

Intro Question:

The US, and all of Western Civilization, is in the midst of the shift to a postmodern society (or Late Modernity) which is reshaping the very foundations of our culture, "transforming the way we understand truth, self and society (Guder 37-38)." So monumental are these social changes that some scholars are comparing it to the foundational changes the Western World experienced in the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern world five-hundred plus years ago (Allen, Christian Belief in a postmodern world: the full wealth of conviction, 2). With respect to families, the impact of the lingering Modern Mind combined with our current postmodern condition have created a toxic atmosphere for our families (refer to e-mail from Guder), resulting in stressed and broken families (Elkind), and for adolescents our societal shifts have resulted in them being abandoned by the very institutions that were created to nurture them (Clark). With respect to the church, Darrell Guder, editor of Missional Church, argues that the transition to postmodernity is forcing Evangelicalism to own up to the extent to which Modernity has impacted its identity and understanding of its mission in the world, including its mission to evangelize and disciple the adolescents in our culture, who themselves are in a major stage of life transition. In light of our societal transitions and the impact on the church, family and adolescents, this leads to two major questions concerning the U.S. church and our ministry to contemporary adolescents:

1. As the church, what is our identity and mission in the world.
2. How does our identity and mission inform our calling to make disciples of youth

As the church, what is our identity and mission in the world.

As the church, we are "a holy nation," present in culture, but distinct from culture (1Peter 1:9). The church is the *ekklesia* of God; the people who have been "called out" and "called together" by God for the worship of God (Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 270). Our identity as the *ekklesia* of God is rooted in God's call to Abraham to leave his people and father's household and His promise to make him "into a great nation" (Gen 12:1-2 NIV), in God's call and promise to his people Israel to be His "kingdom of priests," a "holy nation" and "a light for the Gentiles" (Exodus 19:5-6; Isaiah 42:6, 49:6), and ultimately in Jesus Christ, who, as the Son of God, was the fulfillment of Israel (Wright, *Challenge of Jesus*, 174-197). Lastly, it is our worship of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that sustains our identity as His *ekklesia*.

Secondly, as the church, our identity as God's *ekklesia* and our understanding of our mission or calling are "intimately intertwined" and cannot be separated (Oden *Life in the Spirit*, 270). In Matthew 28: 18-20 it was Jesus, in whom our identity is hidden, who sent His *ekklesia* into the world as the representation of the in-breaking kingdom of God with the mission to make disciples. So, in sum, we are "a holy nation," a community, with a Kingdom mission to go out into all the world and make disciples, thereby bringing more people into the *ekklesia* of God.

How does our identity and mission inform our calling to make disciples of youth

Our identity as the *ekklesia* of God with a kingdom mission to make disciples means that the church's ministry to adolescents, or "Youth Ministry," is not a department or sub-ministry of the church, but is an integral part of the missional call of the church to a particular subculture in our rapidly changing society. In Deuteronomy 6 we find the account of Moses instructing Israel, out of love for God, to be diligent in obeying the "commands, decrees and laws" that He had given them (Deu 6:1-5 NIV). In the same breath Moses then states,

6 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deu 6:6-9 NIV)

This was a communal calling, as the people of God, to raise their children and grandchildren to Love God, follow his decrees, and, as seen in verse 6:21-23, teach them the history of God's redeeming acts; i.e. part of the mission of Israel, as a "holy nation" and "light of the world," was to communally raise children to be fully engaged Israelites who loved God, obey the laws and remembered God's redeeming acts. In light of this communal calling of Israel to teach their children, coupled with New Testament teaching of Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of Israel, we can read Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19-20 as a fulfillment of God's instruction to Israel, through Moses, to teach their children God's commands. Jesus' commissioning was to make disciples of all nations, assimilating the new disciples into the *ekklesia* of God by "teaching them to obey everything" Jesus had taught them (Mat 28:20 NIV). As the *ekklesia* of God in the twenty-first century our mission is the same, to go and make disciples, and with respect to adolescents, this calling does not change. In sum, "youth ministry" is simply part of the missional calling of the church to go and make disciples of adolescents, fully assimilating them, systemically and relationally, into the congregational life of the church (Clark, Hurt, 189).³

Thesis

The thesis of this paper is that beginning with Emperor Constantine in third Century A.D., the The Western Church has struggled with its identity and mission, identifying more with Christendom and Western culture than with Jesus Christ as Lord, and consequentially, because of this struggle with its identity, each major societal shift, from Constantine to Postmodernity, has affected its understanding of what its mission is to be within that society. Furthermore, this confusion of identity and mission has severely affected the American church's approach and ability to effectively evangelize, disciple and integrate youth, who, as a subculture, have been hurt by societal changes in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, into the congregational life of the church. Lastly, in order for the U.S. church in general, and Christ UMC specifically, to have a transformational ministry to youth, it starts, not with the youth, but with the adult congregation embracing our communal identity in the Lordship of Jesus and His gospel as His missional people and, out of this, embracing a renewed understanding of Youth Ministry as part of the missional calling of our church.

Method

Since "the church relates constantly and dynamically both to the gospel and to its contextual reality" (Guder, pg18), I will first briefly discuss my theological foundations in order to define "the gospel" that we proclaim to our "contextual reality. Secondly, in order to understand our "contextual reality," I will briefly examine the historical roots of the philosophical and cultural changes in our society and the impact these have had on the U.S. church, our families and on adolescents. Lastly we will look at Christ United Methodist Church in Jackson, MS and the implications for its Youth Ministry and new questions for our congregation that arise in light of our discussion.

Theological Foundation

The understanding of God as Trinity, one God in three distinct persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, existing in a self-giving "holy love" relationship, is the base theological foundation of this paper. The Triune God of the Bible exists in communal relationship with self-giving love as His very essence or nature, and out of God's nature of holy self-giving love He created the world. Moreover, because God exists as a love relationship, He did not create the world because of a relational void, but because He desired to. With respect to humans, because all humanity has been created in the image of God (Genesis 1:21-22), we, at our core, are relational, meaning we were not created to be alone, but were created to commune with God as His people with the mission of multiplication and exercising dominion over creation (Hamilton, 139, NICOT). It is out of this Trinitarian relational framework that the rebellion of mankind, or sin, is ultimately understood not as the breaking of a rule or rules, but as a relational (and communal) turning away from God resulting in a broken, schismatic relationship with our Creator, with each other as a human community and with the whole of creation. Furthermore, it is also out of this foundational framework that we understand salvation, not in individualistic terms, but as being restored to God in and through the community of God. It is the Trinitarian framework that allows us to understand the self-giving nature of God as one who, beginning with Abraham and Israel, entered into His creation to restore it relationally to Himself by gracefully electing and sending a people to be His incarnational body in the world, and ultimately in the incarnation, death and resurrection of the sent Son, Jesus Christ, as the elect fulfilment of Israel and atoning representative of humanity. Lastly, it is the Trinitarian framework that helps us understand that the Son who was sent by the Father, sends the church in the power of the Holy Spirit into the world with the communal mission to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and to make disciples.