The Locus Adventus: An Eschatological Anthropology
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Abstract

Are young people human beings? It may strike youth workers as an absurd question with an obvious affirmative answer. But does our implicit anthropology actually support the claim? The dominant developmental interpretation of human experience, as consisting in and qualified as stages of development toward adulthood, implies a substantive anthropology that threatens to reduce young people's experience to a pathological and subhuman status. When this anthropology is smuggled into youth ministry through an overreliance on developmental frames of interpretation, youth workers are obstructed from attending to young people’s experience as an authentic location for divine encounter and ministerial participation. This article will explore the question of theological anthropology for youth ministry, offering an eschatological anthropology which constitutes the human being as locus adventus, a location for the coming of God, thus affording youth ministry an interpretive frame that will allow youth workers to engage in the actuality of young people's experience with the hope and anticipation of encountering God and participating in God's ministry here and now.

Faith Formation: Attending to Divine Encounter

Youth workers and youth ministry educators have spilled quite a lot of ink discerning how we might effectively engage in the faith formation of young people. Our key conversation partners in addressing faith formation have been, ironically in some ways, developmental psychology—with its conception of “adolescence”—and sociology. These sciences have provided a key hermeneutical lens for understanding faith formation. Psychology has helped us understand what is happening in the interior life of the young person while sociology has given
us insights into what bolsters or hinders young people’s participation in various forms of youth ministry.¹ Faith formation has thus consistently become oriented toward a developmental frame of interpretation that correlates faith formation with social and psychological processes of development.² However, these lenses have not provided the most important and distinctly theological vision for faith formation. As ministers and theologians, youth workers are not to be most fundamentally concerned with processes of psychological development or issues pertaining to the measurable religious participation of young people, but with faith itself.³ What youth workers are to be most fundamentally interested in, and what youth ministry educators should be teaching youth workers to engage, is not psychological or sociological but theological—it is the presence and action of God in young people’s experience. What youth ministry and the question of faith formation must actually attend to is “mystical union” of divine and human encounter, the actuality of God’s presence, in the lives of young people.⁴

Often, what hinders us, as educators and as youth workers, from being able to attend to the actuality of a young person’s experience as a location for divine encounter is our expectation, our desire, and relatedly, our underlying conception of what it means to be human. It is our

¹ This is a somewhat simplistic explanation. There are certainly overlaps in the hermeneutical vantage points of psychology and sociology in regards to youth. Psychology, for example, looks beyond the merely interior and attends to all sorts of sociological and anthropological realities, but it is still fair to say that its key point of interest is the individual and, while sociology certainly looks to individuals, its key point of interest are the external and more communal forces of society and culture.

² For example, see James W. Fowler, Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning (New York: HarperOne, 1995).

³ I am indebted to Andrew Root who has made this observation. He has argued that conversations regarding faith formation must not be limited to the level of the immanent, social, and natural but must indeed attend to the more important, though contested, level of the transcendent. See Andrew Root, Faith Formation in a Secular Age (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

⁴ Andrew Root, Faith Formation in a Secular Age (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 133-146.
theological anthropology that will either open us up or close us off to the experience of young people and, thus, to the presence of God in their experience. If our conception of humanity is that it should develop or change according to a particular itinerary—for example, moving through stages from childlike dependency, through adolescence, to the rationality and independence of adulthood—we will find ourselves closed off to the experiences of those whose development transgresses such expectation. If our conception of Christian “maturity” demands a particular level of participation in religious activities, then we may never even ask the question of how we might encounter God in the experience of those who are not “maturing.” In order to move forward with a theological vision for faith formation, one which sees all young people’s experience as a location for divine encounter and participation in divine action, we need a theological vision of what it means to be a young person. For that, we will need a theological vision of what it means to be a “normal” and “healthy” human being. We need a theological anthropology of youth.

In this article, we will explore the various anthropologies that have historically constituted the backdrop of normalcy by which we in the West, particularly in youth ministry, have judged human experience, particularly the implicit anthropology of developmentalism we have inherited from developmental psychology. We will explore an alternative theological account of what it means to be human—an eschatological anthropology that is grounded in expectation without reducing human experience and faith formation to expediency, futurity, or potentiality.

From Substantive Anthropology to Theological Anthropology
One of the core challenges of theological anthropology is that it seeks to answer one question, “what does it mean to be human?” (anthropos), by way of addressing questions about God (Theos). Theological anthropology answers the anthropological question theologically. This has proven to be difficult for theologians over the years. It is difficult to hold these two elements, anthropos and Theos, together in a theologically appropriate way. This is a logical challenge. God, as Holy Other, cannot be contained in any description of the human being that is immanent thereto, meanwhile it can be difficult to faithfully attend to human experience in any abstract description of divinity. This has led theologians either to neglect the anthropological question altogether—to adopt a disembodied and arcane system for theological reflection that feigns or avoids accountability to the question of human being—or to neglect the theological element which should be at the heart of theological anthropology.

This logical challenge is accentuated by the epistemic ecosystem we currently occupy. There is a distinct preference for nomothetic forms of knowledge over ideographic forms of knowledge.\(^5\) That is to say, we may tolerate narrative—those more subjective experiences that cannot be replicated and verified—but what constitutes the highest form of rationality and, thus, the most adequate account of reality is that which is most objective and absolute. As John Swinton has observed, “so-called ‘soft’ forms of knowledge such as spirituality may have their place, but they are only allowed to eat at the table after the hard sciences have finished their meal.”\(^6\) This is problematic for the youth worker, the youth ministry educator, and the practical theologian in general. When epistemology is such that we prefer our science ‘hard’—indeed, the

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‘harder’ the better—it is no wonder that “we have become a people who so often talk of faith as almost completely coated in a sociological shell, bound almost entirely in measured institutional participation, content to survey variables.”\(^7\) In this ecosystem, practical theologians are especially prone to neglect the theological vantage point of theological anthropology.

Philosophers, biologists, sociologists, and even legislators have suggested empirical solutions to the anthropological question. As Otto Weber put it, “Theological anthropology enters a sphere which was already fully occupied.”\(^8\) But theologians must resist the temptation to simply theologize an existing response. A truly theological anthropology will address both sides of the question without accepting a false dichotomy.\(^9\) But it will address the anthropological from the vantage point and through the prism of the theological—God’s incursive self-disclosure through ministry and not merely through “theology” and doctrinal propositions. According to Weber, “…we exclude the abstractly conceivable possibility that the Christian view of man [sic] is merely a reinterpretation of our self-understanding. The issue is not a change of our self-understanding but a transformation of our existence.”\(^10\) We have looked to the human to answer the question of what it means to be human while an authentic theological anthropology calls us to look instead to God.

Emil Brunner laid out the guiding principle for theological anthropology, at least within the Reformed tradition, quite explicitly. The “first article” of Christian anthropology, wrote

\(^7\) Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*, xviii.


\(^10\) Ibid, 541.
Bruner, is “that man [sic] cannot be known from himself [sic] but only from God.”\textsuperscript{11} God—not the human—is the criteria for being human. Bruner’s contemporary (and sometimes rival), Karl Barth, employed the same principal. “Only a phantom man,” wrote Barth, “thinks that of himself he can know himself”\textsuperscript{12} This is why theological anthropology has historically oriented itself around the doctrine of the \textit{imago Dei}—the image of God.

In the creation poem in Genesis 1, on the sixth day of creation, God said, “Let us make humankind in our image…” (Genesis 1:26). God created human beings, male and female,\textsuperscript{13} in God’s image. The word “image” in this passage, is translated from the Hebrew word \textit{tselem} (טֶלֶם), which also means “likeness” or “of resemblance.”\textsuperscript{14} In modern Hebrew, \textit{tselem} can be translated as “photograph.” In creating humankind, God created a living photograph of God, such that to see humankind is to see God or to see a true representation of God. The \textit{imago Dei} bears within it and holds together all the aforementioned tensions and challenges of theological anthropology. This, perhaps, accounts for the centrality of the \textit{imago Dei} as a doctrine in the face of its relative scarcity, as a concept, in the biblical text.\textsuperscript{15} Swinton writes, “In terms of the actual attention given to in within the scripture, the idea that human beings are made in the image of God would not appear to be of great import to the biblical writers.”\textsuperscript{16} The concept is only directly

\textsuperscript{11} Emil Brunner, \textit{Man in Revolt}, (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1939) 64.

\textsuperscript{12} Karl Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics III.2}, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960) 75.

\textsuperscript{13} Presumably, this figure of speech would not be categorically binary, and would apply the same logic to every possible gender identity construction.


\textsuperscript{16} John Swinton, \textit{From Bedlam to Shalom}, 18.
mentioned in the Genesis account, specifically in the Priestly writings, and is implicitly mentioned only a handful of times throughout the bible. But because of its conceptual force in bearing the challenge of theological anthropology, it appropriately remains central to the task.

Stating that human beings are created in the image of God is simply a way of naming the problems of theological anthropology, and in this way providing a theological starting point. It does little, however, to solve those problems. As Barth observed, “we are nowhere told in Scripture what the image of God actually is.”17 The task of theological anthropology is the task of working out what imago Dei means. Simply employing the term does not immediately rescue one from the substantive fallacy of constituting the human according to the human as a “self-enclosed reality.”18

According to Oliver Crisp, “The substantive account of the image of God” is an account that “equates the image with something substantive about human beings, such as possession of an immaterial substance, or soul, or certain powers associated with the soul or the human person, such as rationality.”19 This substantive anthropology begins with something about the human, a structure or a function, and, from there, extrapolates a characterization or definition of the imago Dei. In the following subsections we will explore some ways in which the fallacy has become manifest in theological anthropology. We will see how the image of God has been reduced to varying human faculties, including (but not limited to) reason, creativity, morality, and diversity.

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17 Quoted in ibid.
18 Karl Barth, CD III.2, 72.
After this exploration, we will look directly at the implicit theological anthropology of developmentalism and from there we will look toward a theological anthropology of youth.

The Image of God as ‘Reason’:

According to Swinton, “historically the dominant Western interpretation of the image of God has been that human reason is the particular human faculty that marks [human beings] out from the rest of creation.”

Thomas Aquinas wrote, “Man [sic] is said to be after the image of God… as regards that whereby he excels other animals… Now man excels all animals by his reason and intelligence; hence it is according to his intelligence and reason, which are incorporeal, that man is said to be according to the image of God.”

Gregory of Nyssa defined the human being as a “rational animal,” univocally identifying rationality with the *imago Dei* and elevating reason as the defining trait of human beings. This perspective has become commonplace in the modern world. Even in more “secular” accounts of anthropology, rationality is presumed to be central and distinct to human beings. In our Western context reason is understood as a power of cognition, an ability or capacity to perceive and analyze events, actions, and the reasons thereof with a degree of objectivity that will ensure verifiability.

20 John Swinton, *From Bedlam to Shalom*, 22.


22 Gregory of Nyssa, *Of the Making of Man* 8.8.

23 Examples of this are too numerous to catalogue here, but it should be noted that this rationalist anthropology manifests itself not merely in straight-forward logical reasoning, as in the ability to solve math problems, but also in basic neurodevelopment and moral reasoning as well. In many circles in neurobiology, there exists a persistent implication that human beings are essentially their brains. Thinkers such as Raymond Tallis have argued against this sort of biological determinism. He writes, “It is now almost impossible to pick up a magazine or a newspaper, or listen to the radio, without being reminded of the grip that biologism has on contemporary thought, in every place where our nature is discussed…” Raymond Tallis, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (Durham: Acumen, 2011), 7. Also, within moral philosophy, human beings are often characterized fundamentally as creatures that reason morally. See, for example, Alasdair Maclntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Peru: Carus Publishing, 1999).
falsifiability, and replicability. In essence, the unique quality of human beings, according to this view, that sets them apart from the rest of the animal world is their ability to reflect on their existence. The “rational animal,” the human being can describe and ask questions of their experience through the use of language, or so it is assumed. This sort of cognitive ability is distinct to human beings and therefore, we think, it is what makes us human. While in modern theology this view has come under scrutiny, the perspective is alive and well in some circles of theological inquiry. Swinton observes that theologians Edmond Hill and Carl F. H. Henry centralize the importance of rationality as the defining trait of human beings. Swinton quotes Hill, echoing Gregory of Nyssa, “Man [sic] is a rational animal; being human means being rational… it is only in rational activity of intelligence and mind that man and woman can properly represent God and realise His [sic] image in themselves.”

But this account of what constitutes human being has violent implications for those who are not perceived as possessing the powers of “reason” and language. In this view, as Swinton observes, “The more intellectually endowed a person is, the more human they become… the less intellectually endowed a person is, the less authentically they will image God…” Implicitly, those who have yet to develop intellectual capacity, and those who have not and will not develop it, are implicitly subhuman or only potentially human. In them, we must conclude, no representation of God can be disclosed, at least not until they have adequately matured. Since,

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24 But even this is a contestable proposal. Drawing on research of dolphin activity and communication, Alastair MacIntyre has raised questions regarding just how unique rationality really is to human beings. He writes, “The thesis that nonhuman animals lack the as-structure is compelling in the case of moths, crabs, lizards, and the like. But it is much more open to question, when we consider dogs, chimpanzees, gorillas, dolphins, and a number of others.” Alastair MacIntyre, Dependent Rational Animals, 46.

25 Quoted in John Swinton, From Bedlam to Shalom, 23.

26 John Swinton, From Bedlam to Shalom, 24.
traditionally, the capacity of rationality has been defined primarily by men and has been viewed socially as a capacity belonging especially to masculinity, this view has not only reified hegemonic masculinity and misogyny in society but has aided in the historic subjection of women to social and systemic dehumanization. Though the implications may be slightly less documented, they are no less significant in the lives of children and young people who, in a gerontocentric society that equates rationality with adulthood, do not bear this apparently uniquely human quality. Hans Reinders, John Swinton, Benjamin Conner, Amy Jacober, and others in the field of disability theology have pointed out the implications of this perspective for people who live with disabilities. They remind us that we cannot presuppose a narrow concept of intellectual rationality as a universal human capacity. As Reinders puts it, “If the point of our lives is what we are capable of doing, the implication must be that a human life lacking in the capacity for purposive action will be pointless.” And perhaps the more important implication is that such a life will be precluded from the possibility of revealing the *imago Dei*. Jacober stresses that, in regards to doctrines of the Christian faith, including the doctrine of *imago Dei* in theological anthropology, our concern should not be limited to logical precision or the “purity” of the doctrine itself. “Unless a doctrine can include those with disabilities, their family, friends, and communities as they are, then the work is not finished.”


As with any substantive account, the account of the *imago Dei* as a capacity of reason will necessarily produce marginal cases, and, according to Reinders, “there are no marginal cases of being human in the loving eyes of God the Father.”  

With the Apostle Paul, “we are convinced that one has died for all” (2 Corinthians 5:14)—“all” being the operative word for this discussion. *Every* person who draws breath in the world is a person that God loves, even enough to endure crucifixion. If there is a “marginal case” in any theology or anthropology, if there are any refugees of a system of thought or practice, we can rest assured that such a practice must be contested and that God goes with those refugees as the shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep (Luke 15). God’s stubborn insistence that each one matters precludes the possibility, from a theological perspective, of any “marginal case” in regards to the status of being human. Everyone is created in God’s image.

**The Image of God as Human Diversity:**

As Swinton has observed, a key mark of all substantive anthropologies is that they lead “to the exclusion and alienation of the weakest members of society.” This structure or function of being human inevitably issues a backdrop of normalcy against which all variance is essentially pathologized. In regards to youth, when a notion of adulthood or maturity is allowed to set the terms for what it means to be human, then youth is interpreted or “diagnosed” according to deficits. Anthropologically speaking, this constitutes a reduction of the humanity of those who

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occupy the social category of youth, even if adult society still fettishizes the fantasy of “youthfulness.”

This problem has risen in history especially in regards to gender and sexuality. In the West, the dominant anthropologies have been hegemonically patriarchal. Thus, in some traditional anthropologies, “the male sex [becomes] normative for humanity.” According to Jana Bennett, “Feminist and disability theologians alike critique thought that suggests ‘normal’ is a young, physically muscular, perfectly formed adult male body which, by default is rational.” This patriarchal anthropology is an essentialist anthropology; there is a specific way of being human, a male way, and any deviation into female subjectivity, any variance from that norm constitutes subhumanity. Elaine Graham summarizes,

...dominant views of human nature, self, knowledge, action and value are constructed andocentrically: that is, they assume that maleness and masculinity is the norm for adequate accounts of what it means to be human, how I achieve a sense of self, what counts as verifiable and reliable knowledge, the relationship between thought, will and action, and the sources and norms of ultimate value, truth and beauty.

In order to correct this hegemonic form or substantive anthropology, some have adopted a more pluralist anthropology, one which embraces difference rather than attempting to reconcile it.

34 See Andrew Root, Faith Formation in a Secular Age.

35 Rosemary Radford Reuther documents the tendency throughout the history of Christianity to associate women with sinfulness and to hold them uniquely responsible for the fallenness of creation, citing Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and others. See Rosemary Radford Reuther, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 1983), 93-98.


From this, in regards to gender and sexuality, a kind of binary or “two-nature” anthropology is constructed, “a vision of human being as divided into two distinct kinds, each with identifiable differences that become normative for the sex.” 39

Another option is a kind of apophatic anthropology wherein what it means to be human is only articulated through the rejection of any universal or totalizing account of humanity. Pastor and theologian, David Arthur Auten, writes, “Eccentricity is one of the most fundamental features of your life. You are by virtue of your difference from everything else around you…” 40 In other words, there is not one thing that makes one a human being, indeed that which makes one individual human may differ from that which makes another human. “You stand out in some way from the myriad other things that stand out in their own ways.” 41 Our difference is all we really have in common. The image of God is neither male or female, but transcends and includes every possible sex and gender. “God is different as different can be. It is in that likeness that we are created and called into participation with existence.” 42 This participation with existence, however, implies that we are not to allow eccentricity to be reduced to individualism. In our difference, humankind is expressed more creatively and authentically in community. This is where the kerygmatic theology of the trinity can help balance the apophatic anthropology of eccentricity. The God who is revealed in difference, even in the triune difference of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is a God who is love (1 John 4:8). There is a unity to be realized in difference. As Mary Aquin O’Neill writes,

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid, 50.
I now think for the Christian theologian the issue is not whether one adopts a two-nature or one-nature anthropology… The issue is rather how to imagine the oneness that is to obtain between the sexes. Is it, in other words, a unity to be realized in an individual way or one that can be realized only in a community of persons, each of whom has gifts and limitations? …The unity of humanity is the unity of a communion of persons and the model of the person is not the autonomous and isolated individual but the covenanted one who is free because bound to others and to God. …In such an anthropology, difference is not liquidated but delighted in, and personal development is the fruit of relationships as much as the reward for efforts of will.43

Thus we are given an anthropology of difference that embraces the uniqueness of humankind and might thus embrace youth not as pathology but as difference, a difference in which we are invited to delight.

But there is still a theological risk in embracing such an apophatic anthropology. If we seek to associate God’s image with the plurality of difference in humanity, then even our diversity becomes substantive insofar as it constitutes yet another aspect of our humanity. We may have solved the anthropological question anthropologically but, in doing so, created a theological problem. The theological problem with this eccentric or pluralist anthropology is that it sets out to know the human being from the human being, even if it does so without falling into abstraction, essentialization, or totalization. The self, not God, is the “inescapable starting place” and the initiating subject of this anthropology.44 When anthropology begins with self, a certain standard is still smuggled in, a standard of personal discernment. According to Auten, “There are many forms of difference. What really matters, however, is the very personal discernment of the difference that God calls you to be, in the totality of your life…”45 But not all human beings may

43 Mary Aquin O’Neill, 150-151.
44 David Arthur Auten, Eccentricity, 32.
bear the powers of “personal discernment.” As Hans Reinders put it, “if there is to be an inclusive account of the good life for human beings, it cannot depend in any way on the centrality of the choosing self.”

The problem, though, is not between, as O’Neill puts it, a “one-nature” or “two-nature” anthropology, nor is it resolved by taking up a pluralist anthropology. The problem is between a substantive and a theological anthropology. Whereas a substantive anthropology would have us search for “the unity of humanity,” even in the communion of diversity in humanity, a theological anthropology would have us look in a different direction entirely. Theological anthropology invites us to look to God alone for our humanity. As Craig Keen puts it,

“It is a serious category mistake to look for evidence of our uniqueness, evidence of the way we differ from other beings in the present order of beings, and from that to explicate Gen 1:27. The image of God is not remembered as something in us; we rather are remembered as God’s children in him [sic].”

If we are to properly understand what it means to be human from a theological perspective, to understand humankind as created in God’s image, we must be guided by “first article” of theological anthropology and look not to the human being or to some aspect or capacity of humanity. We must instead look to God—the God who is revealed in the crucified, risen, and reigning Christ.

You Are What You Love?

46 Hans Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship, 138.

47 Craig Keen, After Crucifixion, 50.

48 “The revelation of God is the total redefinition of the man [sic] who receives it… that Jesus is the Christ of God does not mean an additional definition of man’s [sic] being but rather a total definition of man’s [sic] human existence through Christ’s work as the Revealer and Reconciler.” Otto Weber, Foundations of Dogmatics, Vol. 1, 538-539.
In his groundbreaking work, *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith lays out a philosophical anthropology to undergird his project of reorienting Christian education toward “formation of hearts and desires.” In order to do so he offers a pointed critique of two claims in society regarding what it means to be human, two “options in philosophical anthropology.” These options are to see the human person fundamentally as a “thinking thing” or “the human person as believer.” Smith critiques both of these models of anthropology to be too abstract and “reductionistic.” For the former, his critique parallels, in some ways, the aforementioned critique of rationalist substantive anthropology. But his concern is not that we will produce refugees or marginal cases and reduce some human persons to a subhuman status. His concern, rather, is that Christian education will be too narrowly focused on ideas. “The result is a talking-head version of Christianity that is fixed on doctrines and ideas...because the church buys into a cognitivist anthropology, it adopts a stunted pedagogy that is fixated on the mind.” As welcome as this critique may be in seeking a theological anthropology, Smith’s concerns are less about a distortion of theology and more about a limitation in pedagogy.

In regards to the latter—the human-as-believer anthropology—again, Smith is less concerned about theology than pedagogy. In this perspective, human beings are not just a “talking-head” but a person with commitments and orientations that run deeper than mere cognitive assent to ideas. “What defines us is not what we think—not the set of ideas we assent


50 Ibid, 41.

51 Ibid 41 and 43.

52 Ibid, 46.

53 Ibid, 42-43.
to—but rather what we believe, the commitments and trusts that orient our being-in-the-word.”

Smith attributes this perspective to the Reformed tradition of Christianity, “developed precisely as a critique of more rationalistic construals of Christianity…” But Smith is not satisfied with this perspective either. “The person-as-believer model still gives us a somewhat reductionistic account of the human person—one that is still a tad bit heady and quasi-cognitive. And that is significant because of the pedagogy it yields.” In Christian education a “believing” pedagogy still essentially focuses on information rather than formation. It may be less interested in discrete ideas, but it is still interested in orienting the person to the correct set of commitments that underlie their cognitive conclusions.

Smith recognizes these anthropologies as substantive. “They take the slice to be the whole and thus absolutize just one aspect of the human person.” Smith’s alternative to these ideas, a shift he seems to see as radical in regards to anthropology, is to suggest that human beings are not thinking or believing animals but “essentially and ultimately desiring animals.” Smith summarizes, “To be human is to love, and it is what we love that defines who we are.” He goes on to describe this anthropology as essentially teleological. It is not our ideas but our ends that should be our primary concern. Human beings are always being formed toward certain ends and goals. This provides a fine scaffolding for the kind of work Smith is interested in doing.

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54 Ibid, 43.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid, 45.
57 Ibid, 46.
58 Ibid, 50-51..
59 Ibid, 51.
pedagogically. His shift from “you are what you think” or “you are what you do” to “you are what you love” is helpful in many ways, but does it suffice as a theological anthropology?

It is certainly helpful for philosophers to engage in the conversation regarding Christian education, but from a theological standpoint, Smith’s philosophical anthropology falls short of providing a theological anthropology for ministry. While Smith seems to regard his “shifting the center of gravity… down from the heady regions of mind closer to the central regions of our bodies…” as a radical shift, he has not yet, in doing so, shifted the center of gravity to the theological. To say, "you are what you love" is not actually radically different from saying "you are what you think” or “you are what you do.” Nor is the difference between the human as a “lover” so radical from the human as a “thinker” or a “believer.” These claims all share the quality of emanating from within the person, within the self. The two claims—you are what you do and you are what you love—were, after all, side by side in the mind of Sigmund Freud, the architect of the ego and the super ego in psychological thought, and Erik Erikson’s teacher.

When he was asked, "what must a 'normal' person be able to do well?" Freud answered, "lieben und arbeiten" ("to love and to work,“).

The really dramatic shift, therefore, would not be for us to move from "you are what you do" to "you are what you love," but instead to insist, "you are a child of God" and to answer the question posed to Freud by saying, "a person must be loved." The theological shift would be to insist on an anthropology that emanates not from the self but from God. We are not determined

60 Ibid, 47.

61 This is notable only because of the profound impact that Erikson has had on the practice of youth ministry, with his eight stages of development including the stage of “adolescence.”

62 Erik Erikson, Identity Youth and Crisis, 136
by what we love but, As Swinton has put it, "a person's humanity is defined and maintained by God's gracious movement towards them in love." 63

To be human is not to love, as Smith suggests. Rather, to be human is to be loved. In this way human beings bear God's image perfectly and always, regardless of their actions, thoughts, or even their desires! We can use such bold terms because what determines God's image is not the human being’s ability to respond appropriately to God’s love. It is, rather God’s love itself, the love extended from God toward human beings, that determines the image of God in human beings. And this love is extended perfectly and always. The imago Dei is not any aspect or set of aspects of the human. In fact, God's love, and thus God's image, is revealed most fully and exhaustively in Christ’s passion, death, and burial—when God met us at our very worst. We are united to God, then, not in our strength and glory, but in the cross itself wherein God loves us completely and perfectly. To claim that one is created in God's image is not to elevate them to a certain standard or demand that they love rightly, but it is simply to say, "God loves you!"

**Human Becoming: The Anthropology of Developmentalism**

Developmentalism bears within it its own implicit substantive anthropology. As a pervasive epistemic framework in Western society, with corresponding economic and social implications, developmentalism has provided perhaps the dominant interpretation of the meaning of human life and, by extension, what makes us human. It has been fertile soil for the kind of rationalist and hypercognitive anthropologies mentioned above, as well as other anthropologies that take their starting point in the human being rather than in the theological, but most particularly central to developmentalism’s account of what it means to be human is the quality of

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63 John Swinton, *From Bedlam to Shalom*, 31
growth or becoming. By becoming, here, I do not simply mean movement and encounter. Indeed, such concepts are certainly not necessarily developmental in essence or form. But becoming, under the auspices of developmentalism, refers specifically to the actualization of one’s potential—in the case of youth, the potential to achieve maturity and the social status of “the adult.” In essence, developmentalism reduces being (ontos) to becoming (telos), such that the human being is not so much a human being as a “human becoming.” What determines an adequate account of what it means to be human in developmentalism is the actualization of potentiality, not the actuality of lived experience. The abstract and static, yet unattainable, status of adulthood provides the target toward which the human being must always be aiming and toward which she must be moving in order to properly be understood as fully human.

This is the basic orienting principle of Erik Erikson’s work. His “eight ages of man,” his “schedule of virtues” and his “stages in the ritualization of human experience,” all represent a kind of universal ideal for “healthy personality” development that provides a backdrop for interpreting all human experience. The picture that these stages paint—figuratively insofar as they offer an image of the meaning of human life, and literally insofar as Erikson himself characterized human growth in charts resembling an ascending staircase—are of human life as an ascent. This ascension metaphor subjects every stage to a deficit position until it has reached its peak which is, in essence, “generativity.” According to James Fowler,

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64 I am, thus, using the term quite differently that, for example, Eberhard Jüngel. See Eberhard Jüngel, God’s Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2001).

65 See Wesley W. Ellis, “Human Beings and Human Becomings”

66 See Donald Capps, Life Cycle Theory & Pastoral Care, 17.
Generativity, for Erikson, means creativity and productiveness, to be sure, but is also means much more. It means, deriving from the same root as generation, the adult person having found ways, through love and work, creativity and care, to contribute to the conditions that will provide the possibility for members of the oncoming generations to develop their personal strengths at each stage.\textsuperscript{67}

The telos of human life is essentially telos itself. The point of development is development for development’s sake. Human life, then, is a constant transition from deficit to resolution through crisis.

“Healthy things grow.” So goes the adage of church growth and innovation specialists. One might say that to be human is to grow. Developmentalism supposes that to be human is to exist according to telos, toward maturity, and it even goes as far as to imply that adulthood (whatever that may be) is, in fact, the truest form of humanity. Developmentalism sets all accounts of what it means to be human on a scale of improvement and decline. There is really no such thing, in this imaginary, as simple movement. Everything is mechanism, everything contributes or detracts. Nothing simply changes, it develops. “We have to learn to understand ourselves as directed to a range of goals,” writes Alasdair MacIntyre, “that are more or less remote from our present situation and to order our desires accordingly.”\textsuperscript{68} The anthropology of developmentalism emanates from the human being. It is human’s “good or optimal development”\textsuperscript{69} toward “ideal personhood”\textsuperscript{70} through maturity that sets them apart, that


\textsuperscript{68} Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues} (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 76.


\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 30.
distinguishes them from nonhuman animals and determines the *imago dei*. This diminishes the humanity of those who are not yet mature, those who are maturing *improperly*, those who are in *decline*, and those who simply *will not* mature. The child is still becoming human. The concept of “becoming a complete human being”71 displaces those who are, by such standards, still *incomplete*. The young are still on their way to "full human status"72 by virtue of their youth and are thus reduced to a pathology or a subhuman status.73

We see the pervasiveness of this implicit anthropology represented in the dominance of socialization theory. We have tended to make sense of “the child as a potential and inevitable supplicant at the altar of the corporate rationality implicit within the social system.”74 In his work on childhood, Jenks addresses this perspective. He offers the example of Oscar W. Ritchie and M. R. Kollar who, “writing solidly in their tradition, state: …‘Children are not to be viewed as individuals fully equipped to participate in a complex adult world, but as beings who have the potential for being slowly brought into contact with human beings.’”75 Jenks goes on to say that “as a consequence of the adult member being regarded within theory as mature, rational and competent (all as natural dispositions), the child is viewed, in juxtaposition, as less than fully human, unfinished or incomplete.”76 When youth is seen from the vantage point of developmentalism, it carries within it a distinct, though implicit, dehumanizing quality.

71 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
According to MacIntyre, “In early childhood… human beings have not yet made the transition from being only potentially rational animals to being actually rational animals.”77 In MacIntyre’s scheme, the human must be directed, in some way, toward the good, always oriented toward and moving in the direction of that good, discerning along the way appropriate actions to contribute to the acquisition of the highest good. “The first step in this transition,” that is, the transition from potentially rational to actually rational existence, “takes place when the child becomes able to consider the suggestion that the good to the achievement of which it is presently directed by its animal nature is inferior to some other alternative good and that this latter good therefore provides a better reason for action than does the good at which the child has been aiming.”78 By centralizing this transition, equating the fullness of humanity with practical reason,79 not only does MacIntyre fall into the cognitive trap he is trying to avoid80 but, like Smith, the shift he is trying to make—from humans as independent and higher than animals to humans as dependent practical reasoners—turns out to be similar in form to that from which he is trying to depart. Dependent or independent, human beings are still understood as essentially prototypical and transitional. *Ontos*, beings is conflated with and consumed by *telos* in such a way that there can hardly be such a thing as being at all. Can the child be understood as human if humanity is the movement from childhood to adulthood?

77 Alisdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 56.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid, 82.
80 Ibid, 12-13. MacIntyre does not dispute the rationalist argument that cognitive ability is essential to humanity, so much as he argues that this essentially human trait is also shared among other nonhuman animals, particularly dolphins. His contention is not that humans are *not* essentially cognitive, but that so are other animals, and that humans excel over animals not in the degree of cognitive ability, per se, but by its moral quality.
All this is not to say that anyone who employs developmental lenses of interpretation are necessarily adopting a developmental substantive anthropology. There are certainly ways to apply developmental categories of interpretation without falling into developmentalism; perhaps just like it is possible to talk about biology without falling into biological determinism. But as soon as these developmental observations are taken up into abstract schemes and essentialist itineraries, they become hegemonic.

Unfortunately, in practical theology, more has been done to baptize this developmentalist anthropology than to replace it. James Fowler and others not only adopted a kind of developmentalist perspective but used it to help legitimize practical theology as a form of knowledge in an empiricist regime of epistemology. Fowler took Erikson and others’ developmental schemes and used them to construct a kind of itinerary for spiritual growth. Through correlational methodology, he simply theologized the developmentalist perspective. Thus, in theology, this anthropology has survived and practical theology has done little theological work in regards to correcting this anthropological perspective. Telos has been authorized as that which determines human ontos.

From a theological perspective, human ontos, being, is not merely an empty shell awaiting actualization through telos. In fact, the Christian tradition holds that the only intrinsic of humankind is, in fact, death. The pinnacle of maturity, too, is death. Whatever qualitative distinctions we have attached to maturity through social construction, they are neither natural nor intrinsic. “Because in some human beings there are no intrinsic qualities to build on, any anthropology and ethics that proceeds from such qualities cannot be truly universal for that very

81 See James Fowler, Stages of Faith and Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian.
reason.”\textsuperscript{82} Human \textit{telos}, even at its best, is but filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). As Dorothee Sölle put it, “people are somehow wrong right through.”\textsuperscript{83} If we are to rely on human potentiality for the value and constitution of humanity, we are without much hope. But the Christian tradition also holds that being is not dependent upon \textit{potentiality} for its value.\textsuperscript{84} “This possibility, according to the Christian profession of faith, is not a natural one—it is not, for example, the consequence of evolutionary development.”\textsuperscript{85} Meaning and value is ascribed to the person extrinsically, by God. “Being human is never without meaning, because it always means something to God.”\textsuperscript{86}

There is no value to being except by virtue of its relation to God. \textit{Ontos} is, therefore, relational. \textit{Ontos} is not meaningful insofar as it \textit{exists} but only insofar as it is given meaning and created by one who chooses, in freedom, to become its creator. The variances of human diversity and the disorder of human desire notwithstanding, it is by God’s action in relating to us as our creator and doing so in the way in which God has—through freedom and love—that human beings are determined to be human. We must talk about God if we wish to speak of what it means to be human. It is not through the actualization of \textit{ontos} through \textit{telos}, but in the affirmation of \textit{ontos} through \textit{adventus} that being finds its meaning and its quality. “Thus it remains true that,” writes Reinders, “…my being as \textit{imago Dei} is not to be taken ontologically as

\textsuperscript{82} Hans Reinders, \textit{Receiving the Gift of Friendship}, 117.

\textsuperscript{83} Dorothee Sölle, \textit{Thinking About God}, 56.

\textsuperscript{84} “The ultimate end of human life is clearly not dependent on them, but is a gift—an unexpected and undeserved gift.” Hans Reinders, \textit{Receiving the Gift of Friendship}, 97.

\textsuperscript{85} Douglas John Hall, \textit{Professing the Faith}, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 243. Hall goes on to suggest that even though human possibility is issued extrinsically, it is not to be regarded as purely supernatural. It does not disregard our creatureliness but “works mysteriously upon it.” Therefore, the person, in all her creatureliness, is the very thing that is saved, sanctified, and loved by God.

\textsuperscript{86} Hans Reinders, \textit{Receiving the Gift of Friendship}, 314
a subsistent entity, but as a relationship that is ecstatically grounded in God’s loving kindness toward me.”

The paradigm for theological anthropology, then, is not becoming, nor is it mere being, but it is God's coming—the advent of God-with-us so that we are, essentially and fundamentally, being-with-God and, only as such, human being-with one another. The “reciprocating self” is only a response to that which makes us human, reciprocity is not determinative of human ontos, it is symptomatic of it. It is not foremost our relationships with other humans that constitutes a reflection of God’s image. Rather, it is our being-with-God, our humanity before God as the object of God’s love and friendship that reflects God’s image and thus constitutes our humanity. “Ecstatic being is being that is grounded in communion, as distinguished from being that is grounded in itself as substance.” We are not determined through our telos but through God’s eschaton. Humans are eschatological, not teleological beings.

The Eschatological Error of Developmentalism: Incarnation and Ex Nihilo

As Reinders puts it,

Theologically speaking, fulfillment of their being is not the result of developing their potential for intrinsic capacities. The relationship between origin and final end is different. From a theological point of view, the final end of being human is identified by the unique relationship that the triune God maintains with humanity through the economy of Grace.

87 Hans Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship, 273.

88 Douglas John Hall, Professing the Faith, 323.


90 Hans Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship, 252.

91 Hans Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship, 273.
If the theological rationale for anthropology is not telos but eschaton, then we must address the eschatological error in developmentalism. By conflating the qualities of growth and progress with maturity and development, making development not only a natural process but a social and ethical goal toward which human beings are meant to strive individually and economically, developmentalism lays claim on how we are to view history and its ends. Developmentalism’s basic claim about history is that it is a linear progression of the past moving through the present and into the future. This claim about history reduces the present to transitionality and determines the human according to the human’s orientation to the future by way of the pursuit of goods.

Its trajectory fundamentally sets out from the human being—this is what makes it a substantive anthropology rather than a theological anthropology—and this trajectory, this orientation, is of consequential importance to developmentalism. The human’s orientation toward a prescribed goal or telos becomes the determinative quality of the imago Dei.

Reflecting on Erikson’s work, Donald Capps writes,

Erikson asks: How does the individual acquire and maintain a sense of orientation in this ongoing process of change? Orientation language abounds in Erikson’s writings… he stresses the importance of having a clear sense of orientation in life, a steady image of where we have been and where we are going. He rejects the romantic notion that disorientation and disorder are more ‘natural’ to the human species and therefore more desirable or worthwhile.

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92 According to Chris Jenks, “the conflation of development with ideas of growth and progress builds a competitive ethic into the process of development itself which supports the ideology of possessive individualism at the root of industrialized capitalist cultural formations.” Chris Jenks, Childhood, 37.

Erikson was troubled by disorder and disorientation, perhaps because of how much of it he had endured himself in his childhood.

So when Erikson’s orientation language is taken up into abstract formulas of developmentalism, it prescribes a particular orientation. This orientation toward the future as potentiality is fundamental to developmentalism’s anthropology. When developmentalism, then, co-opts theology, it does so by a distortion, an error in eschatology that confuses and conflates development and the coming of God. History is determined by development—the progressive movement from past, through present, to future—and history determines our future.

Theology engages anthropology not from human orientation toward some promise of intrinsic potentiality, nor even from human orientation toward God, but categorically from God’s orientation toward human beings. We must ask in what way is God oriented toward us. And we must answer: God’s orientation toward us is such that God’s future determines history, and not the other way around. “God reveals himself [sic] in the form of promise and in the history that is marked by promise.”94 It is eschaton, not telos, that determines the world and its history. Our hope is not for the development of present potential and its future realization. “To be sure, it can be said that our hope is hope in the coming of the faithfulness of God, that it expects the promised future from the coming of God himself [sic] and not apart from him [sic].”95

When we talk about God’s future, we may think of apocalyptic images of Christ’s coming reign in glory from the book of Revelation or Daniel. But we are also permitted to think of the incarnation and of the actual birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Jesus, even at birth, is incarnation in

94 Jürgen Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 42. Moltmann goes on to say that “the Christian doctrine of the revelation of God must explicitly belong neither to the doctrine of God—as an answer to the proofs of God… nor to anthropology… It must be eschatologically understood…” 43.

95 Ibid, 119.
actuality, not merely potentiality. It is not telos that makes his birth significant. It is that through him, even his infant body, God is with us. This infant Jesus is Emmanuel. The eschatological reality of the renewal and restoration that comes in God's arrival, from nothing in us, to the nothing that we are, is what makes the actuality of the incarnation, as well as the actuality of human ontos and dignity, the truest thing about every living person. It is love that makes us human. “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). This is not some ethereal or abstract concept, but the flesh and blood particularity of the man from Nazareth. According to Craig Keen,

...Jesus declares, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6). Jesus declares this not from the cavernous, acoustically perfect, empty ballroom of eternity, but close to the ground, in the flesh and on the move... Indeed, it is a trial in thinking as a kind of journey with an eschatos, not a telos, a journey of hope, not extrapolation.96

The present is made worthy not by virtue of its orientation (or even potential orientation) toward the future, but only by God’s actual orientation, as the God of promise, toward the present.

Adventus vs. Futurum

If eschatology is to provide the logic of theological anthropology, eschatology and not teleology, then we must be clear in distinguishing eschatology from development. Where development prioritizes potentiality, eschatology prioritizes actuality. This may seem somewhat counterintuitive. Is not eschatology characterized by its distinctive attention to the future? How can eschatology help us attend to the present any better than developmentalism does? But these questions only make sense at first glance, for when we have adequately understood that, in

96 Craig Keen, After Crucifixion, 45.
eschatology, our future comes to us extrinsically as God’s future and does not issue from the “history of the old,” we will be able to look to everyone, regardless of whether they are developing or not, as one to whom the saving presence of God in Christ is expected to arrive. Because we expect God’s coming and not the world’s becoming, we are permitted to hope for the consummation of the world, even under the most hopeless of present conditions.

According to Kathryn Tanner,

The consummation of the world is not brought about by the world. A gap exists between the results of world processes and the world’s consummation, a gap to be bridged by a God with the power to reverse those results, the power to bring what is otherwise absolutely unexpected into existence—say, a world that knows neither loss nor suffering.

Therefore, we need not mine the present for signs of its potentiality or seek to invest our energies where we might have the greatest influence upon the present for its development into the future. Instead, we can look to every present as the location to which the future of God is coming. We can hope in actuality and not merely in potentiality.

Eschatology is not the extension of the world’s present potential into future actualization and it does not celebrate preference for those parts of the present which appear less subject to death than others. According to Moltmann, “The expected future does not have to develop within the framework of the possibilities inherent in the present, but arises from that which is possible to the God of promise. This can also be something which by the standard of present

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experience appears impossible.” The fundamental grounding for this eschatology is the theology of the cross. Hope is not born from the notion that there is necessarily something in the present which bears qualities that correspond to a prescribed future. Indeed, there can hardly be said to exist any intrinsic potential within the mangled corpse of a Galilean man hanging from a Roman cross. Under the theology of the cross, eschatology depends not on any expectation that something should have the potential to progress according to a standard of maturity. Hope does not expect development, it expects resurrection.

The cross, therefore, represents an indispensable element of Christian eschatology. The hope for the future represented in the resurrection of Jesus is hope for the crucified Jesus. Only by recognising the “god-forsakenness of all things” can we hope for the redemption of all things, for “the whole of reality.” As Richard Bauckham put it, “...the cross represents the plight and the fate of the world. But the same Jesus was raised, and therefore his resurrection is God’s promise of new creation for the whole of reality which the crucified Jesus represents.” In this way, eschatology allows our energies as youth workers to be directed toward young people who do not otherwise measure up to the standards of potentiality. Spiritual formation need not and should not be treated as a developmental process. “Instead of progressive stages of development, it is about movements,” namely the movement of the Holy Spirit (as has always been implied in the term spiritual formation).

100 Jürgen Moltmann, Theology of Hope (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 103.
101 Ibid, 34.
102 Richard Bauckham, The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann, 83.
Hope does not refuse to see the god-forsakenness of the present and so it does not optimistically search for those parts of the present that have the potential to be developed into the future. “Hope... can see a future also for the transient, the dying, and the dead.”¹⁰⁴ It looks not to potentiality, but marches straight into actuality and impossibility awaiting God’s self-disclosure through the resurrection of Christ. The paradigm of hope is Advent – adventus as opposed to futurum. As Moltmann explains it, “Futurum means what will be; adventus means what is coming... future in the sense of futurum develops out of the past and present, inasmuch as these hold within themselves the potentiality of becoming and are ‘pregnant with future’ (Leibniz’s phrase).”¹⁰⁵ Hope, in the paradigm of adventus, is hope not for what will be but hope for the radically new creation, a hope for what is coming into our impossibility. Looking at the cross, there is no way to see life as a potential for the crucified. But resurrection can be expected insofar as it is coming, as opposed to becoming. “The novum ultimum – the ultimate new thing – does not issue from the history of the old.”¹⁰⁶ The coming of God provides the real basis for eschatological hope. Adventus depends on nothing from the present but meets it with grace and hope. Futurum, on the other hand, judges the present according to its standards and demands its conformity and, therefore, does not have a horizon broad enough to include the present that stands in its very face. Adventus is the coming of God by grace alone and, as such, it is the coming of God into the nihilo.

*Locus Adventus*

According to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, the work of creation is essentially an act of grace for it is an act performed completely in the freedom of love. There is nothing outside of God that compels God to create the world and so there is nothing outside of God that compels God redeem it. Resurrection and creation are both the work of God, by the grace of God, from nothing—*ex nihilo*. In the *creatio ex nihlo*, the human being, as the *imago Dei*, is to be understood, at the most fundamental level in theological anthropology, as the *locus adventus*. To be human is to be that location at which we are to expect God to arrive in history to bring about its restoration and healing through ministry. This eschatological perspective, not developmentalism, must provide the basis for our understanding of spiritual formation in youth ministry. Every encounter is sanctified and made holy, not because of itself or its ability to develop but because of the God who arrives in its place. The useless human being, the *nihilo*, is the *imago Dei* because in waiting with it, in sharing its place,¹⁰⁷ God might be revealed to us as Christ breathes the Holy Spirit into the lungs of those who wait.

In *Adventus*, as opposed to *Futurum*, our expectation does not proceed from the situation itself. What we hope for is a radically new thing—the *Novum Ultimum*¹⁰⁸—so radically new that it bears no analogy to the present. According to Keen, “The hope of a future in Christ is a hope that does not lean on present and available ability, some power-pack of recovery.”¹⁰⁹ Hope is not latent in the present but comes to it from outside, from God through God’s arrival. “Truly being human is not constituted by intrinsic features that mark the domain of the self, nor is it a

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¹⁰⁷ For more on “place sharing” see Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007).


¹⁰⁹ Craig Keen, *After Crucifixion*, 49.
developmental stage of potentialities entailed in human nature.” Potentiality—as with its analogues in development and innovation—does not bear within it a broad enough horizon to reach the kind of radical hope that is born in Christian eschatology. As Keen puts it, “An act of the properly potential may restore, satisfy, and complete, but will never break the chain that keeps it tethered to the essentially old. It may be relatively, but it isn't absolutely new.” The paradigm for this Novum Ultimum is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. “The hope of the world comes as the resurrection of the Crucified comes...by the Spirit of life and redemption.”

The resurrection of Jesus Christ—as the resurrection of a dead body which contains within it no generative potential for a life of its own, outside of decomposition and perhaps fertilization for other lives—permits us to look upon every human experience, even those which do not have potential, as a location for this expectation and an occasion for hope. We are permitted to look upon every human being as a person to whom God is arriving, and to minister to them by waiting with them for God’s arrival, even in the most hopeless of situations. “Only in the perspective of this God can there possibly be...love to the non-existent, love to the unlike, the unworthy, the worthless, to the lost, the transient and the dead; a love that can take upon it the annihilating effects of pain and renunciation because it received its power from hope of a creatio ex nihilo.” It is only from the perspective of the God of promise, the God who has resurrection as God’s future, that we can look upon broken bodies and shed blood as the location of God’s coming.

110 Hans Reinders, Receiving the Gift of Friendship, 249.
111 Craig Keen, After Crucifixion, 49.
112 Ibid, 64
113 Jürgen Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 32.
Since that which we anticipate in Adventus does not emerge from present possibilities within the person, even while we wait in anticipation, the person’s existence is not reduced to some pedestrian transition in a process of development. Their actuality is sanctified according to the future that is coming to it. Hope does not negate the past or present or try to look past actuality. Hope does not forget. It remembers the past and attends to the present as the very location to which God is coming. The future for which we wait in that place is not a future which can be conjured through investment of energy. It is, after all, God’s future for which we wait, and it is only by virtue of it being God’s that we can, by grace, hope for it to come to us as justification in the present and as our future as well. “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5).

**Ministry in the Locus Adventus**

Because of God’s unity with human beings in the cross of Jesus Christ and the hope we have in the coming of God as the novum ultimum ex nihilo, what constitutes human being is not the actualization of potentiality or the development into maturity, but the eschatological anticipation of God’s arrival and God’s ministerial communion with human beings. This must be the paradigm for spiritual formation. What determines the imago Dei, and thus the human being, is not something about the human being. The truth and reality of human life, according to the Apostle Paul, “is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:2-4). Human life (ontos) is locus adventus—a location for hopeful anticipation of divine presence. Ministry, then, is not determined through the paradigm of investment and return but through the practice of waiting.

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114 “A theology in Christ remembers and hopes. Memory is for what is hoped; hope is for what is remembered.” Craig Keen, *After Crucifixion*, 48.
Ministry takes place in the sharing of personhood as we share in the anticipation of God.\textsuperscript{115} This eschatological anticipation, like Mary’s song in Luke 2, takes the future of God as a present reality, without ceasing to see it as future reality. To embrace humankind as the \textit{locus adventus} is to already, now and not yet, expect God to be present and active in their life. Ministry itself, God’s ministry through the Spirit, reveals the person in their humanity and allows us to see Christ in them. We do not bring to the person an essential definition that precedes actuality. We do not operate in abstraction.

The human being, as the \textit{locus adventus} is revealed only through the particularity God’s action in the concrete lived experience of the human being; humanity is disclosed theologically through God’s ministry. “To be [human]” writes Karl Barth, “is to be in the sphere where the first and merciful will of God toward [God’s] creatures, [God’s] will to save and keep them from the power of nothingness, is revealed in action.”\textsuperscript{116} It is for human beings, as ministers, to wait in expectation for that action and to seek ways of participating in it. This is the human side of ministry, which itself belongs primarily and definitively to God.

Youth workers are invited to attend to the lived experience of young people, to share their place, not for the purpose of influence or “formation,” but in order to wait with them for the coming of God. Our task in ministry, then, is no longer a process of spiritual formation or development. This is at least to say that we are no longer to be understood as agents of formation or development. We are, as ministers, those who wait on God’s agency and whatever formation may come in ministry will come from and through God’s arrival into the person and, by

\textsuperscript{115} See Andrew Root, \textit{The Relational Pastor}, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2013).

\textsuperscript{116} Karl Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics III.2}, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960) 145.
extension, their present situation. As ministers, we wait on and tend to God’s arrival, prayerfully
naming it and and witnessing to it along the way. Our task is essentially the reception of God’s
ministry. There is a primal passivity to this reception, but in that passivity our agency is restored
to us. Waiting bears its own intensity—indeed, according to W. H. Vanstone, “waiting can be the
most intense and poignant of all human experiences”117—and in this way it bears its own kind of
agency. “Any kind of waiting presupposes some degree of caring.”118 But even our agency is a
gift we receive passively as those who could not, without God’s grace, attain it through our
action. As those who, in encountering God, receive God’s action, ministers are agents insofar as
they perceive that action in the life of another. Only God, however, can disclose Godself to us.
Therefore, the ultimate agent of ministry is always the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

According to Abigail Visco Rusert, “Encountering young people with the expectation
that God is already at work in their lives removes the pressure that we must somehow conjure
God up for them—or worse, attempt to play God for them ourselves.”119 The anthropology of the
Locus Adventus opens up a new and liberating vision for ministry and spiritual formation. “In a
society that overvalues progress, development, and personal achievement,” wrote Henri Nouwen,
“the spiritual life becomes quite easily performance oriented… but it is of great importance that
we leave the world of measurements behind when we speak about the life of the Spirit. Spiritual
formation, I have come to believe, is not about steps or stages on the way to perfection.”120 We

118 Ibid, 102.
119 Kenda Creasy Dean, Wesley W. Ellis, Justin Forbes, and Abigail Visco Rusert, Delighted:
What Teenagers Are Teaching the Church About Joy (Grand Rapids: Eerdman, 2020), forthcoming.
120 Henri Nouwen, Spiritual Formation, xv-xvi.
are permitted to look less at how the young people with whom we work are progressing in their development and to look more toward the coming of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Youth workers can trade in their anxieties over young people’s religious participation and future development for hope that God is bringing new life into the very present we and our young people currently inhabit.