

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

**Culmination Phase for Selected
Micro-project Assignment**

A Paper Submitted to

Submitted to Dr. James Zabloski,

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of

Micro-Project II: Historical and Current Practices

DSMN 852 – B01

by

Curtis Boozer

February 28, 2021

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Who is Influencing Whom.....	2
Generation Z and Spiritual Maturity	4
Consumer Society: Its Definitions and Its Christian Criticism	6
Will/Heart/Spirit: Discipleship That Forms the Christian Character	8
The Dark Side of Religious Individualism: A Marcusian Exploration.....	10
An Appropriation of Psalm 82.....	12
The Church as Family	14
Religious Individualism and Moral Progressivism	16
The Spirit and the Law	18
Symposium on the Shema	20
Analysis of the Micro-Project	22
Bibliography	29

Introduction

As preparation for this phase, forty peer-reviewed articles from academic journals were read and ten were selected for this micro-project. The intent was to gather information from highly credible sources that were commenting on how culture has changed in the most recent generations and what impact those changes will have upon the process of creating disciples of Jesus.

Specific focus was given to understanding how people's worldviews have changed, the impact of technology upon individual's behavior and thought processes, the tendency in individuals overall to move toward materialism and consumptionism. This self-seeking modality turns people's hearts away from the truths in God's Word and establishes themselves as the "best" authority in their lives. Articles were sought which indicate how these types of thought processes come into play and how society is driving this kind of paradigm.

Information was sought that describe how changing mores are impacting the view of family and the importance of family in determining truth boundaries and what authority is placed upon the views of the family.

Finally, articles were also sought to see how others view the *Shema* from Deut 6¹ and what impact those considerations have upon a person's religious perspectives as well as views on the authority and work of the Holy Spirit in influencing and protecting truth standards. This portion of the research was targeted to understand how people understand devotion to God and their likelihood to align with His precepts for their lives as opposed to their own definitions of truth and proper behavior.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

Baker, Samuel. “Who’s Shaping Whom? Digital Disruption in the Spiritual Lives of Post-Familial Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 16, no. 2 (2017): 117–43. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1163/24055093-01602003>.

Article Summary

Samuel Baker currently serves as the chair of the Christian Ministry & Intercultural Studies department at Corban University, located in Salem, Oregon. Baker earned his Ed.D. at George Fox University, and a M.A Christian Education as well as a B.A Psychology from Biola University. Baker served churches in multiple states and in a variety of ministries.²

The author addresses the significant changes in communication technology and how it is affecting early adults regarding their interpersonal relationships. Baker contends that technology is causing culture change and states “it continues to reshape a variety of frameworks: individual, social, and ecclesiastical.”³ Baker describes how increased use of communication technologies (smart phones, Facebook, etc.) are having impacts upon familial relationships and creating a state that is described in the article as “post-familial.”⁴ This state describes how family members are alone together as they interact with each other and those outside the family with their smart devices. Baker poses the question, “What is an appropriate theological response to the shaping effects of technology in the lives of emerging adults?”⁵ The author warns of the tendency for ministers to hold “dystopian views of digital engagement”⁶ and encourages the readers to

² Corban University, “Dr. Samuel E. Baker”, Accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.corban.edu/faculty/dr-samuel-e-baker>.

³ Samuel Baker, “Who’s Shaping Whom? Digital Disruption in the Spiritual Lives of Post-Familial Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 16, no. 2 (2017), 117.

⁴ Ibid., 118.

⁵ Ibid., 119.

⁶ Ibid.

develop their own “integrative approach to a theology of technology” if they are to be effective in providing holistic guidance.”⁷ Baker concludes that those seeking to influence others spiritually need to be aware of technology’s influence to help early adults not be conformed to the world and adopt a “crowdsourced” view of God.

Article Critique

Baker introduces an interesting discussion on a culture change that is certainly having a significant impact upon how individuals interact with each other daily. He describes how these technologies degrade social interaction from what it has been in the past and suggests that people need to be aware of how it will change family discourse and engagement. Baker’s call to action is very pertinent to ministers in the current environment as their congregants are not following traditional family behaviors and it is wise to recognize that the assumptions that have been used to engage in relational ministries will have to adapt the new cultural norms. A well-thought-out theology of technology will provide a minister with convincing arguments to persuade the impacted individuals of the degradation that has occurred in their family relationships and aid them in recovering those healthy relational interactions.

Baker attempts to find a space between techno-utopians and those with a dystopian viewpoint of the impact of technologies upon our lives. Baker tended toward a dystopian viewpoint himself when he discussed users of displays for reading as opposed to using printed texts.⁸ Baker’s bias should give a reader pause and encourage them to consider that all of the data analysis is not complete on the full impact of technologies and a reader should remain open-minded until further research is available.

⁷ Samuel Baker, “Who’s Shaping Whom?”, 120.

⁸ Ibid., 134.

Bergler, Thomas E. “Generation Z and Spiritual Maturity,” *Christian Education Journal*, 17, no. 1 (2020): 75–91. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/0739891320903058>.

Article Summary

Thomas E. Bergler teaches in the Ministry and Missions Department at Huntington University, located in Huntington, IN. The author earned his Ph.D. in American Religious History from the University of Notre Dame, a MA in Theology and Church History from Wheaton College, and a BS in Chemistry and History from the University of Michigan.⁹ This article considers the traits of Americans whose birth years would categorize them as “Generation Z” and how to develop appropriate strategies to aid these individuals toward spiritual maturity. The author presents an explanation from Scripture of what traits a mature believer should exhibit, then presents his analysis of the challenges Generation Z individuals will exhibit to those that invest in them to help them gain spiritual maturity. Bergler declared that “When it comes to religious beliefs and practices among Generation Z, the minority who are committed Christians are doing reasonably well, a less committed middle group that identifies as Christian is not faring as well, and the minority who profess no religious affiliation is growing.”¹⁰ Bergler explains attempting to reach Generation Z individuals should reflect upon the research that shows that the methods used for biblical teaching are not proving to be very successful. Bergler references studies conducted by the Barna Group in 2018 and the National Study of Youth and Religion conducted in 2005, where the number of Millennial teenagers that

⁹ Huntington University, “Tom Bergler”, Accessed February 10, 2021, <https://www.huntington.edu/meet-the-faculty/tom-bergler>

¹⁰ Thomas E. Bergler, “Generation Z and Spiritual Maturity,” *Christian Education Journal*, 17, no. 1 (2020), 79.

qualified at “devoted” were 8% in the 2005 study and the 2018 study.¹¹ Berger highlights the need to help these young people “catch a vision for spiritual maturity and pursue it in community with other disciples of Jesus.”¹²

Article Critique

The author presents an argument regarding the imperative in Scripture that encourages mature believers to help develop new believers and the need for new believers to pursue growth toward spiritual maturity. The author explains that a mature believer must address the cultural influence a new believer has experienced and address specific misconceptions that they have. He explains common traits those in this age group exhibit such as a slow growth strategy, intense use of social media and mobile technology, mental health struggles, risk aversion and a desire for material things to power their life goals

The author encourages mature believers to spend extra effort “on apologetics and on learning activities that involve the affective and volitional domains so that these young people will take greater ownership of their beliefs.”¹³

The author references “The National Study of Youth and Religion” in this article but does not footnote the study nor reference the specific publication from which he asserts a statement based upon this study. It appears to have been a project of the University of Notre Dame and included surveys from 2003, 2005 and 2008.¹⁴ The author relies upon other writers for several of his observations that point out the characteristics of the Millennials in the test group.

¹¹ Thomas E. Bergler, “Generation Z and Spiritual Maturity,” 80.

¹² Ibid., 90

¹³ Ibid., 87.

¹⁴ University of Notre Dame, “National Study of Youth & Religion”, Accessed on February 10, 2021 from <https://youthandreligion.nd.edu/research-design>.

Brandner, Tobias. “The Church as Family,” *Theology Today* (Ephrata, Pa.), 76, no. 3 (2019): 217–23. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/0040573619859018>.

Article Summary

Tobias Brandner serves as an Associate Professor at the Divinity School of Chung Chi College in Hong Kong. Brandner earned his ThD and MDiv from the University of Zurich.¹⁵

Brandner discusses the importance that family relationships have upon the Chinese churches and the leadership structures within them. He describes how traditional Confucianism aligns well with defining the need for strong, supportive families, which the Christian church in China can promote as well to the believers in the churches. Brandner continues by explaining that the church leadership structures benefit from the expectation of having a “family feel”. Brandner states, “. . . the family paradigm of the Christian church creates closely knit communities. The closeness and reliability of relationships contrast with the anonymity and individualization of modern urban life and give churches great relational and perhaps more importantly financial strength.”¹⁶

Brandner explains the efforts that the central government has exerted over the decades to erode familial relationships and to transfer the reliance of individuals to the government for support and approval. Brandner points out that the efforts have had a significant negative impact upon families, but people do not find the government to be a good substitute for the family relationships, thus creating fertile ground for the church to provide a community for relational support. Brandner asserts that the Chinese government sees the churches as challengers to their influence and will continue to encroach upon that influence.

¹⁵ The Chinese University of Hong Kong, “Tobias Brandner”, accessed on February 13, 2021 from <https://www.theology.cuhk.edu.hk/en/academics/teaching-staff/tobias-brandner>.

¹⁶ Tobias Brandner. “The Church as Family,” *Theology Today* (Ephrata, Pa.), 76, no. 3 (2019): 218.

Article Critique

The article provides a glimpse into one aspect of what has been the most successful evangelical outreach in the modern age and how familial closeness can withstand intense outside pressure. The author's observations of how the evangelical church is prospering in China allow the reader to consider how important the "church family" will be in other nations and cultures. The fact that people seek out the church for a "sense of belonging" speaks to the inherent need of people to have that connection with each other, especially within the family of God. Also, it is interesting to see the author's comments about how the Chinese governmental leaders have a pattern of describing themselves as "Fathers" to the Chinese people. Brandner mentions that this practice is ". . . echoed by the present leader, who is styled as father and popularly celebrated as "big daddy Xi""¹⁷ by the party propaganda ministry. Brandner continues by describing strengths of the family church paradigm that allows flexibility and resiliency under pressure and weaknesses that can cause internal divisiveness among the churches.

The article does not explain how familial closeness is developed within these churches among members who were not blood related family. Brandner does describe how the families are often closely knit because of the familial bloodlines but does not explain how the churches minister to those who are not part of the genetic families. The author simply asserts that the churches view themselves as family in general, without providing context of what behavior and thoughts support such a view.

¹⁷ Tobias Brandner. "The Church as Family," 222.

Kopiec, Piotr. “Consumer Society: Its Definitions and Its Christian Criticism,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 76, no. 3 (2020): e1–8. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4102/hts.v76i3.5910>.

Article Summary

Piotr Kopiec serves as the Chair of Protestant Theology at John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, in Lublin, Poland.¹⁸ Kopiec engages in a conversation regarding how culture and economies have evolved a state of consumptionism into individuals. He presents that consumptionism has been created by the industrial revolution and urbanization. Kopiec decries the effects of consumptionism and asserts it has reduced mankind’s values, as it reduces all relationships to transactions which feed further consumption. Kopiec suggests that a person should consider the rise of consumptionism in two forms: socio-economic and psychological.

Kopiec describes how the industrial revolution, coupled with the spread of democratic governments, gave rise to the rapid advancement of consumer society. Kopiec shares, “In a democratizing society, the consumer society has an inherent potential to unfold itself and consequently the conditions making its proliferation possible.”¹⁹ The author describes the psychological form as a consumer cycle of thought. Kopiec says, “A consumer lives in the consumer cycle, which consists of the sequence desire–purchase–consumption(use)–disappointment–new desire.”²⁰ The author contends that the consumer will not stop looking for new experiences.

¹⁸ Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski, “dr hab. Piotr Kopiec prof. KUL”, Accessed on February 11, 2021 from <https://pracownik.kul.pl/piotr.kopiec/kontakt>

¹⁹ Piotr Kopiec, “Consumer Society: Its Definitions and Its Christian Criticism,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 76, no. 3 (2020), 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5

Pope Francis shared in 2013, how the idolatry of money and consumption could be equated with the golden calf from Exo 32:1-35.²¹ Mankind's increased reverence for the acquisition and consumption of products and experience overwhelms their desire for meaningful relationships with others or with God.

Article Critique

This article clearly defines the journey which modern man has pursued to seek personal comfort and satisfaction, as well as explaining how the existing governmental and economic environment has made consumptionism available to many people rather than just a few elites. The amazing prosperity that modern economies provide has led to a significant worldview shift. While people decry the non-stop marketing efforts of the marketplace, the same people feverishly pursue and consume the products offered to maintain their status and comfort within their societal relationships. Mankind has always tended to observe others and to mimic those who have things that are perceived as valuable.

The article explains that many in the world are unable to access this lifestyle yet yearn to be like those who live such a lifestyle. The pervasiveness of television around the world exposes the American lifestyle to far-flung groups and incites them to crave what is not available to them.

The article's title suggests that it will be a Christian criticism, yet it is predominantly a criticism made by the Catholic Church. Even though the thoughts proposed by Pope Francis will resonate with evangelical Christians, this article would be enhanced with more Christian voices being included in the argument.

²¹ Piotr Kopiec, "Consumer Society: Its Definitions and Its Christian Criticism,"6.

Porter, Steven L. “Will/Heart/Spirit: Discipleship That Forms the Christian Character,” *Christian Education Journal*, 16, no. 1 (2019): 79–94. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/0739891318820334>.

Article Summary

Steven L. Porter teaches theology and philosophy for Talbot’s Institute for Spiritual Formation at Biola University. Porter earned his Ph.D. from the University of Southern California, a M.Phil from the University of Oxford, a MA from the Talbot School of Theology, and a BA from Biola University.²²

Porter explains that a person’s will is a key driver to their development in spiritual formation. Porter highlights the importance of understanding the role of the will in spiritual formation. Porter raises the priority of the human will in spiritual formation by relating how Jesus spoke to His disciples about proper and improper prayer. In His examples, Jesus pointed out that a person who performed for others or who sought to manipulate God were misguided and only received benefits that their minds granted, rather than blessings from God. Porter states, “The ability we have to originate a course of action, to set our minds on this rather than that, to do one thing and not another, is what contributes to who we are and who we are becoming.”²³ Being actively aware of their motivations and choosing to pursue a relationship with God requires an action of a person’s will.

The author references ineffectual prayers identified by Jesus in Matt 6:5 as opposed to effectual prayers in Matt 6:4, where the individual hides themselves away in private and seeks the Lord without anyone else being a part of the conversation. This recognition of the

²² Biola University, “Steven Porter”, Accessed on February 11, 2021 from <https://www.biola.edu/directory/people/steven-porter>.

²³ Steven L. Porter, “Will/Heart/Spirit: Discipleship That Forms the Christian Character,” *Christian Education Journal*, 16, no. 1 (2019), 83.

importance of the relationship with God demonstrates a believer's understanding of God as a person rather than a formless entity. Porter encourages believers to see, "it is loving of God to direct his children to approach himself in a manner that frees them from false views of themselves, of himself, and of the Divine-human relationship."²⁴ Porter reminds the faithful that it takes an act of their will to properly value God and approach Him as God has encouraged.

Porter describes the four stages of progression toward complete identification of a person's will with God's that Willard had expressed. The four stages (surrender, abandonment, contentment, and participation) will serve to align a person's will with God's and allow them to enjoy fellowship and directed purpose in the service of the kingdom of God.

Article Critique

Porter makes a compelling argument as he advances these concepts to aid the reader in understanding the process of spiritual formation and recognize how vital the will is in determining the individual's progress in their formation. His conclusion states how a disciple who is learning to do all that Jesus commanded (i.e., the Great Commission) needs understanding of this concept to establish a basis of care for their will. Porter's assertions, along with Dallas Willard's comments, point out the need for an individual to purposely set their will to pursue relationship with God and to acknowledge His Lordship in their lives. Without this active recognition and submission, the cultural influences each person experiences will be more effective in steering the believer away from spiritual formation.

Porter concentrates on expressing his thoughts and those of Dallas Willard. His other citations are relegated to definition support and not allowing those other voices to contribute significantly to the conversation.

²⁴ Steven L. Porter, "Will/Heart/Spirit: Discipleship That Forms the Christian Character," *Christian Education Journal*, 16, no. 1 (2019): 81.

Spickard, James V. “The Dark Side of Religious Individualism: A Marcusean Exploration,” *Critical Research on Religion*, 7, no. 2 (2019): 130–46. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/2050303219848066>.

Article Summary

The author, James V. Spickard, earned his Ph.D. from Graduate Theological Union, a MA from New School for Social Research, and a BA from Stanford.²⁵ He currently serves as a professor at the University of Redlands, Redlands, CA.

Spickard presents an article that examines the concept of religious individualism through the lens of Herbert Marcuse, who was a scholar with the Institute of Social Research and wrote series of books from 1940 to 1972. Marcuse presented the idea that individuals submit, without realizing it, to the established order. Spickard says, “Marcuse would see contemporary religion as not independent enough from the status quo to provide a source of critique.”²⁶ Spickard and others have built their premises upon this thought and Spickard focuses on discussing how a person’s choice for religious individualism will lead them to submit to the “status quo” of the existing culture.

Spickard’s article argues that religious individualism has resulted in organized religion losing its voice and being dismissed by the culture. Spickard points out how the sexual scandals in the Catholic church have had a significant impact upon the credibility of all organized churches in the American culture. He explains that individuals are defining religion for themselves and believe that God requires little, and church is a helpful community filled with nice people. Spickard voices, “Individualized religion specifically does not focus on structures of

²⁵ Academia, “James V. Spickard”, Accessed on February 11, 2021 from <https://redlands.academia.edu/JamesVSpickard>.

²⁶ Spickard, James V. “The Dark Side of Religious Individualism: A Marcusean Exploration,” *Critical Research on Religion*, 7, no. 2 (2019), 136.

oppression. Nor does it focus on communities. Instead, it focuses on personal development: an “I’m OK, you’re OK” spirituality that emphasizes living a good life and helping others while accepting the status quo, which is okay. Individualized religion is also a source of personal identity. Like other consumer goods, it is a means of self-expression.”²⁷

Article Critique

Spickard’s discussion provides a credible argument of how the seeker sensitive movement in churches can lead to individualistic behavior in the realm of religious thought. His description of people seeking a comfortable happiness is well stated. Marcuse was primarily presenting observations on non-religious matters in the 1950’s, but his thoughts do amply describe how individuals within the church who do not have a strong identity in Christ have been impacted by the culture and have modified their expectations of what their religious life should look like. Spickard points out that religious voices have lost impact as they have been attached to other meanings by the masses. Spickard says, “And yet, the issue is not just whether religious voices speak on issues of injustice; it is whether they are heard. Though the Religious Right has considerable influence in the United States, it largely concerns itself with the famous culture wars, not with structural critique.”²⁸

Spickard’s article attempts to describe how religious individualism is not equipped to become meaningful in providing meaningful action in culture, which does not seem an appropriate conclusion considering what was presented. The conclusion that would make more sense was that religious individualism tends toward narcissism and a consumptive lifestyle rather than providing a meaningful impact to society.

²⁷ Spickard, James V. “The Dark Side of Religious Individualism: A Marcusean Exploration,” *Critical Research on Religion*, 7, no. 2 (2019), 136.

²⁸ Ibid., 139.

Sutton, Lodewyk. “An Appropriation of Psalm 82 against the Background of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The Christian Church as a Change Agent in the Fourth Industrial Revolution,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 76, no. 2 (2020): e1–9. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4102/hts.v76i2.6126>.

Article Summary

Lodewyk Sutton serves as a professor of Old and New Testament Studies at the University of the Free State, in Bloemfontein, South Africa. He earned his Ph.D. in Old Testament Studies, a MDiv, a BTh and an BA from the University Of Pretoria.²⁹

Sutton explains that the Fourth Industrial Revolution began around the year 2000 and was initiated by the advancements in computers, networks, advances on the internet, nanotechnology, and robotics. This revolution aided a change in individual’s perceptions and moved people in America toward an individualistic society rather than a group-oriented society. Sutton described one of the “GenMe” attributes as “This is a generation that was born after the cultural mainstream of self-focus was already established and therefore they are a generation this is not familiar with a world that would put duty before the self.”³⁰ These individuals do not rely upon groups for their answers of truth but are more likely to define truths for themselves and expect others to do so as well. Lodewyk states,

one of the negative factors of the digital age is that it sustains an individual society that can lead to extreme forms of self-obsessiveness and even narcissism. The church, therefore, needs to be familiar with the generation that functions primarily in this Fourth Industrial Revolution and with how this society differs from ancient biblical societies.³¹

²⁹ Academia, “Lodewyk Sutton”, accessed on February 12, 2021 from <https://ufs.academia.edu/LodewykSutton>.

³⁰ Lodewyk Sutton, “An Appropriation of Psalm 82 against the Background of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The Christian Church as a Change Agent in the Fourth Industrial Revolution,” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 76, no. 2 (2020), 3.

³¹ Sutton, Lodewyk. “An Appropriation of Psalm 82 against the Background of the Fourth Industrial Revolution”, 2.

Sutton continues by referencing Psalm 82 and providing the perspective that God is the sole provider for truth and can be relied upon for that truth. The author argues that the church needs to recognize the thoughts of the current audience of individuals and act as a change agent that is active in interpreting how to respond to the changes around society. He argues that rather than teaching them to be group-oriented, the church should attempt to point individuals to seek God for truth and direction as the appropriate authority.

Article Critique

Sutton speaks clearly of the individualistic nature of Americans and offers an interesting perspective that allows a believer to approach an individual in a manner that has a greater chance of being received well, given their worldview. The author explains that a believer should not assume a person will have a group-centered consciousness and believe it is their duty to do something for others. Sutton shares they will need someone to explain to them the benefit of having an absolute authority that provides trustworthy guidance rather than having a value that pretends that every individual's truth is factually truth. The chaos in the world demonstrates that not everyone's truth is in fact truth, which logic demands this argument should be set aside.

Sutton makes his argument that authority lies solely with God, which is accurate; however, his proposed solution does not do much beyond providing an individualistic person a starting point to appropriating a biblical lifestyle as proposed by Jesus and the Apostles. This topic can be very expansive and will require believers to develop relationships with others to be able to spend an appropriate amount of time to help them understand the value of surrendering their control and allowing God's Word to provide them trustworthy guidance.

Uecker, Jeremy E, and Paul Froese. “Religious Individualism and Moral Progressivism: How Source of Religious Authority Is Related to Attitudes About Abortion, Same-Sex Marriage, Divorce, and Premarital Sex,” *Politics and Religion*, 12, no. 2 (2019): 283–316. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1017/S1755048318000792>.

Article Summary

Jeremy Uecker earned his Ph. D. in Sociology, and a M.A., Sociology from the University of Texas at Austin. Paul Froese earned his Ph.D., and a M.A. Sociology from the University of Washington.

The authors report upon their survey and calculations that sought to determine if a person’s adherence to religious individualism correlated to their moral progressivism. In almost every case, those who identified that they placed high reliance on religious organizations and the leadership of those organizations, were more conservative in their viewpoints on the contentious matters. Those who placed a higher reliance on other cultural authorities more likely to be described as morally progressive. The authors’ research pointed out that there is an increase in moral individualism, where an individual “is more likely to be influenced by cultural trends which champion individual choice and question the legitimacy of traditional norms and prohibitions.”³² The authors describe conservatives as people who “draw not on moral individualism, but rather from religious teachings, texts, and traditions to combat progressive trends . . .”³³

In their sample, they identified that 51% of the individuals were a form of non-religious individualists, 31% were religious institutionists, and 18% were religious individualists.

³² Jeremy E. Uecker and Paul Froese, “Religious Individualism and Moral Progressivism: How Source of Religious Authority Is Related to Attitudes About Abortion, Same-Sex Marriage, Divorce, and Premarital Sex,” *Politics and Religion*, 12, no. 2 (2019), 284.

³³ Ibid.

They concluded that those with individualistic sources of religious authority have a robust association with progressive attitudes. Not surprisingly, the secularists discounted religious authority, but religious individualists appeared to be moving away from religious conventions of the past.

Article Critique

The methodology used for analyzing this sample appeared well constructed and adhered to prior studies which had been peer viewed and accepted as valid. It is understandable that it is difficult to measure a person's beliefs along so many scales and be able to easily group any person into a subgroup. The authors' efforts should be applauded, and they suggest that more research should be conducted to clarify the data.

The authors point out that many religious individualists have several items of progressive thought that do not align with the traditions of their religions. They also point out that people surveyed "hold progressive moral attitudes because their understanding of morality comes directly from their personal understanding of God rather than an institutionally prescribed understanding."³⁴ This comment seems to display that a person grouped as a religious individualist may be operating as an expressive individualist based upon their desire to define God's thoughts themselves outside of Scripture or a religious institution.

The authors pointed out that their methodology did not discern the amount of importance a person placed upon making moral decisions based upon religious principles, which could have skewed the number of people who were reported as being religious individualists rather than properly identified as expressive individualists or utilitarian individualist.

³⁴ Jeremy E. Uecker and Paul Froese, "Religious Individualism and Moral Progressivism", 288.

**Westhuizen, Henco van der. “The Spirit and the Law,” *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 40, no. 1 (2019).
<https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4102/ve.v40i1.1933>.**

Article Summary

Henco van der Westhuizen serves as a senior lecturer at in historical and constructive theology at The University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa.³⁵

Westhuizen has written a very interesting article where he explains how theologian Michael Welker has analyzed the fundamental purposes of biblical law and how those principles relate to God’s law that was presented in the Old Testament. Welker continued by considering how the Holy Spirit’s influence moves to empower that law to become more than a guide to moral living, but to something “beyond morality.”³⁶ Westhuizen explains that the law provides a “security of expectations”, which aids a person to know proper boundaries that they can count upon. Welker describes security as “referring to “certainty, assurances, reliable promises, firm expectations, trust and trustworthiness.”³⁷ Welker had described three codes: the legal code, the mercy code, and the cultic code.³⁸ The legal code in God’s law aids a believer to understand God’s character. The mercy code enables a believer to relate to those who do not yet know God as it reminds them of their own need for mercy from God. The cultic code in the law highlights the fact that God is accessible to man. Westhuizen points out to the reader that Welker’s work reminds mankind that God’s law is meant to aid them, not simply result in condemnation. The

³⁵ Academia, “Henco van der Westhuizen”, accessed on February 14, 2021 from <https://ouvs.academia.edu/HencovanderWesthuizen>.

³⁶ Henco van der Westhuizen, “The Spirit and the Law,” *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 40, no. 1 (2019), 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

article points out that mankind tends to twist and redefine morality and God's law establishes a plumbline that can be referenced to determine true morality.

Article Critique

Westhuizen explained Welker's thoughts clearly and provided a convincing dialogue of the theologian's arguments. His explanation's help a reader understand that it is a work of the Spirit to transform law from a punishing framework to a revelatory framework of God's character and love for mankind. Welker's work seems to be a bit mechanical in the way he describes the Spirit's work in the three categories of law, but that can be understood in that he is attempting to create a simile to describe how the Law of God can establish boundaries and bring forth an abundant life for the believer.

Welker describes how the knowledge of God and mercy require the involvement of the Spirit to keep the intent of the Law from being misapplied by mankind. He argues that the Spirit of God pours out upon all mankind, rather than just one people. This application aids a reader in understanding that the Spirit of God is at work on all men to bring blessing to them if they choose to abide by God's law.

Westhuizen often quoted Welker in German but did not clearly identify if he was directly translating those statements. In some instances, German was used in quotes and there was no subsequent translation. Since this article was published in English, it seems reasonable to have expected all German quotes to be translated.

Zaas, Peter. "Symposium on the Shema," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 48, no. 3 (2018): 133–47. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/0146107918781280>.

Article Summary

Zaas has compiled three presentations made during the Symposium on the Shema that occurred in 2017. Three scholars who represented Islam, Judaism, and Messianic Judaism were asked to give their reflections upon the Shema. Roberta Sabbath, representing Islam, explained why the Shema was important to Muslims and how it had been slightly transformed to highlight there was only one singular God. Interestingly, she described how this passage was etched onto the outer walls of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and how it was also written on the interior of the Dome. The interior message has a more specific refutation of Jesus as being in any way divine.

Kenneth Hanson described how there is a move of reformation within the Messianic Judaism community to explain that Jesus was a Jew and would not have elevated Himself to the level of the divine as He quoted the Shema. Hanson does describe this is a splinter movement and not the opinion of most Messianic Jews, who would be more easily understood to be Christians who are Jews. These reformers seek to remove the Trinitarian concepts where Jesus was the incarnation of God. Hanson concludes by suggesting, "a fresh look by messianic Jews at the Jesus of history might well pave the way for an expression of their faith that would in no way be in tension with the essence of Jewish monotheism."³⁹

The final scholar was Zev Garber, who represented Judaism. He spoke of the Jewish belief that there is only one God and no others. He argued that Deut 13:1 describes a commandment to not add to what God has stated nor diminish it. His argument is that there is no room for adding two more members to the Godhead according to Scripture.

³⁹ Ibid., 142.

Article Critique

This article is very useful to gain perspective on how other major religions consider this passage and the arguments those who represent those religions would make against a Christian interpretation of the Shema. It also provides insight to how they would seek to rebut the challenging thought that God chose to send His son, the Word, in flesh to save mankind. Each of these scholars approach this topic from their presuppositions and make reasoned arguments that explain away the deity of Christ so that their religious view can rise about the assertion of a Triune God.

Each scholar presented arguments which are obviously sufficient to them to refuse that there could be a Trinity in existence. The statements of Garber show a deep-seated distrust of any offering of another “god”. Garber states, “hence Yeshua/Jesus, worshipped as truly God and Man (and other Messianic belief articles) is totally unacceptable and incompatible to (Rabbinic) Judaism.”⁴⁰

The article did not include a Christian viewpoint that was not associated with the Jewish community. It would have been useful to have a Christian scholar presenting a well-reasoned argument from that viewpoint to be included in this dialogue of scholars. These scholars were all speaking to refute Jesus as God and it would have represented a more balanced discussion if the key focus of their discussion had been properly represented and the “gospel” shared in a manner that explained how God acted and acts, in all of the unity of the persons of God: Father, Son, and Spirit.

⁴⁰ Peter Zaas, “Symposium on the Shema,” 146.

Analysis of the Micro-Project

The critiques selected for this micro-project were chosen to help explain how the contemporary church has experienced declining results from historical ministry practices and consider how the current ministry practices in use might be modified to achieve favorable results. Three areas were considered for these selections. The first dealt with the consideration of how devoted individuals are to God. The second area considered how individuals view unity. The third area of study considered how individuals view the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

Devotion to God

Bergler's article expressed that Generation Z individuals are not very responsive to the historical methods of biblical teaching. His article does not provide a roadmap to success in this area, but it is important to consider this research and use it as a motivation to study the issue and develop new methods to communicate God's principles effectively. The ability to help the younger generation understand God's love for them will enable them to develop their devotion for God and become willing to submit to His lordship.

Porter's article leads a disciple to consider the importance of aligning their will with that of God's. Porter reminds the reader that it takes a concentrated effort to submit their will to follow what the Lord directs them to do so that they grow in their spiritual formation process. His key point was that this kind of spiritual alignment does not happen just by hearing the correct information, but through a conscious choice. This information confronts a historical practice of preaching to a group of people without spending the time to know each person individually and to share the pertinent Scripture that speaks to their current issues in life as well as encouragement to seek the Lord for daily instruction as a disciple.

Spickard explained how the seeker sensitive movement can enable individualistic behavior as an individual considers religious matters. Spickard's conclusion was that religious individualism tends toward narcissism and a consumptive lifestyle. As the church seeks the most effective methods to disciple believers, a strong need will exist to provide clear and focused direction back to God's Word and lovingly telling them how to apply that truth to their lives, even as that truth conflicts with the current cultural norms.

Sutton provided a strong argument about how the continued evolution of the Industrial Revolution is causing people to become more individualistic, self-important and self-absorbed. He continues that thought with the statement "This is a generation that was born after the cultural mainstream of self-focus was already established and therefore, they are a generation this is not familiar with a world that would put duty before the self."⁴¹ This lack of understanding of the value of submission to God is a major challenge for the church. This article provides clarity for ministers to understand that devotion and submission to God is far from the norm for most of the individuals they encounter on a weekly basis.

Uecker and Froese's study explained that people are being affected by culture toward moral progressivism. This pressure to conform to worldly views is evident within the church community as well as the general public. The authors reflected that many people "hold progressive moral attitudes because their understanding of morality comes directly from their personal understanding of God rather than an institutionally prescribed understanding."⁴² This desire to make their own judgements outside of the established church is common and

⁴¹ Lodewyk Sutton, "An Appropriation of Psalm", 3.

⁴² Jeremy E. Uecker and Paul Froese, "Religious Individualism and Moral Progressivism", 288.

demonstrates how ministry needs to ground itself in God's Word to bring validity back to the exercise of ministry and common thought among disciples of Christ.

Zaas' article was a good reminder that God's Word is powerful and influences humans even as they pursue other religions. Islam, Judaism and Non-Trinitarian Messianic Jews all find value in the simple devotion shared in the *Shema* in Deut 6. It is interesting to consider how each scholar describes how their religion sees the value of devotion, yet they each twist the focus of their devotion to turn people away from the God of Scripture. The article described how they focus on debunking Christianity based upon their view of monotheism and their denial of the existence of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The work of Satan to delude people away from God has been effective and Satan is still active in his work to separate people from devotion to God.

Unity

Baker's article describes how the impact of the increased availability of technological tools has led to a decrease in interactions between family members. Baker encourages ministers to consider the appropriate theological responses to the challenges that these young adults will face. Baker describes how ministers will need to avoid a dystopian viewpoint and speak negatively of technology but express the value of healthy family relationships and the benefits that come from developing that kind of closeness.

Brandner's article focused on the value of family relationships in Chinese churches and how the Chinese government validate the value of family relationships by trying to subvert existing families and redirect the people's loyalty to the government. Many people can conceptually understand the value of family relationships in their lives, but they have not experienced those relationships themselves. This article provides an encouragement to ministers

to spend the effort to teach, define and assist people to understand biblical family so that they can experience the unity that Jesus commanded His people to pursue.

Kopiec described how the industrial revolution has led to a psychological construct called consumptionism. This construct follows a cycle of “desire–purchase–consumption(use)–disappointment–new desire.”⁴³ The author explains that people have become relentless in the pursuit of objects and experiences. This focus in their lives leaves less room for contemplation and seeking character development. Another side effect of this lifestyle of consumption is that it leads them to focusing on self-gratification, which results in less involvement in community. Ministries seeking to grow will need to understand the mindset of consumptionism and speak directly about the negative consequences of such a lifestyle.

Spickard’s article reminds the reader that a mature believer needs be aware of how important their character is displayed to others. Spickard described how organized religion is losing its persuasive voice as many scandals have been reported to the populace. A disciple who lives uprightly before all men according to God’s Word will attract others to such an amazing lifestyle.

Empowerment of the Holy Spirit

Porter’s article brings clarity to a believer’s need to focus on their relationship and communion with the Holy Spirit. Porter states, “The ability we have to originate a course of action, to set our minds on this rather than that, to do one thing and not another, is what contributes to who we are and who we are becoming.”⁴⁴ Being actively aware of their motivations and choosing to pursue a relationship with God requires an action of a person’s will.

⁴³ Piotr Kopiec, “Consumer Society”, 4.

⁴⁴ Steven L. Porter, “Will/Heart/Spirit”, 83.

Westhuizen expressed the theologian Welker's thoughts on how the knowledge of God and mercy require the involvement of the Spirit to keep the intent of the Law from being misapplied by mankind. This article reminds a believer that a close relationship with the Holy Spirit is required to pursue a God-honoring lifestyle as well as to find direction for each day's journey.

Peer Guidance

As I prepared for the Implementation phase of the micro-project, I interacted with my classmates to learn from their experiences and perspectives. I explained to them that I was concerned that I properly describe what I discovered in my research and that I didn't feel that this micro-project is about defining a solution to the defined problem but is more focused on painting a picture of how we arrived where we are in our churches by using our past practices and describing how our current practices are being challenged by the current cultural environment. I feel that this part of the overall project is about providing a perspective that there is a "root cause" to our diminished effectiveness as disciples. I asked my classmates, "whether my thought process of "painting the picture" is the correct thought process or if I should be considering another goal for the micro-project?"

Travis Meadows gave excellent counsel as he shared his methodology for doing article critiques in a prior term. He suggested doing a summary of the key points in the article, followed by a critique that outlined the pros and cons of the article as it related to my ministry problem. Meadows also encouraged me to focus on the analysis in the implementation phase and see what thoughts arise as I completed that phase. The "painting the picture" could happen in the culmination phase based upon the data I discovered in the research.

Mary Clare was very supportive in her suggestions that I remain focused on gathering information to explain what is happening in our churches and describe it well as I “paint the picture.” Clare commented that she had witnessed the decline in growth in her own church experience and the turning away of society from God to other pursuits.

Reflection upon Historical and Current Ministry Practices

This micro-project has been very instructional to me as I have come to understand the intense challenges that exist to aid an individual in growing as a disciple after being influenced by the current America culture. It appears to be normal to be self-absorbed, self-seeking, consumptive and individualistic. It is important to understand what our people’s condition is so that we can develop appropriate responses to aid them.

It is not the first time the culture has moved people away from devotion to God. Nor is it the first time that they clergy have behaved in a manner that people moved away from the church rather than toward an increased closeness to God. In view of that, I am encouraged to know that God can use His people to change cultures and to live God-honoring lives before those who do not know him. These articles encourage that a response is needed, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to reach and disciple the many that are far from God.

The historical practices of traditional church and the more recent attractional church models have proven to be deficient on their own. A church that is seeking to be effective in discipling the church members will need to develop a hybrid method that will provide proper biblical encouragement and inspiration. The ministers will need to develop methodologies that will convey the need for people to be devoted to God as a priority in their lives. This message can not be minimized that needs to be clearly demonstrated in the lives of the ministers. In addition, the people will need to be taught the meaning of biblical family and the behaviors that

one devoted to God's family would be expected to exhibit. The concept of living in the presence of God at all times will aid the people in knowing how to seek direction each day from the Holy Spirit and to become adept at hearing His voice as well as following the directions that He provides.

A minister that has awareness of the impact of contemporary culture will be more effective in developing apologetics that address the misleading messages of the culture and gift people with the truths for abundant living provided by God's Word.

Bibliography

- Baker, Samuel. "Who's Shaping Whom? Digital Disruption in the Spiritual Lives of Post-Familial Emerging Adults," *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 16, no. 2 (2017): 117–43. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1163/24055093-01602003>.
- Bergler, Thomas E. "Generation Z and Spiritual Maturity," *Christian Education Journal*, 17, no. 1 (2020): 75–91. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/0739891320903058>.
- Brandner, Tobias. "The Church as Family," *Theology Today (Ephrata, Pa.)*, 76, no. 3 (2019): 217–23. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/0040573619859018>.
- Kopiec, Piotr. "Consumer Society: Its Definitions and Its Christian Criticism," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 76, no. 3 (2020): e1–8. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4102/hts.v76i3.5910>.
- Porter, Steven L. "Will/Heart/Spirit: Discipleship That Forms the Christian Character," *Christian Education Journal*, 16, no. 1 (2019): 79–94. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/0739891318820334>.
- Spickard, James V. "The Dark Side of Religious Individualism: A Marcusian Exploration," *Critical Research on Religion*, 7, no. 2 (2019): 130–46. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/2050303219848066>.
- Sutton, Lodewyk. "An Appropriation of Psalm 82 against the Background of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The Christian Church as a Change Agent in the Fourth Industrial Revolution," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 76, no. 2 (2020): e1–9. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4102/hts.v76i2.6126>.
- Uecker, Jeremy E, and Paul Froese. "Religious Individualism and Moral Progressivism: How Source of Religious Authority Is Related to Attitudes About Abortion, Same-Sex Marriage, Divorce, and Premarital Sex," *Politics and Religion*, 12, no. 2 (2019): 283–316. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1017/S1755048318000792>.
- Westhuizen, Henco van der. "The Spirit and the Law," *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 40, no. 1 (2019). <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4102/ve.v40i1.1933>.
- Zaas, Peter. "Symposium on the Shema," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 48, no. 3 (2018): 133–47. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1177/0146107918781280>.