating that 'the theological perspective must transform the human science understandings in ways that strive to preserve the integrity of both sides of the interaction and thereby enhance our understanding of the human spirit generally'. Loder, therefore, does not discount the role of developmental psychologists like Erikson and Piaget, but simply insists that human development lies primarily in the domain of the Holy Spirit. In *The transforming moment*, Loder (1989:vii) writes: 'The first and uppermost concern is to understand the relationship between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit in a way that takes account of the human sciences (particularly psychology in the developmental and psychoanalytic traditions) as well the theology of the Holy Spirit (particularly in the Reformed theological tradition).'

Loder and Neidhardt (1992:20) explain the relationship between the human spirit and the Holy Spirit as follows:

First, the struggle of the human spirit to grasp the ultimate intelligibility of the universe in modern science and to grasp the ground of that intelligibility in the inner nature of God, unites these themes on the topic of "spirit." Second, despite many significant and lasting successes in both these themes, the human spirit has failed to retain its integrity as spirit and the result has been a collapse into dualism in potential resolution through the recovery of an integrity of "spirit," we have the two key topics upon which the major themes of this chapter converge.



Loder (1998:6) describes the human spirit scientifically as ‘self-transcendence and its implicitly unlimited openness to ultimacy’. Loder (1998:8-9) further states that ‘we are also and definitely the breath of God by which we become spiritual beings, and as spirit we are uniquely set apart from that history (creation) so that we may transcend and comprehend it’. What Loder seems to say is that in the transcendence of the human spirit lies logic and comprehension – all of which are divine attributes. This self-transcendence, however, is made possible only by the power of God through the Holy Spirit who reveals to the human spirit the mind of God. Loder (1998:12) states it as follows:

[F]or its [the human spirit] reality, its legitimacy, its remarkable genius, its genuine but blind longing for the Spirit of God – and its tragic end when that longing is not satisfied ... because the abyss between the human and the divine is humanly unfathomable, it must be crossed by the act of God; but the argument from above is that this has already been done in the paradox of God’s becoming fully human while remaining fully God in Jesus Christ. What remains for us is the awakening to this reality and to all that it implies for the conviction, illumination, and sanctification of the development of persons.

Loder argues that there is a direct relationship between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit (Lee 2003:102). This dynamic relationship between the Holy Spirit and the human spirit is instrumental in human development. ‘According to Loder’s model, the human spirit is in relation with the Holy Spirit; the soul is in relation with Jesus’ humanity’ (Jacobson 2011:28). Lee (2003:103) argues that according to Loder, spiritual development is ‘the core essence of human development’:

This means that he [Loder] insists that all the aspects of human development should interplay toward and for spiritual development. It means that only when the Holy Spirit intervenes with the human spirit, does the human development become healthy and whole.

Lee (2003:105) describes Loder’s methodology as ‘(1) the necessity of transformation of human science in order to accept theological concerns; (2) the divine and human togetherness in Christ; and (3) the divine exercising logical and ontological priority over the human’. Jacobson (2011:66-68) goes to great lengths to explain Loder’s perspective when it comes to adolescence and identity. She argues that Loder’s perspective is more than mere individuation; instead, it is transformation – something that ultimately is the work of God through the Holy Spirit. This transformation, however, is not limited to only the adolescent stage but extends throughout one’s lifetime. Loder seeks to ‘add an element of completion’ to what developmental psychologists may have missed, namely, the theological aspect. This element of completion for Loder is experienced during the transition between the various stages of adolescent development where each individual experiences an ‘existential positive and negative’. Jacobson (2011:68) argues that this transformation experienced during the transitional periods is only possible through ‘the power of Jesus ... drawing us closer to himself’.

Loder (1998:35) explains it as follows: ‘The impact of grace on the human spirit is to awaken it to a true sense of its freedom to be itself as image restored to its original’. This refers to the new creation in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:17). A transformed life through and in Christ is ‘the image restored’ (Loder, 1998:36). Loder (1998:10) explains that the definitive meaning to life must ultimately come from one that is beyond the human spirit.

### **Identity discovery vs identity formation**

When developmental psychologists talk about identity, they talk about identity formation or identity development. The general premise is that the adolescent will go through different stages with conflicts and/or challenges prior to or as part of each stage. Stages could be





cognitive (Jean Piaget), psychosocial (Erik Erikson), entail social learning (Robert Havighurst), social (Lev Vygotsky), and involve faith formation (James Fowler). The successful engagement and interaction with the challenges will result in successful navigation through the various stages. If the adolescent is unsuccessful in dealing adequately with the challenges, they may not move through the various stages, which will have a dire effect on their lives as adults. Apart from the challenges and stages, context also has a significant role in the identity development-formation process. Basically, who and what the individual becomes is a result of choice and context.

The primary task of adolescence, arguably, is individuation (Jacobson, 2011:53; Nel, 2000: 30; Nel, 2003a:161). Individuation can be considered as more than a mere distancing oneself from primary care givers to become one's own self. Jacobson (2011, 54) states that individuation is about becoming 'one's own best self'. Individuation, however, is not only limited to the individual but also has communal implications as the adolescent considers their role and participation in the community and eventually the greater good (Jacobson, 2011:71-72).

The identity of the youth, therefore, has an important role in the individuation of the young person. Identity, especially during adolescence, is concerned with a person's existential reality. One cannot negate the spiritual component of 'human development' when discussing identity (Jacobson, 2011:66). Cloete (2012:71-74) argues that there is a relationship between the identity process and the spiritual formation of the young person. She describes spiritual formation as 'a process through which human beings become more and more like Jesus in their way of living through the work of the Holy Spirit ... [an] integration of what we believe in all areas of our lives'(Cloete, 2012:74). For Cloete (2012:71-74), spiritual formation and identity formation are 'interrelated and complementary' as identity formation is 'not just about learning to be an adult or life skills, but about fundamental and existential questions concerning life and the meaning thereof'. Identity discovery, therefore, is a search for answers to existential questions first experienced during adolescence as 'it is in adolescence where one first recognizes an existential otherness' (Jacobson, 2011:27). Wright and Dean (2004:162) argue that during this phase, the adolescent experiences a theological identity crisis as they seek answers to their existential questions. Or as Cloete (2016: 85) phrased it, "a community in transition awaiting God who reveals Himself within their ontological crisis and experiences". Wright and Dean (2004:164) believe that 'Loder posits a new, re-centered identity for adolescents grounded in the reality of Christ'.

Nel (2000:101-102) poses the question: 'What is finding one's identity?' How should we respond if an adolescent never arrives at a point of faith in God? Is the implication therefore that such a person will not discover their identity? It may be prudent to argue along the lines of Loder, then, that this person will never discover their true selves as who they truly are in Christ – the way God sees them through the transcending work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Weber (2015, 4) expresses this reality of coming to faith and identity formation as 'youth can discover themselves in the face of God' and an 'encounter with the person of God in Jesus Christ' (Ellis, 2015:130; see also Dean, 2004:84). The identity of the individual will always be in question, it involves a constant search for answers to the existential questions of 'who am I?', 'whose am I?' and 'what is my purpose?'

Nel (2000:101) speaks about 'identity-finding': '[I]dentity-finding means becoming the person God created and recreated you to be: someone in Christ'. Nel (2000, 101) articulates it as 'becoming what you already are'. Nel (2000:101) continues, 'The theological content of identity-finding eliminates fear. Children and adolescents *become* what they *are* [emphases added]. The outcome is 'given''. Nel speaks of a reality that is present and future: what is and what is to come. Ellis (2015:131) frames this concept as follows: 'Theologically, it is not in what a person is *becoming* but it is in their *being* [emphases added] that God is present and active'.

Adolescents are already who they are meant to be in Christ, but it is only when they are in Christ that they discover whom and what they truly are. 'The spiritual quality of human



existence is found in the relationship between the spirit and the soul' (Jacobson, 2011:27). Human development, according to Loder (1998:341), is only possible with spiritual transformation. The existential questions about life in human development can only be answered through spiritual development – it involves an act of God (Lee, 2003, 104). It is only through the transforming power and work of Christ through the Holy Spirit that adolescents truly experience this discovery and 'the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Loder, 1998: 248). In this sense, identity is more of a discovery than a formation or development. It is a discovery through the transforming work of Jesus Christ to become the person who they were always meant to be and already are in Jesus Christ. This process removes the need for an adolescent to continuously work, successfully ticking all the boxes in order to move on successfully to the next stage or phase. It removes the burden on oneself to work and instead makes one rely on the transforming power of the Holy Spirit (Wright & Dean, 2004:165). In addition, it affirms that young people are valuable and valued for who they already are in Christ – complete beings.

## Conclusion

This article has attempted to raise the issue of language and the terminology used when discussing adolescent identity. It is acceptable to talk about adolescent identity formation and development when approaching the subject from a developmental perspective. It will always be responsible to have developmental psychology and the social sciences as partners. A theological discussion, however, should cause us to reframe the language used. This article has raised the question, by using Loder's methodology, whether adolescent identity is discovered as the result of a theological journey and transformation or whether it is developed and formed by successfully navigating the various tasks or phases experienced in adolescence. The article has attempted to situate one's identity as 'in Christ' only to be discovered through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

The challenge is, how do we construct meaningful experiences whereby the youth are able to encounter the transforming power of the Holy Spirit? Root (2012) uses the example of Moses's mysterious experience at the burning bush as an encounter with God that led him on a journey of transformation. Similarly, it is through an encounter with Jesus Christ that the young person is able to discover who they truly are. While this article has not focused on programming in youth ministry, it does raise questions for further study and research on how pragmatically to devise programs that would allow and facilitate such transformational experiences.

Furthermore, this article has expressed the need for theology to be the primary dialogue partner when discussing adolescent identity by utilising the theoretical framework and methodology of James E. Loder. While there will always be a need and place for the social sciences, it should not be used in theological discourse as the primary source regarding the identity of adolescents. This is because the spirituality of adolescents is not a priority in the social sciences, if it features at all.

Finally, this article has also raised the issue of the need to reframe the language we use in theological terms when discussing the adolescent. It has been argued that adolescent identity is not developed as much as it is discovered in Jesus Christ. Adolescents should be aware of their dependency on the transforming work of the Holy Spirit as opposed to successfully working through the various tasks of adolescence as prescribed by the social sciences. It is therefore essential that we focus on suitable models for youth ministry to expedite the process and understanding of identity in and through Jesus Christ and not allow it to be contingent on the various developmental processes and theories of the social sciences.



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