An Intimate Revelation: Intercultural Bible Reading with Adolescents

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Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction
  Motivation
  Overview and Structure

Part One – The Context

1. Intercultural Bible Reading
  1.1 Introduction
  1.2 A Different Approach to Hermeneutics
  1.3 The Ordinary Reader
  1.4 The Biblical Text as Intercultural Encounter
    1.4.1 The Value of Intercultural Bible Reading
    1.4.2 Intercultural Bible Reading Groups as Contextual Bible Studies
  1.5 Summary and Conclusion

2. Theoretical Frameworks
  2.1 Introduction
  2.2 The Concept of Adolescence
    2.2.1 General Critiques of Adolescent Theories
    2.2.2 Physical Development
    2.2.3 Cognitive Development
    2.2.4 Psycho-social Development
    2.2.5 Particular Characteristics of Adolescence in Eight Different Regions of the World
      2.2.5.1 Sub-Saharan Africa
      2.2.5.2 India
      2.2.5.3 China and Japan
      2.2.5.4 Southeast Asia
      2.2.5.5 Arab Countries
      2.2.5.6 Russia
      2.2.5.7 Latin America
      2.2.5.8 Western Countries
      2.2.6.9 Implications from the Survey
    2.2.7 The Concept of Adolescence: Summary and Conclusion
  2.3 Understanding Culture
    2.3.1 Defining Culture
      2.3.1.1 Power Distance
      2.3.1.2 Collectivism v. Individualism
      2.3.1.3 Femininity v. Masculinity
      2.3.1.4 Dealing with Uncertainty
2.3.1.5 Long-term Orientation v. Short-term Orientation

2.3.2 Understanding Culture: Summary and Conclusion

2.4 The Intercultural Communication Process
   2.4.1 Effective Intercultural Communication
   2.4.2 Globalization and Intercultural Communication
   2.4.3 The Intercultural Communication Process: Summary and Conclusion

2.5 Spiritual Growth
   2.5.1 A Difficult Task
   2.5.2 Guidelines for Researching Spiritual Data
   2.5.3 New Testament Metaphors
      2.5.3.1 Agricultural Metaphor
      2.5.3.2 Child Metaphor
      2.5.3.3 Implications
   2.5.4 Defining Spiritual Growth for the Study
   2.5.5 Spiritual Growth: Summary and Conclusion

2.6 Summary and Conclusion

**Part Two – The Study**

3. The Research Method
   3.1 Introduction
   3.2 Issues for Empirical Research in Theology
   3.3 Problems in Researching Intercultural Bible Reading with Adolescents
   3.4 Grounded Theory Approach
   3.5 Applying Grounded Theory: The Protocol for the Study
   3.6 Summary and Conclusion

4. Adolescents as Participants
   4.1 Introduction
   4.2 Summarizing the Experiences of the Groups
      4.2.1 Brookwood Group
      4.2.2 Malta Group
      4.2.3 Crossroads Group
      4.2.4 Bolivia Group
      4.2.5 LaBelle Group
      4.2.6 Yamato Group
      4.2.7 Gateway Boys Group
      4.2.8 Ben Lippen Boys Group
      4.2.9 Gateway Girls Group
      4.2.10 Ben Lippen Girls Group
   4.3 Summarizing the Experiences of the Groups: Summary and Conclusion
   4.4 In Search of Spiritual Growth
      4.4.1 Learning to Read the Bible Differently
      4.4.2 Learning to See Themselves Differently
      4.4.3 Learning to See Others Differently

4
4.4.4 In Search of Spiritual Growth: Summary and Conclusion
4.5 The Role of Intercultural Openness
  4.5.1 Yamato Group: The Highest Level of Intercultural Openness and Most Evident Growth
  4.5.2 Other Groups with High Intercultural Openness and Evidence of Spiritual Growth
  4.5.3 Low Intercultural Openness and Less Evidence of Spiritual Growth
  4.5.4 Observations
  4.5.5 The Role of Intercultural Openness: Summary and Conclusion
4.6 Adolescent Interpretive Themes
  4.6.1 Dominant Themes
  4.6.2 A New Christianity?
  4.6.3 Adolescents Reading the Bible
  4.6.4 Adolescent Interpretive Themes: Summary and Conclusion

Part Three – Reflections and Implications

5. Willing and Able: Adolescent Theology
  5.1 Introduction
  5.2 Traditional Interpretations of the Parable
  5.3 Adolescent Interpretations of the Parable
  5.4 Implications
  5.5 Adolescent Theology: Summary and Conclusion

6. Adolescents in Intercultural Bible Reading and the “Other”
  6.1 Introduction
  6.2 The Concept of the “Other”
  6.3 Adolescence and the “Other”
  6.4 Contact with the “Other”
  6.5 Encouraging the “Other” in Intercultural Bible Reading with Adolescents
  6.6 Adolescents in Intercultural Bible Reading and the “Other”: Summary and Conclusion

7. Toward a New Approach in Youth Ministry
  7.1 Introduction
  7.2 A Current Critique of Youth Ministry
  7.3 Characteristics of Congregations with Effective Youth Ministries and Implications for ICB with Adolescents
  7.4 The Challenges and Opportunities of ICB with Adolescents
    7.4.1 Challenges
      7.4.1.1 Cultural Stressors
      7.4.1.2 Loss of Groups/Group Members
      7.4.1.3 Language Difficulties
      7.4.1.4 Technological Issues
    7.4.2 Opportunities
      7.4.2.1 Enthusiasm
7.4.2.2 Engagement in Online Relational Connections
7.4.2.3 Access to Technology
7.4.2.4 Scholarly Focus
7.4.2.5 The Response of the Participants

7.5 Looking Ahead
7.6 Toward a New Approach: Summary and Conclusion

Samenvatting

Appendix A: Codes

Appendix B: Group Materials List

Bibliography
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Introduction

In the final book of C.S. Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia, *The Last Battle*, three of the Pevensie children (Peter, Edmund, and Lucy) find that after walking through a door the Narnia they are familiar with has been replaced with another Narnia. This new Narnia, although reminiscent of the old Narnia, seems to be in a process of continual rebirth as they run further up and further in to explore. The children have trouble understanding exactly what is happening until Mr. Tumnus, the faun, tells Lucy, “The further up and the further in you go, the bigger everything gets. The inside is larger than the outside.” After taking a long look around, she begins to put it into words for herself;

“I see,” she said. “This is still Narnia, and more real and more beautiful than the Narnia down below, just as it was more real and more beautiful than the Narnia outside the stable door! I see...world within world, Narnia within Narnia...”

“Yes,” said Mr. Tumnus, “like an onion: except that as you continue to go in and in, each circle is larger than the last.”

Although one could never claim that Lewis’ intent was to apply this metaphor to the realm of Biblical interpretation, it does seem to be especially apropos for this area of theological reflection in particular. The Bible is a text that generates an amazingly diverse number of interpretations, and the more questions one asks of the text the more unanswered questions seem to appear (like Mr. Tumnus’ larger circle appearing inside of a smaller one). Yet in this field of ostensibly endless investigation there is one approach in particular that this dissertation will examine in light of its potential ability to develop theological understanding specifically for the next generation of young people: intercultural Bible reading.

Motivation

I arrive at this question after spending most of my adult career working in churches and other ministries primarily with young people from their early teens into their late twenties. There are a number of tasks involved in leading ministries for that life stage, but one task which I have tried to keep as a constant has been that of encouraging and facilitating youth to read the Bible for themselves, typically in small groups. Adolescence is a wonderful age for youth to begin recognizing how their story and God’s story meet together, and the Bible contains many passages which provide clear connections to teens’ developmental and social contexts. As helpful as the process can be, however, over the years I have been in many Bible studies where, after the text for discussion has been read, the following conversational thread is repeated ad infinitum:

Youth A: I think it means ______. What do you think it means?

Youth B: Oh. Well, I think it means _____ because ______.

Youth C: Hmm. That’s interesting. I think it really means ______. What about you over there – what do you think it means?

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When I first starting working with youth, these exchanges were frustrating for me as I watched the conversation move from what I perceived to be one uninformed opinion to another. And by uninformed, I mean merely that – the teens rarely had a specific agenda embedded in their opinions, yet they also were not typically in the habit of consulting commentaries or academic journals to form their opinions as to how a particular passage in the Bible should be interpreted. As my years in ministry to this age group continued, however, I started to realize that youth who spent time in these Bible reading groups (typically meeting together once a week) seemed to have a tendency to stay more committed to their faith even as they moved on into adulthood. One of the motivations for this research, then, has been my growing suspicion that the “simple” activity of reading the Bible together (which is, of course, not actually all that simple) can encourage these adolescents toward spiritual maturity through the process of dialogue and exchange inherent in the process of reading the Bible with others in a group.

As I began pursuing further theological studies in 2007, my curiosity about the effect of Bible reading on youth was piqued again by a question which was asked in one of my initial classes at the Vrije Universiteit by Professor Dr. de Wit. It was a program comprised primarily of international students from around the globe which focused on the study of cross-cultural and contextual theology, and in the initial class he asked a very simple yet pointed question; what is the Bible – a text or a meeting place? With my background from a conservative evangelical denomination in the U.S., I could of course agree that the Bible is first and foremost a text. Yet my years in ministry, and my own convictions, had led me to also see that although the Bible is indeed a text, the way it functions in the practices of faith of which I had been a part was more as a meeting place, specifically between God and people and people and each other. When as a class we began to discuss studies conducted by West and others where groups of people from different cultural and/or socio-economic backgrounds interacted with each other about Biblical passages, I began to wonder more about how youth could function in Bible reading groups of that kind. Because those reading interactions bring with them a certain level of conflict and challenge to each person’s personally held beliefs and convictions, they presented a clear opportunity for change and growth in the aftermath which some participants seemed to have welcomed and others saw as threatening. Yet no matter the response of the participants, the exchanges had value for those involved by opening up new understandings about the role their own cultural perspective plays in how they interpret the Bible. The studies we examined at that time, however, were primarily focused on adult participants. As a result of spending time studying these projects, my question, which in turn became the research question for this project, ended up becoming simply this: What effect, if any, does intercultural Bible reading have on the spiritual growth of adolescents?

Overview and Structure

In attempting to carefully, clearly, and with intentional modesty propose whether intercultural Bible reading can have an effect on the spiritual growth of adolescents, the discussion is arranged in what will hopefully be a helpful format for the reader. Part One of what follows (which includes chapters one and two) presents the context of the study and provides clarity in understanding essential concepts while also presenting the theoretical frameworks. Part Two (chapters three and four) is focused on the actual study itself and elaborates on the research method as well as the experiences and findings from the materials. Part Three moves from the specifics of the study to present reflections and implications in chapters five, six, and seven.
The first task, undertaken in Chapter One, will be to elaborate on the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur as essential shifts in hermeneutics which focused attention on the crucial role which the reader plays in constructing meaning from texts. Because it is from these foundations that the concept of the “ordinary reader” was born (a concept which is essential to this study), the next section of the chapter will demonstrate how Mesters (in the 1970’s) and West (in the 1990’s) applied this turn to Bible readers in those theologians’ different non-Western contexts. The chapter will then go on to examine the international study “Through the Eyes of Another” (TEA) which, as the first large-scale study of its kind, sought to utilize the Bible as a means for an intercultural encounter which could create opportunities for “ordinary readers” to have their voices heard by the wider theological community.

Chapter Two presents the theoretical frameworks of the study. The first section offers a detailed look at the physical, cognitive, and psycho-social characteristics of adolescence before offering the specific cultural characteristics of adolescence in eight regions of the world to demonstrate the global prevalence of the life stage. The next section examines the concept of culture and presents empirically useful definitions of both “culture” and “intercultural” by adopting Hofstede’s theory of common cultural dimensions. The dynamics of intercultural communication are discussed due to their primacy in the intercultural Bible reading process before the section ends by making the case that globalization provides an increasing motivation for intercultural religious studies of this kind. The next part of the chapter presents recognized intricacies in attempting to measure spiritual growth before offering helpful markers of spirituality based on the work of Glock and Stark, Moberg, and two New Testament metaphors. Finally, a definition of spiritual growth as change or deepening of perspective is given as an appropriately open-ended concept for examining the effects of intercultural Bible reading on adolescents.

Chapter Three recognizes and discusses the complexities of performing empirical research in the area of theology, and then explains how a grounded theory approach provides the best opportunity for researching adolescents in the process of intercultural Bible reading. The specific protocol for the study is explained and a detailed list of codes is provided.

Chapter Four begins by summarizing the experience of ten of the exchanging groups (four other groups contributed reading materials but were unable to participate in exchanges) and specifically notes each group’s cultural characteristics, adolescent characteristics, dynamics of intercultural communication, and feelings about the intercultural Bible reading process before offering an initial examination for spiritual growth along Glock and Stark’s measures of religious dimensions. The next section digs deeper into the reports of all the groups to discover how spiritual growth appeared in the experiences of the groups by looking for more subtle signs of transformation as evidenced by changes in how the participants understood the Biblical passage, changed in their view of themselves, and learned to see their partner group differently. The third section of the chapter presents evidence of how intercultural openness was related to groups which displayed spiritual growth, and the final section presents the top three interpretive themes in the reading reports and compares them to Smith’s National Study of Youth and Religion.

Chapter Five examines how adolescents functioned in offering theological insights from the passage (Luke 15:1-32 – the Prodigal Son) by comparing the material which was generated by the groups with more traditional understandings of the meaning of the parable. While similarities to classic
theological understandings are noted, there are other subtle yet significant differences which suggest that adolescents can indeed function very well as “ordinary reader” Biblical interpreters.

Chapter Six briefly presents the concept of the “Other” as Levinas and Lacan develop it in their work and examines the idea’s connection to adolescent development. The reading reports are then presented for evidence that adolescent participants can indeed come into contact with the Other during the intercultural Bible reading process before the chapter ends by making recommendations on ways to increase the opportunity for confrontations between adolescent participants and the Other.

Finally, Chapter Seven offers a current critique of youth ministry before examining a study on effective youth ministries which highlights significant and positive points of connection with the process of intercultural Bible reading with adolescents. Next, the challenges of ICB with adolescents are noted as well as the opportunities for moving forward in adopting the practice as a significant tool for youth ministry.

And now, in the words of Lewis’ Mr. Tumnus, it is time to go further up and further in.
1. Intercultural Bible Reading

1.1 Introduction

It is unfortunate that Christian theology has sometimes been very slow to welcome certain groups into the arena of theological discourse, especially if those groups have not matched neatly with a Western academic paradigm. While this fact has been changing, the reality is that theology still has a tendency to miss out on the perspectives which many Bible readers have to offer. The following chapter will take a look at attempts to remedy this state of affairs by first briefly presenting the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur as essential hermeneutic foundations which challenge long-standing approaches to Biblical interpretation. Next, Mesters’ practice of reading the Bible with “ordinary readers” in the 1970’s as a way of unlocking fresh theological insights and giving them a wider voice will be examined as will West’s appropriation of the concept in his South African context beginning in the 1990’s. Then the process of intercultural Bible reading, based as it is on the hermeneutic of the ordinary reader, will be explained and observed through the example of the international bible reading project “Through the Eyes of Another” (TEA) before the dynamic of intercultural communication itself is examined. The end of the chapter will then directly address how adolescents, as historically under-represented Bible readers, can benefit from (and be benefitted by) the process of intercultural Bible reading.

1.2 A Different Approach to Hermeneutics

A shift occurred as Biblical theologians realized that in their earnest pursuit of the historical factuality of Jesus something had been lost. Slowly, awareness began to dawn that perhaps the writers of the Bible were not especially concerned with historicity in the same way that modernity was, and that by asking the question of veracity in the way in which modernity defined it (as correct information) interpreters were missing out on the goal the writers had in mind, namely, transformation. A Biblical hermeneutic was perhaps not to be so much about finding one correct interpretation (as if that could ever be truly possible), but instead about recognizing the multiplicity of significances found in the Bible as they match up with the human experience of life, God, and self.

It was a tremendous shift which in process was influenced by such thinkers as Gadamer and Ricoeur who posited that written texts such as the Bible demand the reader to create an interpretive meaning that is necessarily loosed from whatever meaning the author may have originally had in mind. From this perspective, a written work thus renders any claim of complete interpretive surety unrealistic and operationally reductionist. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, argues that a move toward post-critical naiveté is the only way to bring a restorative hermeneutic which can recognize the validity of the “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer’s goal) where the world of the reader and the world of the text merge into each other as a text is being read. These horizons merge in spite of the spatial and temporal boundaries which keep the original author’s intent for the most part outside of the interpretive process, so for Ricoeur the search for authorial intent (historically and still a large

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portion of Biblical hermeneutics) does not necessarily bring value.\(^4\) What is written is all that can be known, and as Ricoeur says, "What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it."\(^5\) This is not to negate the value of classical historical criticism, but rather an attempt to keep that particular methodology from maintaining a stranglehold on all interpretations which may be gleaned from the text.

Having established that complete knowledge of the original author’s intent is functionally out of reach, Ricoeur (as Levinas also notes) stresses that every written communication should then be recognized as hosting multiple valid interpretations. While he does admit that there is a limit to the number of potential meanings, this does not change the fact that, for Ricoeur, even that limit itself can be multivalent. This is necessary to recognize in the interpretive process due to the fact that each interpreter is internally reenacting the written text and thus liberating it from the primary connection with its original reference and intention of the author.

> “Only writing, in freeing itself, not only from its author and its originary audience, but from the narrowness of the dialogical situation, reveals this destination of discourse as projecting a world…an ensemble of references…"\(^6\)

> “Thus we speak about the ‘world’ of Greece, not to designate any more what were the situations for those who lived them, but to designate the non-situational references which outlive the effacement of the first and which henceforth are offered as possible modes of being, as symbolic dimensions of our being-in-the-world.” (1971c:536)

By providing a critical analysis of the process of interpreting texts Ricoeur is aiming to recover the significance of a text’s transformative and transcendent meaning in a way that tools of traditional historical criticism alone simply cannot. In Ricoeur’s estimation, his process of interpretation energizes a deeply rooted “metamorphosis” of the original meaning in the same way that a Dutch master’s paintings neither produces (nor reproduces) a scene but instead provides a meaningful interpretation of it.\(^7\) The original source material is present, yet at the same time it has been significantly changed and deepened as it undergoes representation.

One readily apparent critique of Ricoeur’s work is the opportunity it opens for interpreters to legitimize whatever meaning they choose to find in a text. If valid interpretation lies in the merging of interpretive horizons with no pressure to reflect authorial intent, does that mean that a text no longer has an inherent meaning? While it is true that Ricoeur’s proposal for interpreting a text encourages multiple levels of polyvalence, it is important to note that he also clearly states that interpreting texts is not a completely open-ended task which allows anyone to say anything at all.

> “If it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal. The text presents a limited field of possible constructions. The logic of validation allows us to move between the two limits of dogmaticism and skepticism. It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to

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\(^5\) Ricoeur, ibid., p.30
\(^6\) Ricoeur, ibid., p.37
\(^7\) Ricoeur, ibid., p.41
arbitrate between them and to seek agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our immediate reach.\textsuperscript{8}

In other words, while a text should be liberated from a slavish search for the author’s original intent, the text must still be recognized as a formation of literary genre which has technical rules presiding over its production and application.\textsuperscript{9} Thus every text has within itself imposed limits according to its composition and style, and recognizing a text’s literary genre is not simply useful but invaluable for understanding both the content of the text and the ways in which the reader should legitimately interpret it.\textsuperscript{10} It is in the balance of both the analytical attitude and the existential approach (which maintains a focus on appropriation) that a legitimate chorus of textual interpretations may be best heard. As de Wit notes, the “moment of the new reader” does not negate the historical background of a text but serves to propel the text to further development and enrichment.\textsuperscript{11}

Ricoeur’s significant work began in the 1970’s, and his contribution to Biblical hermeneutics from that point on has been his encouragement for scholars to shift from an almost singular pursuit of settling questions of historicity and intent to acknowledging what the text as it now stands means to the contemporary reader.\textsuperscript{12} Modern-era tools such as historical and literary criticism still have their place in Biblical interpretation, but Ricoeur brought an emphasis to the plurality of meanings demanded by every great text by recognizing that the reader is a valid participant in the interpretive process. In the same way that a musician interprets Mozart or an actor interprets Shakespeare, so Ricoeur emphasizes how a reader’s “performance” of text (including the Bible) can bring both faithfulness and creativity to interpretation.\textsuperscript{13}

Hans-Georg Gadamer’s work, which preceded Ricoeur’s, takes a slightly different perspective in that he uses the analogy of dialogue as his main metaphor for explaining textual interpretation.\textsuperscript{14} For Gadamer, the back and forth action of a conversation is an accurate corollary to the back and forth action which he sees occurring between text and reader as a middle space opens for exchange between the two. This space between text and reader then becomes the hermeneutic opening in which Gadamer posits that interpretive meaning is made.\textsuperscript{15}

An obvious difficulty of using Gadamer’s metaphor of conversation is that the author of a written text is usually not present to give clarifying or re-directing input as the interpretation is occurring (as happens during a real-time conversation). Gadamer, though, does not see this lack of direct authorial input as a problem:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{8} Ricoeur, ibid., p.79
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Ricoeur, ibid., p.33
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Sandra M. Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics : The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture," \textit{Horizons} 8, no. 1 (1981). p.33
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Hans de Wit, "Objectives and Backgrounds," in \textit{Through the Eyes of Another : Intercultural Reading of the Bible}, ed. Hans de Wit(Elkhart; Amsterdam: Institute of Mennonite Studies; Free University, 2004). p.5 of essay
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics : The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture." p.34
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Schneiders, ibid., p.35
  \item \textsuperscript{14} This stands in contrast to Ricoeur who saw the fixed nature of written language as a defining characteristic for interpretation theory. For Ricoeur, the fixed nature of text makes it fundamentally different from speech and therefore only slightly related to spoken discourse.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Hans Georg Gadamer, \textit{Truth and Method} (Seabury Pr, 1975). p.263
\end{itemize}
Every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text is part of the whole of the tradition in which the age takes an objective interest and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and whom he originally wrote for. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history.16

Gadamer sees this ever-increasing distance from the original author’s situation and the ever-receding ability of subsequent readers to comprehend the author’s intent as invitingly open doors through which the reader must pass in order to struggle for comprehension.17 This opening for dialogue between text and reader (as de Wit notes) means that since each interpretation is made from a specific place and specific perspective which is different from that of the text, the reader must necessarily enter a kind of “hermeneutic circulation” where the past (as represented in the text) speaks to the present reader - which then creates the opportunity for more meaning to be imbued into the text from this new cycle.18 This struggle, then, becomes the dynamic which allows the reader to become “part of the meaning he apprehends [so that he] belongs to the text he is reading.”19 In this back and forth dialogue with the text, the reader’s preconceptions are challenged and the text’s past interpretations are disputed in such a way that the text eventually serves to illuminate the present while itself being illuminated to give newer (yet still faithful) shades of meaning than the author could have foreseen.20 Gadamer’s view is that the goal of interpreting a text, therefore, is not simply to agree with what traditional interpretation has found, but for the text and present reader to come together to an understanding about the subject that is current, active, and necessarily contemporary.21

At this point it is worth recognizing that although both Gadamer’s and Ricoeur’s work is generated squarely within the realm of Western European hermeneutics, their desires to validate the polyvalence of texts and to stress the importance of an open interpretive encounter which transcends beyond one’s own interpretive system and dominant reading tradition have found wide reception among hermeneutic scholars in the rest of the world as well. Non-Western theologians have been diligent to utilize both Gadamer’s and Ricoeur’s insights in their own contexts, and it would appear that this open-handed hermeneutical understanding speaks to a shared global hunger for a way forward in interpreting the Bible.22 As de Wit notes, Bible readers around the world desire to read the text in such a way that it is allowed to speak with a sense of power and immediacy, and the categories which have been used in the past to label reading strategies are becoming increasingly less definitive in the current globalized culture.23

16 Gadamer, ibid., p.267
17 Gadamer, ibid., p.301
18 Hans de Wit, ""It Should Be Burned and Forgotten!" Latin American Liberation Hermeneutics through the Eyes of Another," in *Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009). p.42
19 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.304
20 Schneiders, "From Exegesis to Hermeneutics: The Problem of the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture." p.37
21 Schneiders, ibid., p.35
1.3 The Ordinary Reader

As the acceptance of Gadamer’s and Ricoeur’s approaches to the hermeneutical task grew within theological circles, there were other developments taking place (also in the 1970’s) which sought to encourage “ordinary readers” to share their insights from their conditions of poverty, repression, and newly-recognized ecclesial openness.24 As one of the fathers of the Latin America biblical movement, Carlos Mesters, a Carmelite priest serving among the poor in Brazil, began listening to the interpretations of his parishioners and recognizing the value of these typically overlooked Bible readers. Since that time Mesters has continued to champion the cause of connecting the Bible and ordinary readers.

For Mesters, the way poor parishioners in his context read the Bible was a “re-appropriation” of sorts from the tightly-held interpretive authority of traditional European scholarship. As Tamez notes, the result of Mesters’ influence was that instead of looking for an external authority to validate their readings his parishioners were taking the Bible into their own hands to read it from their own position of suffering and struggle.25 The result of this approach was that their understanding of the text became intimately married to their everyday situations of oppression, repression, persecution, and exclusion from both political and religious systems of power.26 Mesters summarizes this process by explaining that his objective was not to interpret the Bible, but to interpret life with the help of the Bible.27 The text is not to be dissected for dry theological or historical review, but rather it is the reader’s life which is to be the subject of the vivisection.

Mesters writes that God’s revelation through Scripture to those ordinary readers became a present reality rather than a historical remembrance, and it was in this shift that Mesters saw the potential for the present world to be transformed into a “great theophany” of voices proclaiming that God’s Kingdom has come.28 Because he was so convinced of the power of this interpretive stance to bring with it Kingdom transformation in his country, Mesters began systematically incorporating the concept and practice of what became known as “Base Ecclesial Communities” (CEB’s) wherein he could encourage purposeful attention to the discoveries that ordinary readers were making in their Bible readings. These CEB’s, then, were designed to bring together Roman Catholic priests, nuns, and lay people in impoverished areas to read the Bible together, pray, and work toward a common vision of social justice.29 In these groups, according to Mesters, the Bible was to be read in keeping with the following seven characteristics:

25 Tamez, ibid., p.13
26 Tamez, ibid., p.19
28 Mesters, ibid., p.199
1) **The reading is a community reading.** The Bible was written for a community, belongs to a community, and the meaning is primarily communal rather than individual. The clergy are a part of the interpretive community, but they do not ‘own’ the Bible.\(^{30}\)

2) **The reading is oriented to the present.** The Bible is not a past history but a mirror that interprets life today. Mesters sees this aspect, which he acknowledges as a potentially ‘superficial link,’ as similar to the interpretive reading of the Church Fathers.\(^{31}\)

3) **The Holy Spirit is active in the reading.** The goal is not to find an impartial, objectively historical or literal meaning but to discover what the Spirit is saying to the community today. This is the reason that, for Mesters, a ‘prayerful atmosphere of faith and fraternity’ is a necessity during reading.\(^{32}\)

4) **The reading is an exercise in faith.** Faith is not a condition but an active element for understanding, and prayer underscores the act of interpretation. In fact, without faith the whole reading process will be different.\(^{33}\)

5) **The reading is militant.** Readers should be provoked toward action rather than just understanding alone. Political, social, economic, and practical outcomes need to be the result.

6) **The reading starts from the people’s social position and their realization of oppression.** Because of this fact, there can be no neutral act of reading. The readers’ realization of the similarities between the world of the Bible and their experiences in Latin America created a source of “mutual understanding.”\(^{34}\)

7) **The reading involves all aspects of life.** It should not be limited only to cognitive pursuits like lectures, discussion, information, and reason.\(^{35}\)

It is at these intersections of community, justice, and conflict where, for Mesters, “the word of God becomes a reinforcement, a stimulus for hope and courage.”\(^{36}\) While the lasting impact of these CEB communities may be a source for scholarly debate, their impact both in terms of changing the religious landscape of Latin America and the dynamics of the relationship between clergy and laity is still in effect.\(^{37}\) Mesters’ desire to recognize the worth of the common Bible reader helped speed on a movement which was seeking to change the definition of Christianity from a hierarchically imposed system of beliefs to a fully encompassing life of faith, and through his influence others gradually began to tune their ears to hear this new source of inspiration and interpretation.\(^{38}\)


\(^{31}\) Mesters, "A Liberating Reading" of the Bible." p.128

\(^{32}\) Mesters, *ibid.*, p.128

\(^{33}\) Mesters, *ibid.*, p.127

\(^{34}\) Mesters, *ibid.*, p.128

\(^{35}\) This summarizing list of questions is taken from James M. Dawsey, "The Lost Front Door into Scripture : Carlos Mesters, Latin American Liberation Theology and the Church Fathers," *Anglican Theological Review* 72, no. 3 (1990). p.294

\(^{36}\) Mesters, *Defenseless Flower. A New Reading of the Bible*. p.45

\(^{37}\) For an example, see Christian Smith, "The Spirit and Democracy : Base Communities, Protestantism, and Democratization in Latin America," *Sociology of Religion* 55, no. 2 (1994).

As the influence of Latin American liberation hermeneutics spread to impact other continents and cultural landscapes (encouraging such developments as Dalit and African genitive hermeneutics), Gerald West began in the 1990’s to investigate how to reconnect academic Biblical interpretation to the ways the Bible was being read in his own South African context. After leaving South Africa during the 1980’s when a State of Emergency was declared, West later returned to his homeland convinced that the “resources and skills that [he] had obtained through his position of privilege, and at the cost of their oppression, should be made available to the struggle...Work with poor and marginalized communities enables white middle-class male biblical scholars like [him] to be partially constituted by the experiences, needs, questions, and resources of such communities.”

In West’s view, there is tremendous value in elevating the interpretive status of those readers typically in societal positions of marginalization who approach the Bible looking for what it says to their situation specifically, and it is these exegetes whom he terms “ordinary readers.” Although that term may seem to imply a critique, for West it is not pejorative. Rather, he wants to stress that their hermeneutical approach is pre-critical rather than that of a trained, academic interpreter. In fact, many of these readers West speaks of are in fact only metaphorically “readers” due to their illiteracy yet they still function in similar ways as they are engaged in listening to, discussing, and retelling Bible texts in their resident milieu. It is a very different way of reading the Bible than the way in which textually critical scholars approach it, and appropriating the energy of this difference is what West hopes will lead to creative and socially transformative empowerment.

As an example of the differences that show up when interpretations between these ordinary readers and critical readers are compared, West quotes Pope John Paul II’s reading of the story of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-26. In his reading, the Pope finds that the event should be interpreted as one piece of the whole moral message of the Gospel, especially as seen in the Sermon on the Mount’s mention of being “poor in spirit.” For West, this shows that “the text is abandoned for other intertexts which here lead away from conversation with this text.” Further proof of this interpretive gap is to be found when the Pope skips Jesus’ remarks about the difficulty of a rich person entering into the Kingdom of God being the same as a camel passing through a needle’s eye:

The Pope’s reading goes on as if this gap did not exist, speaking of love, grace, God’s power, freedom, truth and morality...But for most of us this conversation includes questions of wealth and poverty, the rich and the poor, so clearly present in the text...We cannot, you see, talk of love, grace, God’s power, freedom, truth and morality without speaking of these absent things.

West then records the interpretive insights which seven Bible study workshops in South Africa developed from reading Mark 10:17-22 (the parallel passage of Matthew 19:16-26). Many of the

40 West, ibid., p.7
42 Gerald O. West, Reading Other-Wise : Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007). p.2
43 West, The Academy of the Poor : Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible. p.21
44 West, ibid., p.25
participants were from poor and marginalized communities, and in their interpretation they focused on verse 22’s use of the words ‘much property’ as part of the description of the man’s wealth. Their environment in South Africa was to them an illustration of how time and again property ownership could be related to a systemic structural sin of exploitation of the poor. So even though the rich man may have worked hard for his property or even inherited it, he was still a beneficiary of and willing participant in a sinful structure.

Given this reading, the challenge of Jesus to the man (v.21) to sell all he possessed and to give to the poor made sense. The man could not follow Jesus until he had repented of, and made restitution for, his participation in social and structural sin... Following Jesus requires structural repentance and conversion.

This example is a clear demonstration of the type of hermeneutical differences West is looking to recognize and empower. He is clear to note that one reading does not have to be considered as better than the other (as both will have effects in and on the lives of the people who encounter them), but the obvious differences between the two given above is illustrative of the fact that who does the reading is of tremendous importance because it necessarily changes the interpretation. For West, then, it is time for the wider Christian community of faith to recognize the interpretations of the vast majority of Bible readers whose voices are not usually heard.

Because the acceptance of postmodern and reader-response hermeneutical theory has brought more openness to atypical interpretive approaches, West believes there can now be a recognized space into which these “others” (the previously unrecognized or unwelcome ordinary readers) can be invited into conversation about the Bible’s meanings so that greater insight into ethics, practices, and ways of centering the “expert” interpretations can be gained. For this he recommends what he calls a “contextual Bible study,” one that is designed specifically so that critical readers and ordinary readers can read with each other with mutual influence weaving back and forth between their approaches to the text. For West, the first value of setting up such an environment is that it provides a protected space for theological counter ideologies to flourish. As these ideologies become articulated, the group dynamic is an ally to help ensure that the readings are worked out democratically so that they can be truly representative and resonate with the theological understandings of that particular community.

The second value of such Bible study groups is that they offer the presence of resources which can aid in providing structure for that which is discovered or expressed. West has found that while ordinary readers do have the critical resources to interpret their texts and contexts, a prepared approach to meeting together (rather than a more organic or unplanned gathering) can bring historical, sociological, literary, and other textual tools to bear (i.e., structured sets of questions) which might otherwise not be present in the process. These added tools are extremely helpful and end up adding to the group’s “social property.”

45 West, ibid., p.30
46 West, ibid., p.30
48 West, ibid., p.32
49 West, ibid., p.32
The third value of these groups is that they allow for the physical presence of what West terms “socially engaged biblical scholars” who can be the bearers of additional critical resources as they choose to “betray the hidden transcript of the dominant” so they may be “partially constituted by the hidden transcript of the dominated.” The role for the scholar is that of crossing the boundary between hidden and public interpretive communities so that, in time, he or she is able to relate the specifics of a marginalized community to other communities which might otherwise not have the opportunity to hear their voices. For West, it is these intentional mixed groupings which provide the best opportunity for creating a truly reflective theology.

1.4 The Biblical Text as Intercultural Encounter

While West has clearly stated that he is developing his particular hermeneutical approach as a commitment to the liberative struggles of the ordinary readers in South Africa (especially the poor, working class, women, and those living with HIV and AIDS), the term has also come to be used in broader ways and in several difference contexts. One of the applications of West’s work is that it has served as a type of foundational underpinning for researching the dynamics of intercultural Bible reading. In intercultural Bible reading, the main axis of difference turns on cultural characteristics instead of West’s use of critical hermeneutic or socio-economic disparity. While keeping this distinction clear may sometimes be difficult (as Lategan critiques when he states that West’s use of “critical/ordinary” also encompasses such differences as “dominant/dominated,” “theoretical/empirical,” “male/female,” “text-centered/oral culture,” “exegesis/theology,” “North/South,” etc.), the questions which intercultural Bible reading asks follow very closely to West’s process. First, is there value to be gained when readers from two different contexts (in this instance, cultural contexts) interact with each other about a Biblical text? Then second, can contextual Bible study groups (groups with Biblical scholars involved) serve as a meeting place for these two groups to interact?

A large scale project to determine answers to these questions among others (and a significant motivation for this current study) was a three-year study entitled “Through the Eyes of Another” (TEA) led by Hans de Wit in the Netherlands. Over the course of the research, hundreds of participants from more than twenty-five countries studied and interacted with each other about John 4:1-42 where the Samaritan woman talks with Jesus by the well. The text was read in a small group, and then the interpretation was passed through researchers to a partner group in another culture. Finally, the group responded to each other about their interpretations and in this way over 3000 pages of material was gathered during the course of the study. While the stated objective of the study was to see what would happen if ordinary Bible readers in different contexts entered into conversation with each other about the same Biblical passage, the project does point to answers as

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51 West, "Reading the Bible Differently : Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated."
p.33
52 West, ibid., p.33
53 West, Reading Other-Wise : Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities. p.8
55 Hans de Wit, "Objectives and Backgrounds." In Through the Eyes of Another : Intercultural Reading of the Bible, ed. Hans de Wit. Amsterdam: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004. p.3-4
to the value of intercultural Bible reading and the effectiveness of doing such work in contextual Bible study settings.\textsuperscript{56}

It should be noted at this point that the process of intercultural Bible reading as developed by de Wit and his partnering researchers which was utilized during the TEA study views the ordinary reader in a more expansive light than Mesters and West. For de Wit, the concept of the ordinary reader is better understood in a larger sense as meaning readers who approach the text with the hope of appropriating meaning for the here and now rather than limiting the concept to only those readers who serve primarily as an archetypical foil to the academic theologian. Ordinary readers are those who come to the Bible with “expectation and hope...for the groups, reading is more than a cerebral process.”\textsuperscript{57} It is an attitude of the heart which takes legitimate shape as a “precritical, prefigurative, naïve, spontaneous” existential reading of the text that reflects a more explicit desire for the meaning to be actualized in the life of the reader.\textsuperscript{58} For de Wit, expanding the concept toward appropriation serves to emphasize why the community of faith will be richer as it includes both ordinary readers and “exegetes” in the common chorus of interpretive voices: “in the end, it all boils down to how this pact can be made fruitful for the local community of faith.”\textsuperscript{59}

It is precisely because of this slight yet significant shift in emphasis that the question of studying adolescent participants in intercultural Bible reading becomes so intriguing as they seem to be a readily identifiable (and active) population which can fulfill de Wit’s hope for ordinary readers who can serve as “guards against the continuous temptation of objectifying tradition.”\textsuperscript{60} By realizing that broadening the concept of the ordinary reader is a helpful (and necessary) move to avoid an unwanted drift toward reductionism (whereby the term refers only to readers on the weak side of asymmetrical power structures), de Wit rightly throws the door wide open where “authentic interpretation will reflect the conflict of interpretations, test it, listen carefully to alternative interpretations, striving for consensus, although direct consensus is out of reach.”\textsuperscript{61} As participants in this hermeneutical plurivocity, youthful Bible readers can rightfully and legitimately help this process of re-orienting our understanding of the Biblical text.

\textbf{1.4.1 The Value of Intercultural Bible Reading}

One thing that is abundantly clear in reading through the impressions and interpretations of the TEA project is that bringing together two groups of ordinary readers from different cultures had a resounding impact that was felt by both groups. Like two eggs crashing together, the process of exchange placed a crack in the shells of self-contained and insulated interpretations of Biblical passages.

In some groups, this fracture was seen as a positive effect. Comments from some of the different groups reflect this feeling:

\begin{itemize}
\item de Wit, ibid., p.5
\item de Wit, ibid., p.6
\item de Wit, ibid., p.8
\item de Wit, ibid., p.19
\item de Wit, ibid., p.8-9
\item de Wit, ibid., p.14
\end{itemize}
The Netherlands: The partner group interpreted it differently. This provided new material for discussion. We had to imagine a different situation, learn to look at the story from another point of view. We also learned that we must explain our contribution better, and make it clear why we interpret it this way.  

Ghana: We in the Elmina group like the discussions and the different rules of interpretation adopted by you and us. It gave us enlightenment.  

The Netherlands: The partner group has great difficulty with the way we, as a Dutch group, talk about this story. This got us to thinking – don’t we see Jesus too much as a human being?  

South Africa: The expectation that it would be boring to read the same story one more time turned out to be incorrect. Again new elements arose that we had not thought of before. The group from El Salvador has – despite the fact that there were no significant differences – emphasized elements that the group in Stellenbosch otherwise would not have discovered.  

Other groups perceived the experience of contact as somewhat disappointing:  

Korea: Our group was very disappointed because [their report] was too short [for us] to learn about them and because it was very much like our ministers’ general preaching on John 4.  

Unknown: We look at the story of the Bible the way it comes to us and then look at what this means. Then, we further reflect on how we can give shape to the good things. We are surprised that you did not make any connections with your own daily lives.  

Unknown: Has the prosperity in which the Dutch readers live interfered with their perception of the Bible story, and especially of Jesus himself?  

Whether it was seen as a positive impact or a negative impact, there can be little doubt that having ordinary readers interact with each other across cultural distinctions created an impression on the participants which forced them to at least acknowledge their own reading tradition (whether it was denominational or individual). While there can (and should) be more research done to discover whether there are any lingering effects of this type of intercultural contact through Bible reading, let it suffice to say that the fact that people are actually spending time listening to each other and exchanging visions of biblical texts that many consider of vital import is enough to affirm the overall

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62 Arie Moolenaar, "Listening with the Heart: The Reading Experience of the Dutch Groups," in Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible, ed. Hans de Wit(Amsterdam: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004). p.113


64 Moolenaar, "Listening with the Heart: The Reading Experience of the Dutch Groups." p.113

65 de Wit and Kool, "Tableaux Vivants." p.62

66 de Wit and Kool, ibid., p.62

67 Moolenaar, "Listening with the Heart: The Reading Experience of the Dutch Groups." p.110

68 Moolenaar, ibid., p.108
value of the process. As one observer notes, “[S]erious intercultural reading of biblical texts could be the most effective way to avoid the pitfalls of biblical fundamentalism, on the one hand, and postmodern relativism where anything goes, on the other hand.”

1.4.2 Intercultural Bible Reading Groups as Contextual Bible Studies

The second question answered was whether or not the format of a contextual small group Bible study was helpful to the process of articulating a blending of the theological insights of the groups. Did the groups really provide a means of restraint to ensure that the resulting interpretation was of value to the larger theological community? Was it an environment in which critical resources (including biblical scholars themselves) could ‘read with’ those who are underrepresented in traditional biblical interpretation?

In the TEA project, it appears that the groups worked in just those ways. Reading report formats and suggested questions were given at the beginning of the process to help the groups raise issues in keeping with critical textual methods but were phrased in ways to try to avoid derailing the process. In many of the groups trained theologians were present either as members or group facilitators. The result of this approach was that in some ways the group members themselves were interacting with each other much more than they ended up interacting with their counterpart group in another place in the world. One Dutch group reported their experience in this way:

Most discussion in our group related to the opinions of our partner group on the concept of sin. It was through this discussion that it became more apparent than before that there were diverse opinions within our own group on the subject…Has our interpretation not gradually grown too casual? Should we not have established more clarity by now?

Another group, also in the Netherlands, had a similar experience of having to make their way through the process by developing together as a community:

Gradually the Groningen group became more open with one another, partly owing to the influence of the Nicaraguan group…The blunt and personal approach by the Nicaraguans, straight from their hearts and addressed personally to several Groningen group members, persuaded the Groningen people to open their hearts in response. The group’s conversations were no longer from the head but from the heart as well. In an atmosphere of trust, much could be discussed.

These comments, as representative samples of the created “social property” which resulted from the project, show that the process of a group contextual Bible study did succeed in allowing for the

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70 Theo Witvliet, "The Ecumenical Relevance of Intercultural Bible Reading," in Through the Eyes of Another : Intercultural Reading of the Bible, ed. Hans de Wit(Amsterdam: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004). p.496
71 de Wit, "Objectives and Backgrounds." p.46
72 de Wit and Kool, "Tableaux Vivants." p.80
73 Saskia Ossewaarde-van Nie, "Is God’s Will the Same for Groningen and Nicaragua?," in Through the Eyes of Another : Intercultural Reading of the Bible, ed. Hans de Wit(Amsterdam: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004). p.128
process of democratic theological interpretation. In those group settings, it became apparent that interpreting scripture is a collective work that depends on the collective memory of those in the living community of faith. Dialogue, exchange, and even dispute was essential to grasping how God’s revelation applied both in the local setting and then in the setting of the partner group, and in the end it can be said that most of the participants did in fact discover a “theoretically well-grounded and culturally autonomous” path in the way that West describes. The process of intercultural Bible reading elevated the level of these groups’ interpretive voices while serving as a stimulus to their faith.

1.5 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter began by presenting the theories of Ricoeur and Gadamer as foundational understandings which have proven essential for a non-Western, non-academically centered Biblical hermeneutic that has been practiced with ordinary readers by Mesters in Latin America and West in South Africa. The next section detailed how de Wit applied the concept of the ordinary reader by means of a study with participants in different cultural contexts to see whether the Bible might serve as a place of encounter across cultural differences and in so doing discovered the confrontational power inherent in such pairings. The project “Through the Eyes of Another” demonstrated that the process of intercultural Bible reading can indeed help open participants to the voices of other perspectives while assisting the groups in clarifying their own interpretive views, so the attention will now turn in the following chapter to look in detail at the theoretical frameworks which serve to underpin how this same dynamic may be applied with adolescents. Is it possible that intercultural Bible reading can foster spiritual growth in youth? That is the question to which the next chapter turns.

74 Witvliet, “The Ecumenical Relevance of Intercultural Bible Reading,” p.496
75 West, ”Reading the Bible Differently : Giving Shape to the Discourses of the Dominated.” p.33
2. Theoretical Frameworks

2.1 Introduction

The following chapter will present the theoretical frameworks which serve as the foundational building blocks upon which the project is based. The first section will define a concept of adolescence along with presenting details from a survey which defines adolescence in eight regions of the world to demonstrate the near universality of the life stage’s characteristics. The second part of the chapter presents Hofstede’s cultural dimensions as helpful tools for both understanding and measuring cultural dynamics while the third section details distinctive features of the intercultural communication process. The fourth and final part of the chapter presents a framework for understanding spiritual growth from a decidedly Christian orientation.

2.2 The Concept of Adolescence

To study youthful participants engaged in intercultural Bible reading, one must first settle exactly what is meant by the idea of adolescence. At first approach, the idea seems a reasonable concept as a period of transition between childhood and adulthood through which all human beings must pass. Yet when one peers a bit more closely, it quickly becomes apparent that there are a number of dimensions hidden within the larger concept that take a specific shape and significance of their own to affect the entirety of the whole.

It must be stated at the outset that the goal of this section is not to delve too deeply into the totality of the processes at work during adolescence, but to show two things; first, that there are consistent and general physical processes at work in all adolescents such that it can be affirmed that adolescents are an identifiable people group. Second, that there is a growing recognition of adolescence as a socio-cultural stage of development in most regions of the world such that a shared concept of adolescence can be understood across different cultures. The goal in delineating both of these understandings is to show that it is legitimate for theology to specifically recognize and seek to understand adolescents in much the same way as it has been beneficial for other groups to have received pointed theological consideration (i.e., contextualized theologies).

2.2.1 General Critiques of Adolescent Theories

Before continuing, it should be noted that there are two precautions to be taken when discussing adolescents as a group. First, there is a non-linear aspect in the growth from child to adult which requires researchers to keep in mind that the process should be seen as one of trajectory rather than fixed with boundaries solely determined by chronological age. Thus the discussion to follow purposefully avoids attempting to establish one range of ages as the fixed timeline during which adolescent processes are definably in place. Second, there have been some questions raised as to the value of attempting to identify universal similarities in adolescents since it tends to downplay important differences in favor of creating blanket categorizations that may not be as accurate as

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76 Leo B. Hendry and Marion Kloep, ”Conceptualizing Emerging Adulthood: Inspecting the Emperor’s New Clothes?,” Child Development Perspectives 1, no. No. 2 (2007). p.76
presented. But the reality for investigating how 13-20 year-olds can participate in intercultural Bible reading is that general similarities can be noted with the allowance for significant variations without diminishing the strength of the argument that this group should be considered legitimate for theological attention.

The first part of what follows, then, will highlight the physical, cognitive, and psycho-social changes which accompany growth from childhood to adulthood. The second part will next take a look at different societal structures wherein that growth takes place by examining the family structures, peer relationships, and educational systems (as generally accepted pieces of adolescent cultural development) in eight different regions of the world: sub-Saharan Africa, India, China and Japan, Southeast Asia, Russia, Arabian countries, Latin America, and Western countries. These regions have been chosen for two reasons: first, they contain recognized adolescent-aged populations (which in most cases ranges between the ages of 10 and 29 years old)\(^7\), and two, as such, they serve as legitimate potential locations for intercultural Bible reading groups. Please note that although the research question is limited to the ages of 13 to 20 years for reasons of procedural clarity, this chapter’s use of the terms “adolescents”, “teens”, “youth”, and “young people” should all be interpreted to mean young adults in the adolescent phase of life that includes but is not limited to 13-20 year-olds. With this being said, now let us move on to present generally recognized features of adolescent physical development to establish the group as a population with identifiable characteristics.

### 2.2.2 Physical Development

One of the most obvious changes which accompany adolescence is the dramatic physical metamorphosis that takes place, including the appearance and development of secondary sexual characteristics.\(^7\)\(^9\) There are tremendous weight and height gains during adolescence (up to 10.4 cm in boys and 8.9 cm in girls) which can affect not only a teenager’s physical coordination but also their perception of themselves as they compare their own physical progress with the progress of their peers.\(^8\) This can be a problem in Western countries like the U.S., where close to 60 percent of adolescent girls report that they are trying to lose weight, and a small percentage of girls (1-3%) become so obsessed with their weight that they develop severe eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia.\(^8\)\(^1\) For many teens, the upheaval caused by these physical changes can so affect their physical coordination that they feel clumsy and awkward, finding it difficult to get used to their new bodies.\(^8\)

These physical changes not only affect self-image but can also affect how teens relate to both adults and their peer group as well. For boys who experience early physical maturation there can be a

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higher rate of popularity and an increase in opportunities for leadership of their peers as well as an expectation to accept what are seen as more adult responsibilities. For girls, early maturation can tend to increase the pressure to become involved in romantic or sexual relationships and can even lead to threatening sexual interactions. One study has shown that physical maturation adversely affects a girl’s safety in the public sphere (even in small communities where younger girls run around freely), and a mapping exercise in the largest slum in Africa, Kibera, found that less than 2% of the estimated 76,000 girls who had begun puberty had a safe place outside of their school structure or family home where they could go without fear of harassment.

For both boys and girls, physical maturation can also lead adults to incorrectly assume that their cognitive and emotional functions are just as developed as their bodies – which they typically are not. This mismatch and the resulting assumptions can set the stage for conflicts and misunderstandings between adults and children when the teenager doesn’t live up to unrealistic expectations. No matter how one looks at it, the impact of physical changes in teens on their relationships is extremely significant.

One important area of physical change and development that has been researched more within the last few years (due to increasingly more precise imaging technologies) is the manner and impact of the way the brain grows during adolescence. Where it was once thought the brain stopped growing by the age of 12 (with most structures complete as early as three years old), recent evidence suggests that the brain actually continues to develop through the teen years and even further on into the twenties. What scientists are concluding now is that the teenage brain is actually a series of dead ends where the connections between the neurons which affect emotions, physical coordination, and mental abilities are incomplete.

The fact that this process of developing connections continues unabated into and through adolescence may be why teens seem to be so incredibly inconsistent. While it is true that the brain is physically almost full size by age six, it is also true that the frontal lobes (which serve to override and control functions such as self-control, judgment, emotional regulation, organization and planning) will continue to undergo great changes from the beginning of puberty to the beginning of young adulthood. These control centers grow between ages ten and twelve and then shrink back in the twenties as unused or unnecessary neurons are pruned back to create a more efficient and organized network. Neurons which help with cognitive and other abilities will survive if they’re used but wither away if they’re not. The net result of this growth and reduction is that some scientists believe the ability to make better decisions comes along later in adolescence as the ability to think things through becomes physiologically enabled.

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85 Bruce, ibid., p.10
86 Huebner, "Adolescent and Growth Development."
88 Ibid.
89 Huebner, "Adolescent and Growth Development."
90 "Teenage Brain: A Work in Progress"
At its most basic level, adolescence is a physical process of being awkwardly in-between, not yet an adult but not still a child. A teenager’s body is in a state of flux where it will remain for a number of years, and as a result some of the physical components which assist in rationality are not even fully functional. No wonder, then, that emotion can so often become the primary driving force for teenagers rather than logic.

2.2.3 Cognitive Development

Concurrent with the myriad of physical changes during the teenage years is a shift in how teens begin to think about themselves and their world. In general, they are embarking on a progression from concrete thinking which focuses mainly on the present to abstract thinking which allows for projection, insight, and imagining hypothetical situations. By the time they enter young adulthood and the processes of adolescence are winding down (in their mid-twenties) it will be possible for them to reason from known principles to a logical conclusion with more and more criteria in the mix. They will be able to systematically examine different facets of a problem and arrive at their own opinion after examining pros and cons while using “What if?” questions as jumping off points to consider the impact of things which cannot be seen, heard, or touched. Teenagers who are getting started on this process of cognitive development tend to:

- Start to question more extensively
- Analyze in more detail
- Attempt to develop an individual code of ethics
- Inject systematic thinking into relationship structures and communication
- Increase their thinking on more global concepts like justice, history, and politics
- Become more idealistic
- Enjoy debating different topics

While these are significant strides forward in thinking and reasoning skills, the increasing role of cognition also brings some unsettling (albeit usually temporary) developments along the way. One of the typical results from this change in cognitive process is that teens begin to feel and consequently demonstrate a heightened level of self-consciousness. Since part of the process of adolescence is an increasing awareness of self, it naturally follows that teens typically believe everyone else is thinking about them just as much as they are thinking about themselves. Normal episodes of

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91 Huebner, "Adolescent and Growth Development."
93 Huebner, “Adolescent and Growth Development.”
94 "Adolescent Medicine: Cognitive Development.”
95 Huebner, “Adolescent and Growth Development.”
96 Leisha M. Andersen, "Adolescent Development."
everyday life tend to be blown up into huge, dramatic experiences (a quick look at teen profiles on internet social networking sites quickly bears this out).  

Another result of this change in cognition is the belief which most teenagers have in their own physical invincibility, a belief which is called the personal fable. Most teens do not yet possess the capacity to correctly project consequences, so they tend to minimize risks and possible negative outcomes. This can result in the pursuit of incredibly risky behaviors for teenagers. Reckless driving in the U.S. (“I won’t crash.”), binge drinking in the U.K. (“I can handle it.”), unprotected sex in Somalia (“I won’t get pregnant or catch a disease.”), and smoking in the Netherlands (“I’ll never get cancer”) are all typical outgrowths of this personal fable thinking.  

Although the myth of the indestructible self is a natural part of adolescence, it can be a major source of friction in relationships with both peers and adults in authority because teens have a tendency to discount others’ testimonies of negative experiences due to their firm belief in their own perceptions of reality – which is filtered through this view of indestructibility.

2.2.4 Psycho-social Development

The path from childhood to adolescence also includes a gradual change from seeing oneself as an extension of the parental figures into seeing oneself as an independent and whole person. The final result of this growing movement toward independence is that an adolescent will possess a more cohesive sense of identity as he or she enters young adulthood than when he or she was a child. For this transition to be effective, though, there are several psycho-social development issues that teenagers must successfully resolve.

One issue for teens on the road to independence is that they must become established with their own identity, and in fact it is this task alone which may be considered the overarching accomplishment most central to successfully maturing from a child into an adult. Teenagers are on a journey where they must discover their own unique identity and move toward an internal locus of control where they are the ones who affect their circumstances rather than an external locus of control where others have the sole power to determine their life’s direction. Although most teens probably won’t cognitively ask themselves, “Who am I?” as they narrow down their own beliefs about who they are and who they would like to be, that is, in fact, the very question they must eventually answer. A healthy progression through adolescence, then, will result in achieving clarity about their personal beliefs and values, educational and occupational goals, and relational expectations so that they possess a secure identity which allows them to feel that they fit in with the world. A successful process of individualization will result in a teenager realizing who he or she is

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98 Huebner, “Adolescent and Growth Development.”
99 Huebner, ibid.
100 Andersen, “Adolescent Development.”
101 Huebner, “Adolescent and Growth Development.”
102 Chap Clark, Hurt : Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). p.28
103 Huebner, “Adolescent and Growth Development.”
104 Huebner, ibid.
in relation to others, taking personal responsibility for the person he or she is becoming, and committing to live in healthy relational dynamics with others.\(^{105}\)

Another psycho-social issue facing teens is that of establishing autonomy. While the quest for autonomy is related somewhat to the search for identity, there is a marked difference in that the search for autonomy means teenagers must develop a certain level of independence from external pressures as they become self-governing within relationships.\(^{106}\) In other words, autonomy must be developed in order to establish identity. While sometimes this budding autonomy can be interpreted as teenagers being rebellious, a certain amount of push-back is necessary and healthy and should not be interpreted by adults as rejection since teens need to acquire the ability to make their own decisions and follow through with them for better or worse.\(^{107}\)

Along with identity and autonomy, another task for adolescents is to develop the skills for achieving relational intimacy.\(^{108}\) In early adolescence, this process is started mainly through the development of same-sex friendships and reveals itself through teens wanting to behave alike, dress in a similar fashion, and participate in the same activities as their peers.\(^{109}\) In later stages, older adolescents will begin to seek out and develop romantic relationships as they feel more and more comfortable in exploring different levels and types of relational intimacy.\(^{110}\) The key, though, is for the adolescent to learn how to develop close relationships where there is transparency, honesty, caring, and trust.\(^{111}\) In the practice of beginning, maintaining, and many times ending relationships, teens are growing their social skills that eventually become the building blocks for healthy and intimate adult connections including marriage.\(^{112}\)

At the same time that many teens are learning to develop relational intimacy, they are also in the process of learning how to deal with their sexuality as well.\(^{113}\) In the teen years, young people are developing physically and cognitively enough that they can begin to think about their own sexuality and those two developmental issues begin to move adolescents into new territory when it comes to their sexual identity.\(^{114}\) As he or she has a range of sexual interactions and explorations, a teenager will draw upon those experiences regardless of whether they are positive or negative to gradually determine a sexual identity and orientation in keeping with his or her internalized values.\(^{115}\) As adolescents move into early adulthood, feelings of love and passion become more focused and intense, sexual identity becomes clearer and clearer, and there is an increased capacity for serious relationships.\(^{116}\) The net result is that the teenage years are foundational in determining one’s sexual identity, a key component for maintaining adult relationships.\(^{117}\)

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105 Clark, Hurt: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers. p.28
106 Huebner, “Adolescent and Growth Development.”
107 Andersen, “Adolescent Development.”
108 Huebner, “Adolescent and Growth Development.”
109 Huebner, ibid.
110 Andersen, “Adolescent Development.”
111 Huebner, “Adolescent and Growth Development.”
112 Huebner, ibid.
113 Huebner, ibid.
114 Huebner, ibid.
115 Andersen, “Adolescent Development.”
116 Andersen, “Adolescent Development.”
117 Huebner, “Adolescent and Growth Development.”
All children who progress into adulthood must eventually go through these developmental processes and as they do, they become a part of a shared generational experience. Wherever they may happen to live, in whatever country or culture, adolescents will struggle with physical changes that make them feel awkward and uncomfortable, cognitive changes that make their thinking fuzzy and difficult and psycho-social changes which raise their awareness of themselves and others. In so doing, they form an identifiable (though not identical) population that can benefit from intentional theological reflection. Yet it is also true that these developmental changes are only half of the story of the adolescent process. Adolescents do not grow up without being shaped to a large extent by the culture around them, so now to examine the other half of the process of adolescence.

To continue clarifying the theoretical framework for this study, the next section will more fully develop the case that 13-20 year-olds around the world share common characteristics in the global life-stage of adolescence, and as such are able to function as an identifiable group for theological attention.

2.2.5 Particular Characteristics of Adolescence in Eight Different Regions of the World

Though many are wondering about the presence of a monolithic global youth culture, it must be admitted that adolescence, although a very real process in each culture, is also a very different process in each culture. This next section, then, will give descriptions of three significant factors in understanding adolescence from a sociological perspective; family dynamics, peer relationships, and educational processes. The reason for choosing these factors for discussion is because they serve as shared foundational characteristics for the adolescent experience while also reflecting the ways in which each region differs from another. The family unit is one of the most basic environments in determining adolescent development, but the number of variations in family structure and relationships are tremendous as one moves from culture to culture. Peer relationships, too, have an impact on the journey from child to adult, but in some cultures the impact is much more significant than others (although even this fact appears to be changing). Education is also significant yet different as it functions as part of society’s formal preparations for the challenges of adulthood.

These eight regions of the world have been chosen firstly because they demonstrate that adolescence is now a globally recognized life-stage, and secondly because of their ability to serve as locations for intercultural Bible reading groups. At the end of the section, specific implications for investigating intercultural Bible reading with 13-20 year-olds will be drawn from the survey.

2.2.5.1 Sub-Saharan Africa

The first region for discussion is sub-Saharan Africa which includes the countries of Cameroon, Kenya, and South Africa among others. In this part of the world, there are three themes which present themselves immediately; the difference in the experience between rural and urban adolescents, the wide range of cultural diversity, and the tension between the indigenous cultural

119 Brown and Larson, ibid., p.9
expressions of adolescence and the pressures of interfacing with the western world.\textsuperscript{120} The worldview of this region of Africa is very different from the framework of Western developmental psychology, and as such serves as a caution against any attempts at dogmatic universalizing.\textsuperscript{121}

That being said, in sub-Saharan Africa adolescence is seen as the “in-between” time where the child leaves his or her social apprenticeship in the family on the quest to becoming fully integrated into adult life.\textsuperscript{122} It is a distinct phase of socialization which usually begins with a rite of passage (typically circumcision for boys and the beginning of training in housekeeping and societal caretaking for girls) and is followed by careful parental guidance. As one African proverb states, “If a person is trained strictly then that person becomes a good person.”\textsuperscript{123} Because family in this region can be defined to include persons connected by blood, marriage, adoption, and/or shared cultural, economic, and emotional attachment, these youth have many adults who are heavily invested in their becoming fully functioning adults.\textsuperscript{124} But it should also be noted that for many sub-Saharan African adolescents, famines, lack of opportunities, war, and political instability have severely increased the likelihood that they will live outside of their family of origin in informal settlements or on the street (i.e., it is estimated that there are as many as 250,000 Kenyan children and one million Zambian children living on the streets).\textsuperscript{125}

Peer groups in this region are typically constituted by age, gender, or neighborhood, and are usually given the responsibility of looking after younger children in the village.\textsuperscript{126} Because most African adolescents are also given other tasks to complete while their parents are away working, they usually spend much of their day recreating adult roles and routines in a kind of alternate culture which helps them re-interpret their relationships with adults. In fact, it is thought that peer interactions for this group of adolescents may be profoundly more significant than the ones with adults.\textsuperscript{127} It is also in these peer groups that sexual expression begins, with most cultures seeing childbearing as the beginning of true adulthood. The difficulty is that sexual and reproductive issues are typically not discussed in such a way as to help adolescents successfully navigate through the risks of unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV infection. The number of AIDS orphans in this region of the world at the end of 2000 was projected to be somewhere around 13 million.\textsuperscript{128}

Finally, the process of education highlights some of the difficulties of the current environment in Africa. Most schools, even though they have been recipients of major investment both from the country itself and from global sources, serve more as recruitment to a Western mindset than preparation for the African social and economic reality. While it used to be a normal occurrence for an African child to participate in learning from parents and mentors what was specifically designed

\textsuperscript{121} Nsameng, ibid., p.63
\textsuperscript{122} Nsameng, ibid., p.69
\textsuperscript{123} Nsameng, ibid., p.74
\textsuperscript{124} Nsameng, ibid., p.73
\textsuperscript{125} Nsameng, ibid., p.76
\textsuperscript{126} Nsameng, ibid., p.77
\textsuperscript{127} Nsameng, ibid., p.78
\textsuperscript{128} Nsameng, ibid., p.81,83
for him or her to take a place as an adult in the community, now youth are sent out from the family to schools which are rarely designed to prepare them for an agrarian existence.\textsuperscript{129} Rote learning and foreign textbooks are the norm, and the typical result of adolescent education is a higher chance of unemployment than if the youth had stayed in the village.\textsuperscript{130} The difficulty is that African youth are caught between the opportunities which increased internationalism brings and a system of education which has, for the most part, remained inappropriately and ineffectively acculturated.

Clearly adolescence is recognized in sub-Saharan Africa as a distinct and significant stage of life through rites of passage, changes in structured responsibilities, more allowance for peer relationships, and even educational opportunities for youth. The challenge going forward in this part of the world will be to craft a middle ground where the demands of young people’s local realities are grafted into the opportunities and understandings that a shrinking world brings.\textsuperscript{131}

2.2.5.2 India

The picture of an Indian adolescent is a multifaceted one which rightfully encompasses a huge range of diversity. From the student attending a prestigious technology university to the Bengali refugee girl who has been sold by her parents into prostitution to provide money for the family, the gap in adolescent experience in India can be very wide as the region possesses an amazing range of social and economic disparity. Still, reasonable generalizations along the three characteristics of family, peer groups, and education are all possible.\textsuperscript{132}

The traditional Indian family typically includes the patriarch and his spouse, their children, married sons, their spouses and children, as well as other members of the extended family such as single brothers, sisters, widowed aunts, and other dependent family relations. All usually live together in the same dwelling and share a common production (whether it is farming, business, or producing goods) supervised by the patriarch as the authoritative head of the family.\textsuperscript{133} The typical Indian adolescent stays with the family until early adulthood or even later with female youth typically having less rights than the males, and that adolescent is expected to participate in traditionally-defined, hierarchical roles.\textsuperscript{134} Parental control is very high, especially when it comes to education and career decisions, and Indian adolescents typically have a strong emotional dependence on their parents.\textsuperscript{135} Also, there is a uniquely important bond between a mother and her first-born son since his birth raises her status in the conjugal family and insures care in her old age.\textsuperscript{136} An increased rate of economic and social change including a rise in the expectation of gender equality is currently challenging the traditional mindset which sees youth almost solely in the context of their family, but it appears that a strong value on family will remain the norm for most Indian youth.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{129} Nsamenang, ibid., p.88
\textsuperscript{130} Nsamenang, ibid., p.92
\textsuperscript{131} Nsamenang, ibid., p.96
\textsuperscript{133} Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.108
\textsuperscript{134} Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.109
\textsuperscript{135} Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.109
\textsuperscript{136} Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.109}
The way youth function in peer relationships is an area where class and gender-based differences are most evident. As one moves up the social scale toward wealth and urbanization, external peer groups which are not a part of the extended family unit increase in occurrence and prominence. These outside peer groups do not exert a tremendous amount of influence (unlike in Africa and Western countries), however, and parents still usually keep a close eye on their young people so that in most cases peer identification is limited to a similarity in the styles of dress, music, using the same slang, and spending time together as a group. When it comes to romantic relationships, most Indian youth expect their parents to arrange a marriage partner for them although some flexibility in this traditional arrangement is starting to be seen in wealthier economic classes. At any rate, by the end of their teenage years, 50% of Indian youth will be married.

Improving the educational system has been identified by the Indian government as a foundational necessity to the country’s continuing growth as a market economy, yet despite having one of the largest schooling systems in the world India also has the largest concentration of adolescents not enrolled in school. In fact, an estimated 100 million Indian children and youth have never been to school, and approximately 11 million live on the streets. For those Indian youth who do get to take part in the education process, however, academic success is a necessity for maturing into a fully vested adult as it has replaced the traditional role of apprenticeship. Formal education is the ideal for middle- and upper-class people who will likely go on to fill bureaucratic or professional positions, and male youth especially are under great pressure to succeed to ensure their future occupational success. The result of this pressure is that more and more youth report being stressed by their educational pursuits, and depression is often related to a lack of academic success.

The overall picture of adolescence in India, then, appears to be one of wide disparity. The country’s increasing role in the world economy is bringing new opportunities to this generation of Indian young people, yet approximately one third of the adolescent population still exists below the line of poverty. So while there may be more options for the future of Indian adolescents, the means to achieve those options may be perhaps not so clear.

2.2.5.3 China and Japan

While the stereotypical image of Japanese and Chinese youth is that of strict conformity, the reality appears to be significantly different. Important economic developments, rising individualism, and an increased exposure to and interaction with Western societies has brought rapid transformation to this part of the world, and today’s adolescents have spent most of their lives adapting to these changes.

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137 Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.111
138 Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.113
139 Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.113
140 Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.129
141 Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.117, 122
142 Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.109
143 Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.131
144 Verma and Saraswathi, ibid., p.124

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While the family structures in China and Japan are indeed different, both countries share a modeling theory of parenting.\textsuperscript{146} Parents in these areas are confident that children will gradually behave in socially acceptable ways if they are shown early tolerance in a positive environment, so their aim in raising their children is to take on the responsibility of functioning as these desirable models for their children to emulate. Although the entire village is seen as significant to raising children, the ultimate responsibility is still in the family of origin where currently fewer adolescents are living with extended family present.\textsuperscript{147} One unique facet of family life in this area is that school teachers are expected to have significant input into the lives of adolescents, sometimes even taking over functions formerly administered by parents. The net result of this dynamic is that 80%-90% of Japanese teenagers describe their family life as being “fun” or “pleasant.”\textsuperscript{148} In China, however, the one-child family policy has resulted in more difficulties in maintaining the traditional Chinese value on extended family and seems to be increasing the pressure on adolescents in that country who now face less opportunities for employment with increasing familial obligation because they are the sole caretakers.\textsuperscript{149}

The teenage years in these countries is generally recognized as the time when activities shift from the family to the peer group. In the transition from elementary school to junior high school, Japanese students tend to rely more strongly on friends and peers than parents,\textsuperscript{150} and although studies are more limited in China those available do show an increased participation in sport clubs and interest groups. In fact, one study shows these hobby clubs as the most significant source of friendship for adolescents in the two countries.\textsuperscript{151} Dating will typically occurs from within the peer groups in both countries even though most Japanese junior and senior high schools forbid it.\textsuperscript{152}

The structure and significance of the education systems of Japan and China are also very similar. In both cultures, school becomes the central hub around which the rest of adolescent life revolves, even though there continue to be gender, ethnic, and economic disparities especially in the availability of higher education.\textsuperscript{153} After school, numerous extra-curricular activities keep students away from home until well into the evening but are seen as opportunities for adolescents to develop friendships, supplement their regular curriculum, and even participate in political events.\textsuperscript{154}

In summation, the cultures of China and Japan view adolescence as a time to prepare youth to assume adult responsibilities. Families increasingly give permission for guidance to come from other sources, schools assist with the growth of peer relationships and independence, and the relative political and social stability of the last few decades have served adolescents well. While there are still foreseeable challenges going forward, mainly on the economic front,\textsuperscript{155} at this point it appears that adolescents in these cultures are being given much support on their way to adulthood.

\textsuperscript{146} Stevenson and Zusho, ibid., p.144
\textsuperscript{147} Stevenson and Zusho, ibid., p.145
\textsuperscript{148} Stevenson and Zusho, ibid., p.146
\textsuperscript{149} Stevenson and Zusho, ibid., p.146
\textsuperscript{150} Stevenson and Zusho, ibid., p.148
\textsuperscript{151} Stevenson and Zusho, ibid., p.149
\textsuperscript{152} Stevenson and Zusho, ibid., p.149
\textsuperscript{153} Stevenson and Zusho, ibid., p.152
\textsuperscript{154} Stevenson and Zusho, ibid., p.156
\textsuperscript{155} Stevenson and Zusho, ibid., p.167
2.2.5.4 Southeast Asia

Today's youth of Southeast Asia (a region which includes such countries as Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Singapore along with six others) appear to personify both the speed of quickening societal changes in the region and the ability of tradition to resist such changes. For example, adolescents in this region are seen as both the hope of their family's survival and the victims of modernization. It is the region of the world where the two great cultures of India (from the west) and China (from the north) meet, and the interplay of religions, life patterns, and traditions together produce a distinct adolescent journey.¹⁵⁶

Families in this region tend to be organized around the nuclear family rather than the extended family although family members and significant other adults usually live close by, and they also tend to allow for a greater recognition of the status of women than some of the neighboring cultures.¹⁵⁷ It is from inside this web of flexible commitment that adolescents are expected to learn cultural values such as keeping harmonious relationships, maintaining concern for the feelings and intentions of others, and making sacrifices to maintain close ties.¹⁵⁸ As children enter adolescence, they are generally expected to take on significant responsibilities in order to contribute to the betterment of their family so much so that a youth’s success or failure brings either pride or shame.¹⁵⁹ Because of this push to assist in the family's standing, and because so many opportunities for advancement are located in the cities, youth in Southeast Asia are now moving away from home earlier and in greater numbers than in previous generations.¹⁶⁰ Interestingly enough, although girls are typically given the main task of caring for the family, they are also the ones more likely to move out before they get married and then return back to their family.¹⁶¹ So while the traditional values of family cooperation and support remains, the expression it takes is shifting significantly as urban environments offer more ways for youth to fulfill their traditional responsibilities in non-traditional ways.

When it comes to how adolescents in Southeast Asia relate to their peers, it looks very similar to other cultures where traditional dependence upon familial relationships is slowly shifting to more dependence on an external peer group. Friends are now viewed as providing significant comfort and assistance, and although only 28% of Filipino youth reported seeing their friends every day even that number itself is a large increase from past generations.¹⁶² Romantic relationships are typically found within the peer group, and some evidence suggests that there is an increased incidence of premarital cohabitation in the last several years – another marked change from the traditional route to marriage even though the cultural double-standard of allowing young men to have several sexual partners while encouraging women to remain chaste is still very much in force.¹⁶³ As more youth

¹⁵⁷ Santa Maria, ibid., p.176
¹⁵⁸ Santa Maria, ibid., p.177
¹⁵⁹ Santa Maria, ibid., p.178
¹⁶⁰ Santa Maria, ibid., p.178
¹⁶¹ Santa Maria, ibid., p.180
¹⁶² Santa Maria, ibid., p.182
¹⁶³ Santa Maria, ibid., p.183
move out of the home during late adolescence, it appears that friends are having more influence in the areas of independence, sexuality, and dating.\textsuperscript{164}

While educational initiatives are present in almost all of the countries of this region, the reality is that as adolescents get older and take over responsibility for caring for their families the likelihood of them staying in school diminishes. Part-time employment, informal labor opportunities, farming, unskilled factory jobs, and other income-generating prospects mean that many youth don’t finish more than a secondary level education because they view education as more of a convenience than a necessity.\textsuperscript{165} Because staying in school does not necessarily increase the likelihood of getting a better-paying job, most adolescents in Southeast Asia would rather begin earning money at one of the many jobs that require little education even though they typically offer a very low wage.\textsuperscript{166} This leaves many youth increasingly vulnerable to economic hardship.

It appears, then, that in this region of the world many adolescents are forced to hold their traditional responsibilities to their families and their personal desire for autonomy in an ongoing tension. Modernization has brought about increased mobility for the purposes of education and economic gain, but the test for youth in this region will be how to meld that opportunity with the traditional role of connection with family.

2.2.5.5 Arab Countries

In Arab societies, the teenage years are a time of learning how to balance responsibility and autonomy while functioning within a mix of different yet important relationships. It is a process that has long been recognized as a normal part of maturity, but only recently are researchers and academicians beginning to label the process in Arab countries as “adolescence.”\textsuperscript{167} While the predominance of Islam as the majority religion may be the initial impression of this part of the world, it also must be remembered that several countries here have significant Christian populations – thus the understanding of adolescence in this area cannot be condensed down into only an Islamic one. It is a region with a wide range of diversity, yet several common cultural and historical characteristics together serve to shape the experience of the modern Arab adolescent.\textsuperscript{168}

To begin with, the traditional Arab family is organized around the patriarchal figure where power is relegated to the elders, and in particular the male elders. Younger males of the family are expected to assume control over female family members, and the whole system is focused on emphasizing the family unit over the lone individual.\textsuperscript{169} Children are taught that they have lifelong responsibilities to their parents, and older children are typically taught that they are to take care of their younger brothers and sisters. One thing to note about the structure of Arab families is that their valuation of family loyalty seems to run counter to the Western concept of ultimate autonomy as the goal of emotionally healthy adulthood – Arab adolescents typically do not see familial obligations as rigid

\textsuperscript{164} Santa Maria, ibid., p.185
\textsuperscript{165} Santa Maria, ibid., p.188
\textsuperscript{166} Santa Maria, ibid., p.187,191
\textsuperscript{168} Booth, ibid., p.208
\textsuperscript{169} Booth, ibid., p.213
and binding in a negative way, nor do they see a need to identify themselves as separate individuals apart from their family unit.\textsuperscript{170} Instead, however, they find significance by finding their place as individuals in adherence to social and familial ideals.\textsuperscript{171} Both male and female adolescents are expected to express respect and submission to their parents, but girls in general have more pressure to also make sure that their public activities are in accordance with local norms of modesty and societal expectation.\textsuperscript{172}

There has not been a tremendous amount of research done on peer relationships in Arab countries since in general the majority of adolescent peers are also family members.\textsuperscript{173} This composition of adolescent peer groups does appear to be changing, however, especially when taking into account the difference in experiences between urban youth and rural youth. In urban areas, where there is typically a wider generation gap between parents and children, there is growing evidence that adolescents are becoming more likely to rely on outside peers for support although these peer groups still respect traditional cultural understandings which prohibit friendships between non-related boys and girls. Also, because urban adolescents are staying in school longer, friendships are more often made at school outside of the family’s view.\textsuperscript{174} One trend to note unique to this area of the world is that an increase in peer influence is also increasing the exposure of adolescents to conservative religious movements which shift some young people from centrist moral positions to more fundamentalist ones.\textsuperscript{175}

The system of education in the Arab world faces many difficulties, yet for most adolescents school is still a place of significant influence since the large majority of children in this region will receive primary education with a majority going on to high school.\textsuperscript{176} It is primarily because of schooling that an Arab adolescent will spend more hours with peers (as mentioned above), have more opportunity to mingle with the opposite sex, or participate in political- or interest-based groups. All of these factors together mean that today’s Arab adolescent will have more exposure to different ideas and life experiences than their parents’ generation – and thus live out an adolescent experience of growing autonomy.\textsuperscript{177} Yet it is still true that fewer girls attend school due to the need for them to help at home or because they are given in marriage,\textsuperscript{178} and a difficulty for all Arab young people is that completing an educational course does not necessarily mean that gainful employment will follow.\textsuperscript{179}

Arab adolescents, then, appear to be living in a time of change. On the one hand, they appear to be quite willing to bring the centuries-old traditions of strong family connection and support into their modern experience, yet on the other hand they also appear to be more open to influence from outside perspectives. While it remains to be seen what the result of this dynamic will be, it cannot be ignored that the life stage of adolescence will continue to increase its role in this region.

\textsuperscript{170} Booth, ibid., p.213
\textsuperscript{171} Booth, ibid., p.216
\textsuperscript{172} Booth, ibid., p.218
\textsuperscript{173} Booth, ibid., p.220
\textsuperscript{174} Booth, ibid., p.221
\textsuperscript{175} Booth, ibid., p.222
\textsuperscript{176} Booth, ibid., p.224
\textsuperscript{177} Booth, ibid., p.227
\textsuperscript{178} Booth, ibid., p.225
\textsuperscript{179} Booth, ibid., p.228
Russian adolescents are also living in a region which is undergoing unprecedented societal and political change. While the experience of today’s Russian adolescent is mostly that of a citizen in a free society, ongoing public discussions and reform policies highlight that they are in a society which is still very much in transition. Adding further complication to the societal mix is the fact that Russia is a large country which contains over 100 different nationalities. Still, there are general characteristics about adolescents which can be seen.

Russian adolescents tend to grow up in an emotionally close, often child-centered environment quite aware of their social responsibilities to their family. The typical trend for a Russian young adult is to marry early, have one or two children, and then live with their own or their spouse’s parents. Part of the reason for this is that there is an accepted economic interdependence which exists in the family where parents are expected to continue to contribute financially to their children even after those children reach adulthood. Values of collectivism, respect for hard work, and love for the nation are emphasized. There is, however, some disparity in the way girls in the family are treated in that they are often evaluated more in terms of their emotional development than for their self-reliance which is possibly a reaction to the Soviet-era characterization of women as strong, capable workers. Russia also has the highest level of divorce behind the United States such that approximately 15% of today’s adolescents in Russia will live at least part of their life with only one parent.

Recent studies on the ways Russian adolescents relate to their peers also demonstrate the stresses of societal transition. For example, one study reports that Russian adolescents do not tend to think of their classmates as kind and helpful, are bullied more often than their peers in other European countries, and that it is not easy for them to make new friends. Yet at the same time, another study reports that Russian boys and girls spend more time with friends than youth from most other countries. One researcher suggests that a growing trend toward individualism may be responsible for such diverse responses as youth are confused about their role with peers as their society changes from its traditionally collectivistic bent. As for dating relationships, though, because Russian culture places such a high value on romantic love as a precondition for dating and marriage the traditional tendency for youth to date others from within their peer group continues.

One factor that has remained consistent in Russia is that the educational system is still quite good. In fact, Russia has the highest rate of adult literacy in the world at 98.4% and social bonds forged in
school remain close since most youth will spend 11 years in the same class with 20-30 classmates. While it is true that not all educational services are free (as they were during the Soviet era), the majority of Russian adolescents still perceive that a high quality education is very much available to them and can be helpful for them to achieve their goals in life. The transition from school to work is also typically easy so that most adolescents postpone starting careers until they can finish prolonged studies.

In conclusion, Russian young people seem to be enjoying the benefit of their new society. Most are self-confident, feel in control of their lives and futures, and are being given the socio-cultural space of adolescence in which to develop and grow on their way to adulthood. Even the rate of religious belief is on the rise now with around two thirds of youth aged 16-17 years-old describing themselves as believers: a positive trend for any theological undertaking designed with adolescents in mind.

2.2.5.7 Latin America

While it is difficult to think that the term “adolescence” could be meaningful in Latin American indigenous or tribal populations where the norm is to begin adult responsibilities at the age of puberty, due to a decrease in fertility and an increase in life expectancy the stage of adolescence has become even more common and recognized in the lives of teens who live above the line of poverty in this region. Even though social scientists have only been studying this demographic group since the 1960’s, several specific characteristics of the adolescent experience in Latin America can be noted.

First, Latin American family structure has seen a significant shift since in the last two decades. Currently, even in rural areas, the family can no longer be characterized as the main economic unit of production as has been the case in previous generations. Patriarchal power, once the standard uniting force in the family, has diminished and individualization has grown such that family members now have greater individual autonomy. The family is still considered a source of love and affection, however, and most households have three generations living together. Only when an adolescent is getting married or choosing to live with his or her new partner does he or she move out, and the average age for this is typically around 20 years old. Interestingly enough, there are no significant differences in this process for youth in urban settings when compared to youth in rural settings.

Friendships among Latin American youth are similar to those in other countries in that they typically serve to provide behavioral guidelines, and most peer groups in this region are organized around recreational activities such as sports or music. Drinking alcohol is considered a major part of teen social events, and for many youth it becomes the main reason to belong to a group. Boys have

191 Stetsenko, ibid., p.249, 255
192 Stetsenko, ibid., p.261
193 Stetsenko, ibid., p.262
194 Stetsenko, ibid., p.264
196 Welti, ibid., p.283
197 Welti, ibid., p.286
198 Welti, ibid., p.288
more opportunity to develop friendships outside of school, but for the majority of girls school becomes the main setting in which to make friends. Dating occurs in the evenings or on weekends, and attitudes toward sexuality are very conservative in keeping with the religious culture of the region (i.e., sexual intercourse is generally prescribed for the confines of marriage).\textsuperscript{199} Criminal gangs are a problem peer group in this part of the world, and the increase in the number of gangs appears to be related to the increasingly disturbing rise in the level of youth violence in the region.\textsuperscript{200}

The educational structure in this part of the world is continuing to develop so that now most adolescents will end up finishing a primary school education. Youth currently have an average of two more years of schooling than their parents, and the positive trend of each younger generation completing higher levels of education is expected to continue.\textsuperscript{201} Some of the main challenges in this region, though, are the lack of qualified teachers, the difficulty of overcrowded schools in urban areas, and a lack of economic resources in the family which sometimes means that students have to leave school to help with family finances. Social class disparity can also be seen as well, as wealthier youth typically attend private schools with higher academic standards than poorer youth and urban youth are more likely to complete a secondary education than rural youth.\textsuperscript{202} In any case, Latin American youth are finding (like in so many other regions of the world), that high levels of education do not necessarily translate into steady, economically viable work — unemployment rates among youth are generally double the rate of adults in this region of the world.\textsuperscript{203} The result of this circumstance has been an increased sense of fatalism in youth.\textsuperscript{204}

In Latin America, an increasing youth population means an increasing need for societal guidance and structures which are designed to help them become healthy, functioning adults. Too many young people in this region, though, see no hope for the future due to harsh current economic realities.\textsuperscript{205}

\textit{2.2.5.8 Western Countries}

The final region to examine is made up of those countries which can be loosely grouped together as the Western world. These countries in general have a long history of defining and studying adolescence beginning with the publication of \textit{Adolescence} by G. Stanley Hall in America in 1904, so even though this region represents a great diversity of cultures including as it does Europe, the United States, and Canada, there many more similarities than differences.

Family life in this region has changed over the last several decades to become less a basis for such things as education, work, and recreation to function more as a source of affection and comfort. Today’s youth have a tremendous amount of autonomy from their families, but they still see their families as the emotional foundation for their lives.\textsuperscript{206} Relationships between parents and adolescence are seldom rigidly hierarchical, and in general the goal for this relationship is that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[199] Welti, ibid., p.290
\item[200] Welti, ibid., p.300
\item[201] Welti, ibid., p.292
\item[202] Welti, ibid., p.293
\item[203] Welti, ibid., p.294
\item[204] Welti, ibid., p.302
\item[205] Welti, ibid., p.302
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
parents will gradually form strong bonds of friendship with their children. Most parenting styles in this area tend toward a permissive style which allows young people to have basically unmonitored lives to come and go as they wish even though most European youth tend to live with their parents for longer than those in the U.S.\textsuperscript{207} These countries do have higher rate of divorce than in other regions, however, and the likelihood of negative outcomes such as substance abuse, lower educational outcomes, and less fulfilling occupational attainment is typically higher for adolescents who experience divorce\textsuperscript{208}.

Relationships with friends and significant peers have continued to increase in importance for youth in the West. A large number of hours are spent with these social groups in school, leisure activities, and work, and recent studies in the U.S. and Europe show that adolescents in these regions consider themselves happiest when with turning to their friends for advice and consolation.\textsuperscript{209} Dating as a couple typically starts earlier in the U.S. than in Europe, during the mid-teens, while European adolescents tend to spend more time in groups. In any case, sexual intercourse is not reserved for marriage by the majority in this region so that most young people will be sexually active for up to 10 years before they marry.\textsuperscript{210} Another common trend for older adolescents in this part of the world is cohabitation before marriage, with that being the arrangement for at least 66% of the adolescent population.\textsuperscript{211}

Schooling in the West is generally organized using primary, secondary, and university level schools with European youth more likely to be required to decide their academic track at an earlier age than their counterparts in the U.S. In both areas there is a trend toward extending the number of years that young people spend in education, but while this fits in well with the increasing call for specialized job training it also serves as a postponement of adult responsibilities for this group.\textsuperscript{212} A very serious challenge to this region are the readily identifiable disparities in the educational achievement of minorities and the economically disadvantaged, but the gender gap has been diminishing over the last several decades to the point where young women now exceed young men in educational performance and attainment.\textsuperscript{213}

As it stands now, adolescents in Western countries are entering the 21\textsuperscript{st} century with more education, more leisure time, and in general more economic advantages than any adolescents before. They have tremendous freedoms in choosing their partners, their educational path, and their careers. While access to these options is not equal for all, there is a sense of promise for the future of this generation – but one hopes that the fulfillment of that promise will show itself through an active and compassionate concern for the rest of the world.

2.2.6.9 Implications from the Survey

The first point to note after such a survey is the confirmation that each of the cultures above does in fact recognize adolescence as a transitional life stage that benefits from societal structures and

\textsuperscript{207} Arnett, ibid., p.312
\textsuperscript{208} Arnett, ibid., p.315
\textsuperscript{209} Arnett, ibid., p.316
\textsuperscript{210} Arnett, ibid., p.317
\textsuperscript{211} Arnett, ibid., p.314
\textsuperscript{212} Arnett, ibid., p.321
\textsuperscript{213} Arnett, ibid., p.322
assistance. This means that while it may take some time to convince local communities of faith to become involved in intercultural Bible reading with their 13-20 year-olds, it will not be a case of having to introduce the concept of adolescence as a whole since each of these regions has familiarity with both the idea and the need for supporting structures. The fact that each of these regions already recognizes the validity of adolescence should also underscore the importance for theology to develop intercultural Bible reading as a means to connect with and empower such a widely recognized population group.

A second point that becomes readily apparent when analyzing these different regions is that youth in all of these areas demonstrate a desire to spend time and form relationships with peers. This fact shows that the methodology of intercultural Bible reading is a natural fit with the typical adolescent process of these regions, meaning that churches and communities of faith can be boldly proactive in promoting intercultural Bible reading to their youth since it takes a recognizable adolescent desire for peer interaction and adds spiritual significance to it. In short, this longing for peer relationships provides an open invitation for theology to utilize intercultural Bible reading methodology with adolescents around the world.

2.2.7 The Concept of Adolescence: Summary and Conclusion

Adolescence is a time when physical changes and societal expectations are in a state of flux. Physical development brings increasing complication to even the most basic of routines, thinking through choices can become hard work, and the pressure to develop one’s own personhood increases. As one American teenager puts it:

“What is teenage life to me? That’s a good question. If I said what teenage life is to me in one word, it would have to be ‘hard.’ No one really gets you, and you don’t even really get yourself. You’re just starting to figure yourself out, who you are, and why you are here.”

While the specifics of the adolescent process are different depending upon which part of the world an adolescent lives in, the generalizations given above for each of the different regions do provide enough evidence to suggest that adolescence is well-defined enough to merit specific theological reflection for the world’s adolescent population, and that a guided cross-cultural reading experience can serve as a legitimate tool in that reflection.

2.3 Understanding Culture

Many people function in life unaware that there is a device, a mechanism, which lies positioned squarely between them and their experience of the world through which their perceptions, ideas, and sense of “normal” is filtered. It is, in effect, like a pair of glasses that they see the world and their experiences through. That device is called “culture.” Because this project is focused on investigating the effect (if any) of intercultural Bible reading on adolescent spiritual growth, this section will first define the term “culture” by adopting five measurable dimensions that can be used as interpretive guidelines when understanding the contexts of the participating groups. Next, the implications of these cultural factors in investigating intercultural Bible reading will be presented.

214 Clark, Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers. p.32
2.3.1 Defining Culture

Attempting to track down and summarize the many definitions of culture would be an extremely difficult task since the meaning of the word itself has continued to change over the centuries. For the current discussion, however, let if suffice to say that the use of the word itself was significantly altered by Wilhelm von Humboldt’s proposal in the early 19th century that each ethnic group has a distinct “worldview” (or “culture”) which is different from that of other ethnic groups. It was this suggestion which began the move to understand culture as something other than Western European artistic endeavors (i.e., theatre, literature, opera, etc.). Another significant shift occurred in the 1800’s when British anthropologist Edward Tylor wrote that, “Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” The word has been conceptualized in different ways over the years, but most current cultural researchers would agree that when one refers to “culture” one is referring to a type of systematic social roadmap, a construct that has been created out of observed social patterns, symbols, and relationships. For the purposes of this project, the word “culture” should be understood to mean the guiding, internal model of social reality shaped by the way a person living within that society has acquired, organized and processed such information. Intercultural, then, is the process that happens when an attempt is made to relate to someone with a different internal model, someone who is across these lines and “other.”

With that being said, it becomes important to clearly delineate which factors can be recognized across cultural divides to allow for studying the process of intercultural Bible reading with adolescents. It is here that the book Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind by Geert Hofstede proves exceptionally useful. In the book, Hofstede posits that every single human being carries within him or herself “patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting” that have been learned from a lifetime of assimilation and learning. These patterns can be understood as similar to computer software which instructs and informs what the hardware (the processing) of the computer is to do. The patterns of culture, then, inform and instruct a human being of appropriate responses to any given stimuli. While Hofstede concedes that these “mental programs” are only partially responsible for a person’s actions, he still sees the metaphor as especially helpful in that it gives full credit to the impact of “the social environment in which one grew up and collected one’s life experiences. The programming starts within the family; it continues within the neighborhood, at school, in youth groups, at the workplace, and in the living community.”

In an attempt to understand whether or not these mental programs can be compared, Hofstede studied IBM employees who were working throughout the world in more than 50 countries. After compiling the data, he initially identified four problems which he saw as common to all cultures before adding a fifth one (long-term vs. short-term orientation) in later studies. For Hofstede, these

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216 E.B. Tylor, Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom (1874), p.1  
218 Gudykunst and Bella, ibid., p.26  
220 Hofstede, ibid., p.3
problems represent fundamental and shared challenges which occur in every culture. Cultural differences, then, are found in the ways in which each particular culture attempts to respond to these challenges. The common problems he identified were:

1. Social inequality, including the relationship with authority (“power distance”)
2. The relationship between the individual and the group (collectivism versus individualism)
3. The concepts of masculinity and femininity, both social and emotional (femininity versus masculinity)
4. Ways of dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity, which is related to the control of aggression and the expression of emotions (uncertainty avoidance)
5. Making decisions based on long-term values of future reward or on short-term values related to the past and present such as tradition, saving face, and fulfilling social obligations (long-term versus short-term orientation)

Before continuing, it needs to be noted that there have been significant and necessary critiques of Hofstede’s approach and his findings. Some theorists view the type and size of his initial sample group as too narrow and too small, while others take issue with what they interpret as a tendency toward deterministic rigidity in his model. Another common critique is that Hofstede tends to equate nationalities with culture rather than recognizing the diversity of cultures which typically exists within the population of each nation and thus renders his model too simplistic. While there is some truth to all of these critiques, it is also true that other studies in several different countries have confirmed the presence of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions as he presents them, and that in the course of over two decades of research those same dimensions consistently show up in studies with groups of many different sizes and backgrounds. For the purposes of investigating intercultural Bible reading with adolescents, then, it would appear that Hofstede’s work can be of most value when used to recognize potential cultural influences which participants may bring into the Bible reading process, so it is from that perspective that Hofstede’s factors will now be examined in more detail.

2.3.1.1 Power Distance

Hofstede’s first cultural dimension is an attempt to recognize that every culture must deal with the issue of both societal and personal power to some extent. How accepted is it in the culture that

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221 Hofstede, ibid., p.23,210
223 McSweeney, ibid., p.110
some organizations (and people) have more societal power than others? This cultural factor Hofstede refers to as “power distance.”

In large-power-distance cultures, members generally accept that power is a basic fact of society, and coercion is accepted as a fair use of that power (superiors consider subordinates to be qualitatively different from themselves and vice versa). Small-power-distance cultures believe differently, however, in that they see power as to be used on occasion and pursue more of an understanding of interdependence between those in culturally high and low positions. While cultures typically possess both kinds of power distance dynamics depending on the different relational structures (such as families, work, government, etc.), typically there is still one dominant style. Cultures that tend more toward high power distance include Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Malaysia, Nigeria, Panama, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela. Countries with more low power distance include Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, and the U.S.

As Hofstede develops the idea, it bears special significance to the age of the participants in this study. Families in large-power-distance cultures tend to see children as needing to obey their parents, and sometimes even their own brothers and sisters in birth order from oldest to youngest. These familial authorities survive even after the death of the particular power-holder, and here Hofstede posits that individuals in large-power-distance cultures in fact have a strong need for such dependence. In Hofstede’s estimation, even a culture’s educational systems reinforce this value. Due to this fact, one would expect that adolescents in large-power-distance cultures might have a strong need to adhere to their traditional understandings as they interpret the Biblical text.

In small-power-distance cultures, children are treated as equals even when they are quite small, and are allowed to tell their parents “No.” Behavior toward others is not dependent on age or status to the extent that formal social deference is very rarely seen. The goal is independence, and the sooner the child is able to take responsibility for his or herself, the further they are along the road to achieving the cultural ideal. The implication here is that adolescents in cultures with a small-power-distance value might be more willing to create their own Biblical interpretations regardless of tradition or training, and be quite willing to express disagreement or criticisms in the process. Pairing groups from cultures at different ends of the power-distance scale, then, may spur participants to recognize how their own culture deals with the issue of power and how this cultural approach may affect their process of interpreting the Bible.

2.3.1.2 Collectivism v. Individualism

In collectivistic cultures, group goals take precedence over those of the individual. Each individual belongs to a certain number of what Hofstede refers to as “ingroups” which are defined as groups whose members are willing to look after and sacrifice themselves for each other. Usually these ingroups are few in number, but members are quite willing for the influence of these groups to apply across a quite wide range of attitudes and behaviors even where there may be no direct

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226 Gudykunst and Bella, *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication*. p.37
227 Gudykunst and Bella, ibid., p.38
228 Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations : Software of the Mind*. p.51
229 Hofstede, ibid., p.52
230 Hofstede, ibid., p.54
231 Gudykunst and Bella, *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication*. p.27
connection. Extended family is important even when the idea of “family” has to be culturally redefined to include peers and other community members.

In individualistic cultures, people are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family only. Individual goals take precedence over those of any group, and while individuals may belong to any number of ingroups (usually more than an individual in a collectivistic culture), those ingroups typically only influence their behavior as it applies to that particular social situation rather than across the broad spectrum of their life. Members of individualistic cultures also tend to be universalistic and apply the same value standards to everyone.

Although both traits exist in every culture (and there are number of mitigating factors which can affect the strength of the traits), collectivistic cultures in general tend to be found in Africa, Arab cultures, Asia, Latin America, and southern Europe. Cultures that tend to be predominantly individualistic include Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the U.S., and northern Europe.

As to how this cultural value can influence interpreting the Biblical text, Hofstede himself gives the example of a former Dutch missionary in Indonesia (a country with a higher collectivistic value). The missionary asked his parishioners to explain the parable where the owner of the vineyard asks his two sons to go tend the vineyard. In the parable, the older son says, “I will go,” but does not, and the younger son says, “I will not,” but eventually does. The question at the end of the story is “Which of the two did the will of the Father?” The answer the missionary was looking for was the younger. These Indonesia Christians, however, said that actually first son was more obedient because he did not contradict his father - whether or not he actually went was of less importance in their eyes due to their collectivistic orientation. One could expect, then, that in the process of intercultural Bible reading it would be adolescents from collectivistic cultures who would be more likely to spend a greater amount of time reaching agreement as a group, avoiding direct confrontations as they discuss the passage’s meaning, and perhaps be more likely to adhere to denominational interpretations. Adolescents from individualistic cultures would be more likely to voice their opinions directly, see confrontation as a sign of closeness and community, and take less time in arriving at group interpretation. It could be that pairing groups along these lines may bring youth from more individualistic cultures a greater appreciation for the collectivistic bent of the Bible while spurring those in collectivistic cultures to take more personal responsibility for their interpretations.

2.3.1.3 Femininity v. Masculinity

For Hofstede, every culture establishes and defines gender roles. Feminine cultures are those in which social gender roles are more relaxed and have a tendency to overlap. In these cultures, both men and women are to be “modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life” (1991, 82-82) as opposed to a masculine culture in which social gender roles stay separate and distinct. In masculine cultures, men are to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success while women alone should

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232 Gudykunst and Bella, ibid., p.28
233 Hofstede, Cultures and Organizations : Software of the Mind. p.86
234 Gudykunst and Bella, Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication. p.27
235 Gudykunst and Bella, ibid., p.27
236 Gudykunst and Bella, ibid., p.30
237 Hofstede, Cultures and Organizations : Software of the Mind. p.87
be concerned with caring for others, serving, and nurturing. Feminine cultures allow both men and women to care for children's emotional well-being, while masculine cultures expect fathers to deal with their children factually and mothers to deal with them emotionally. More feminine cultures focus on relationships while more masculine cultures focus on ego enhancement, ambition, power, and assertiveness. Cultures that tend to be mainly masculine include Arab cultures, Austria, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Switzerland, and Venezuela. Cultures that tend to be feminine include Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, eastern Africa, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Sweden (the United States is below the median).

One can expect, then, that in the process of intercultural Bible reading with 13-20 year-olds it would be groups from more masculine cultures who would struggle to have their interpretation chosen as the dominant one (as a sign of competency and achievement) and that groups in more feminine cultures would show more appeasement and acquiescence when it comes time to respond to each other about their interpretation.

2.3.1.4 Dealing with Uncertainty

The fourth of Hofstede’s dimensions is the degree to which members of a culture try to avoid uncertainty. Members of cultures with a high uncertainty avoidance have a lower tolerance for “uncertainty and ambiguity, which expresses itself in higher levels of anxiety and energy release, greater need for formal rules and absolute truth, and less tolerance for people or groups with deviant ideas or behavior.” Norms are clear, conflict is to be avoided, and consensus is desired but this does not mean that risk is to be avoided at all costs. Rather, people in these cultures look for structure to make things clear and predictable and are quite willing to engage in risky behavior if it will reduce ambiguity. In low uncertainty avoidance cultures, members typically have less stress and are more willing to accept dissent and risk in general. Rules do not have to be as clear, and individuals tend to see things that are different as reasons for curiosity rather than fear. Consensus is not as important although it may still be valued. In general, Japan, Mexico, Greece, France, Chile, Belgium, Argentina, and Egypt are cultures high in uncertainty avoidance. Canada, Denmark, India, Jamaica, the United States, and Sweden are cultures with low uncertainty avoidance.

Since intercultural Bible reading is almost completely predicated on the discomfort which comes from interacting with that which is “other,” it is clear that on the basis of this cultural dimension some groups should find it easier to embrace the project’s inherent ambiguity. Youth in low uncertainty avoidance cultures may pursue the process with more curiosity and openness than a

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238 Gudykunst and Bella, *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication.* p.38
239 Gudykunst and Bella, *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication.* p.38
240 Gudykunst and Bella, ibid., p39
243 Gudykunst and Bella, *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication.* p.37
244 Gudykunst and Bella, ibid., p.37
245 Gudykunst and Bella, ibid., p.37
partner group in high uncertainty avoidance cultures, but it is precisely along these lines that the opportunity for growth may come.\(^{246}\)

### 2.3.1.5 Long-term Orientation v. Short-term Orientation

Hofstede's fifth and last characteristic (which was added after a study of Chinese culture highlighted its presence) is that of long-term orientation versus short-term orientation.\(^{247}\) In cultures with long-term orientation, individuals are encouraged to put in sustained effort no matter how slow the results are in coming. Adaptability, willingness to become subordinate (even to the point of shame), and thrift are all seen essential to one’s ability to become a well-respected member of the society.\(^{248}\) In short-term oriented cultures, the goal is to achieve quick results that allow an individual to stay in step with society’s traditional ideals. Spending, rather than saving, is encouraged, but personal stability is valued as well. As far as workplace behavior goes, short-term oriented cultures value freedom, rights, achievement, and thinking for oneself rather than the values of learning, accountability, honesty and self-discipline found in long-term oriented cultures.\(^{249}\)

This characteristic is particularly intriguing as it applies to intercultural Bible reading. It could be that adolescents from short-term oriented cultures will be quicker to feel dissatisfaction if the results are different or less noteworthy than they had hoped, and participants from long-term oriented cultures may be more patient in the process of discovery. On the other hand, participants in long-term oriented cultures may be less likely to break through their traditional understandings of the passage (therefore less likely to broaden their understanding) than their short-term culture counterparts.

### 2.3.2 Understanding Culture: Summary and Conclusion

In the end, adopting Hofstede’s five dimensions as cultural markers proves helpful in at least three ways. The first is by providing direction in assembling the groups and then making pairings. In accordance with Hofstede’s findings, each group (as a collection of 13-20 year-olds from a roughly similar cultural milieu) should be more or less in internal agreement on each of the five dimensions such that the cultural dimensions of each group can be foreseen with some element of expectation. While Hofstede’s dimensions initially surfaced from his large-scale study with participants from a corporate background, as was mentioned earlier in the chapter his dimensions have now been widely applied in numerous studies to smaller groups from varying backgrounds and can thus be reasonably adapted for the purposes of this study. This generally predictive ability allows for groups to be paired with partner groups who have different characteristics, thus maximizing cultural differences between the two and increasing the potential for a confrontation with the “other.”\(^{250}\)

While any claim that a group possesses a static cultural homogeneity must of course be rejected (a situation rendered impossible due to today’s global swirl of immigrants and cultures), intentionality can be pursued by pairing groups based on the level of difference along Hofstede’s dimensions to increase the possibility for observable changes to occur.

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\(^{246}\) Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. p174-175  
\(^{247}\) Hofstede, ibid., p.213  
\(^{248}\) Hofstede, ibid., p.213  
\(^{249}\) Hofstede, ibid., p.224-225  
\(^{250}\) Hofstede, ibid., p.365
The second way Hofstede’s dimensions prove helpful is in choosing which Biblical passages to use for the process of intercultural Bible reading as using a passage that includes as many of these cultural dimensions as possible should increase the opportunity for cultural differences to appear. The parable of the Lost Son, for example, may be full of possibilities when viewed through the interpretive lens of Hofstede’s cultural factors. To illustrate, will groups react along their cultural understandings of power distance when they read that the younger son (who has the least power in the family) asks his father (who has the most power) to give him his inheritance early and blatantly challenges a societal taboo? Or when the older son, who has less power than his father but more than his brother, crosses a similar line and scolds his father? Might participants in more collectivistic cultures respond more to the younger son’s sense of shame in the parable as a tension brought about by the clash of his individualistic drive against the community’s collectivistic expectations of how he should treat his father? While no gender issues are explicitly demonstrated in the story, could the phrase “that son of yours” be taken to mean that somehow the older and younger son are not related through the same birth mother – which could perhaps provoke a discussion on gender roles? Some groups in more uncertainty avoiding cultures might interpret that perhaps it is the anxiety of the unknown that brings the younger son back to his senses since the text could be taken to indicate that the son wanted to come back for sake of self-preservation. And finally, one of the central issues in the parable is the conflict between the younger son’s short-term orientation and his culture’s long-term orientation toward family hierarchy and respect. While the goal of this study is not to prove the existence of Hofstede’s dimensions specifically in the intercultural reading process, this particular Biblical text illustrates how the dimensions can be used to help explain and calibrate both the text and the groups along lines of difference which arise when groups from dissimilar cultures read the Bible together.

Third, and finally, these cultural dimensions allow for cultural influences to be identified and measured with some degree of empirical expectation. Are the participants able to express an awareness of a change in their own cultural biases during or after the process? Was there a shift in their interpretations that moved them to a different place on any of the five cultural axes? While it must be acknowledged that there are certainly other factors at work as groups read, exchange, and adjust (or freeze) their interpretations, Hofstede’s dimensions are useful benchmarks of tremendous help in identifying cultural attributes that arise as adolescents from different cultures read the Bible together.

2.4 The Intercultural Communication Process

Having now defined an understanding of culture for the project, there is another factor that must be also taken into account when examining the process of intercultural Bible reading with adolescents: the intercultural communication process itself. This section, then, will briefly examine the characteristics of effective intercultural communication before finishing with the observation that globalization shows an increasing need for intercultural contacts such as intercultural Bible reading encourages.

2.4.1 Effective Intercultural Communication

Since communication consists of a message sent and a meaning created, effective communication may be thought of as dependent on the degree to which those communicating attach similar
meanings to the messages they are exchanging.\(^{251}\) The greater the cultural differences between the parties in communication with each other, then, the more likely it is that cultural cues may contribute to misunderstandings in the process (a recognized phenomenon in the process of cross-cultural reading and exchange).\(^{252}\) Because satisfaction with the communication process is itself critical to intercultural effectiveness,\(^{253}\) it is worthwhile to note how to increase the likelihood that an intercultural communication process will succeed such that participants are willing to move through an entire process of exchange and interaction with their readings. To that end, then, there appear to be three generally recognized factors which can greatly enhance the process and need to be discussed with the participating groups.

The first of the factors is knowledge. This speaks to the ability of the participants to possess the “information necessary to interact appropriately and effectively, and the requisite cognitive orientation to facilitate the acquisition of such information.”\(^{254}\) To obtain such knowledge, Wisemen points out that individuals need to be highly attuned to the feedback of others as well as “cognitively flexible” to adjust to the feedback which they receive.\(^{255}\) It appears that encouraging participating 13-20 year-olds to pay close attention, to actively look for information about the other culture, and to keep alert for verbal and nonverbal clues to meaning will help them break free from their frame of reference so that messages can be sent and received from their partner group with less misunderstandings.\(^{256}\)

A second factor which Wisemen recognizes is the role of motivation. What are the feelings, intentions, desires, and needs that surround intercultural communication? If the predominate emotions are fear, suspicion, anxiety, and dislike, a communication process will likely end in frustration.\(^{257}\) A positive motivation accompanied by feelings of confidence, hope, and good intentions, however, increases the likelihood of a fruitful exchange and can even overcome a lack of knowledge about the process itself. As Bar Tal notes, when discrepancies arise between the participating groups’ sets of beliefs (including their insights and convictions) the key to whether the groups “freeze” and hold to their original viewpoints or “unfreeze” and choose to incorporate new ideas is due to their motivation. If the participants are motivated for validity (looking for challenging new information), they will be more likely to move into a different understanding from the one in which they began the process. If, however, they are motivated for structure (as opposed to the uncertainty which a new perspective can bring), or for specific content (looking to confirm what they already hold to be true), participants will be more likely to hold to their initial perspectives and reject the new ideas.\(^{258}\) Managing the participants’ anxiety levels and helping them understand their


\(^{252}\) Gudykunst, ibid., p.26


\(^{255}\) Wiseman, ibid., p.211

\(^{256}\) Gudykunst, *Bridging Differences : Effective Intergroup Communication*. p.34,116

\(^{257}\) Wiseman, “Intercultural Communication Competence.” p.211

motivations, then, become critical components to activate effective intercultural communication. In intercultural Bible reading with 13-20 year-olds, it is here where the group facilitator could be of the most help by intentionally encouraging feelings of safety and reassurance to the group members as they go through the process.

The third factor which enhances intercultural communication is the possession of adequate skills. One may be knowledgeable about the process itself and quite motivated but there are still certain skills which are needed nonetheless. Navigating through ambiguous situations, summoning feelings of empathy, employing behavioral flexibility, and intentionally reducing the level of uncertainty can be vital in the pursuit of effective intercultural communication. These skills should be goal-oriented (i.e., intentional) and repeatable to be of the most use, and once mastered can become a part of cultural fluency. It is here that the skill of mindfulness, which Gudykunst equates with becoming “aware of our communication behavior in order to correct our tendency to misinterpret others’ behavior and communicate more effectively,” comes into play. Being open to the idea that our own cultural constructs have inherent limitations allows the freedom to create new categories and distinctions to account for the differences we encounter in intercultural communications. These newly created understandings then allow for expression to take place in an unscripted environment without either party resorting to habitual modes of communication that may be completely misunderstood by the other party. Although it is in this area that youth could be at somewhat of a disadvantage due to a lack of intercultural experience, it is also here that perhaps they may benefit from being encouraged to enter it knowing that it will require them to obtain certain communication proficiencies.

In looking through these characteristics of intercultural communication, it is evident that it takes more than positive motivation alone to ensure effective intercultural communication. In the process of intercultural Bible reading with 13-20 year-olds, most groups who become involved may have sufficient motivation to push through initial anxieties yet it is apparent that they will still need to be guided as they move through the method. The good news is that these factors of mindfulness, motivation, and skills can be taught through education, experience, and guided practice so that even youthful participants can learn to become competent intercultural communicators.

2.4.2 Globalization and Intercultural Communication

Then, as a final note for this section, any discussion of intercultural communication would be remiss if it did not include at least a passing remark about the current era of internationalism and globalization. At the heart of the issue seems to be the question of whether individual cultures are still qualitatively different when so much of the world is linked through such things as common media, multi-national corporations, and communication technologies. Is there value in intercultural Bible reading with the current reality of so much contact across cultural boundaries? Are there still enough cultural differences among 13-20 year-olds living in different places in the world to provide

259 Gudykunst, *Bridging Differences: Effective Intergroup Communication*. p107
260 Gudykunst, *ibid.*, p.117
262 Gudykunst, *Bridging Differences: Effective Intergroup Communication*. p.32
sufficient contrasting contexts? How does the reality of the presence of immigrant populations affect intercultural communication?

While there are different opinions on what exactly is meant by the word "globalization," the fact remains that current experience is not demonstrating a decrease in cultural differences, and opening borders are not necessarily ensuring open attitudes across cultural divides. Research shows that there is actually little evidence of cultural convergence over time; instead, it is individualism which is more likely to increase within a culture as that culture becomes wealthier. Though people from some countries will cooperate with foreigners more easily as contact across cultural borders increases, a growing problem in today’s world seems to be the way in which differences are emerging between groups living together inside a country. An often overlooked result of the increasing frequency of contact between different groups means that more groups become less satisfied as they compare their situation to the lives of those around the world whom they consider to be better off. Globalization, then, may in fact be responsible for increasing the anxiety between groups as they interact, thus increasing the need for intercultural understanding and communication. In short, globalization has not entailed a deep transformation of society’s primary structures but appears to have merely brought shifts within them. There can be no doubt, consequently, of the tremendous value of engaging today’s 13-20 year-olds in a process such as intercultural Bible reading which has the potential to develop intercultural proficiency in the participants. Rather than reducing the need for contact across cultural divides, the current era of globalization brings with it a deeply ethical imperative for conscientious and intentional cross-cultural connections to challenge reductionism, while at the same time reconfiguring social spaces in ways which open tremendous opportunities for adolescents to engage in cross-cultural reading.

2.4.3 The Intercultural Communication Process: Summary and Conclusion

Mindfulness, a positive motivation, and adequate skills are necessary components for any successful intercultural communication to occur where the message sent is received by the other party intact and as intended. The intercultural communication process itself must be recognized and managed as a significant part of intercultural Bible reading, and today’s era of globalization brings with it a unique opportunity for adolescents to learn and grow by stepping outside of their own experience of culture and into another’s. The next section will finish this chapter of theoretical frameworks by offering a definition of spiritual growth that is both measurable and in keeping with decidedly Christian metaphors.

2.5 Spiritual Growth

There are some things in the experience of humanity which are taken as certainties and yet can be extremely difficult to confirm. For example, most people would agree that love exists. Yet empirically verifying the presence of love can be difficult because it is a concept that involves interplay of other factors such as behaviors, emotions, and cognitive processes (to name but a few) which may be present for other reasons. Spiritual growth is another idea which is readily assumed to exist but can be extremely difficult to define with precision on roughly similar grounds. Yet to investigate whether

265 Hofstede, Cultures and Organizations : Software of the Mind. p.366
266 Hofstede, ibid., p.367
the process of intercultural Bible reading with 13-20 year-olds can foster spiritual growth, a reasonable definition of spiritual growth itself must be given. The following section, then, will begin by detailing the difficulties of defining and measuring spiritual growth as illustrated by a recent study before presenting helpful guidelines for studying spiritual development. Then two New Testament metaphors for spiritual growth will be examined before a definition of spiritual growth is offered which is deemed appropriate for studying the effects of intercultural Bible reading on 13-20 year-olds.

2.5.1 A Difficult Task

The difficulty of attempting to measure spiritual growth is a well-recognized obstacle for researchers. A quick survey of literature shows a host of studies looking for significant relationships between spiritual well-being and other issues like surviving a critical illness, dealing with crisis events, or even achieving a feeling of control over one’s own life, but it appears that fewer studies are willing to tackle defining specifically Christian spiritual growth using verifiable characteristics. At the same time, however, an inspection of popular Christian books will attest that the validity and necessity of spiritual growth for the Christian seems to be widely accepted and encouraged. The term is a well-embraced part of the vocabulary of Christendom, yet, as a recent U.S. survey shows, not many who would attest to the necessity of spiritual growth are able to define it with consistency.

In 2008, the Barna Group conducted a nationwide telephone survey which used random samples of 1005 adults (aged 18 years and older) and Protestant clergy in diverse locations spread across the continental U.S. The researchers asked the respondents to explore definitions of spiritual growth, their perceptions about it, and to reveal what they perceived to be barriers to spiritual maturity. The results were as follows:

- Most Christians in the survey equated spiritual maturity with “following the rules” (81% of self-identifying Christians endorsed this statement, and 53% of those who endorsed it did so with the strongest possible agreement). Those who identified themselves as believing that “good works” are not enough to earn salvation (the study’s definition of “born-again Christian”) also agreed at the rate of 80% although the exact definition of the rules was not offered by the researchers nor explained by the respondents.

- Most churchgoers are not clear on what characteristics their church expects as indicators of spiritual maturity. When asked how to define a “healthy, spiritually mature follower of Jesus,” half of churchgoers said they were not sure and could not even attempt to guess at how their church would define the concept. Forty percent of born-again churchgoers (those who have made a profession of faith in Christ and confessed their sinfulness) were unable to identify their church’s definition of spiritual maturity. Of those respondents who did make an attempt, the most common responses were “having a relationship with Jesus,” “practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study,” “living according to the Bible,” “being obedient,” “being involved in church,” and “having concern for others.”

269 See http://www.cbaonline.org/nm/documents/BSLs/Christian_Living.pdf for a listing of bestselling international Christian books that deal with spiritual improvement
As for a personal definition of what spiritual maturity is, 21% said it included having a relationship with Jesus, 15% said it was about following rules and being obedient, 14% said it was about living a moral lifestyle, 13% about possessing concern for others, and the rest of the responses from highest to lowest percentages included being involved in spiritual disciplines, applying the Bible, having belief, sharing faith with others, and being involved in church activities. The researchers noted that in the process of presenting the survey questions they asked repeatedly for additional or clarifying comments but most respondents gave only one response.

Finally, pastors themselves could not articulate a specific set of objectives for spirituality and tended to list activities over attitudes (practicing spiritual disciplines was listed by 19%, involvement in church activities by 15%, witnessing to others by 15%, and then the other responses included having a relationship with Jesus, concern for others, applying the Bible to life, being willing to grow spiritually, and having a knowledge of Scripture). When asked to specifically give references from the Bible about spiritual growth and maturity, one-third simply said “the whole Bible,” 17% pointed to the gospels as whole, 15% to the New Testament, and 10% to Paul’s letters.

The researchers in this study summarized their conclusions with the following:

“The study shows the need for new types of spiritual metrics...Of course spirituality is neither a science nor a business, so there is a natural resistance to ascribing scientific or operational standards to what most people believe is an organic process. Yet the process of spiritual growth is neither simplistic nor without guidelines, so hard work and solid thinking in this arena is needed.”

The reality is that spiritual growth is a system of intricate complexities with a number of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, interpersonal, and physiological dimensions at work that can be difficult to recognize and identify. As Koenig points out, even the way the word “spiritual” itself is used in research has a multiplicity of definitions, and the vast majority of research which attempts to examine “spirituality” actually only refers to religion. Yet there are researchers who have developed structured approaches to measuring spirituality which can prove useful for a study such as this one.

In the 1960’s, two sociologists who were interested in measuring certain aspects of American Christianity proposed a theoretical approach for identifying religiosity which is based on five different dimensions. Since then, Glock and Stark’s dimensions have continued to prove exceedingly relevant for the study of religion, and have in fact served as baseline understandings for measuring...
spirituality. Although there has been a measure of continuing debate over both the number of dimensions and the way Glock and Stark define them, the continued acceptance and utilization of their model by researchers worldwide clearly demonstrates the value of their approach.

The first dimension which Glock and Stark propose is the experiential dimension. This aspect covers subjective and emotional religious experiences (which the researchers further define as “encounter”) which serve as expressions of personal religiosity. The second dimension is the ideological one, which demonstrates the adherent’s acceptance of the belief system in a personal sense. The third dimension is known as the ritualistic dimension and takes into account the activities, both personal and corporate, that make up a person’s faith practices as guided by a religious institution. The knowledge dimension is Glock and Stark’s fourth aspect, and is an attempt to describe a person’s understanding of the creeds and dogmas of their religion. They also proposed a fifth dimension, consequences, but acknowledged the difficulty of measuring such a far-reaching concept because “it is not entirely clear the extent to which religious consequences are a part of religious commitment or simply follow from it.”

While Glock and Stark’s multi-dimensional model still serves well for many researchers in the social sciences, there are also more current attempts to move forward with new paradigms for understanding and measuring spiritual growth from different perspectives. Benson is a researcher in just such a pursuit, and one who believes that it is time to recognize the active role of individuals in shaping their own spiritual growth especially since it cannot be denied that even within strong, centralized religious traditions there are significant individual differences among members in how they choose, integrate, and keep that particular religious tradition’s tenets. These differences between the individuals and the larger tradition suggest to Benson that interplay should be recognized between the individual and his or her culture so that both factors are viewed as coauthors in creating that individual’s spiritual life story.

Benson is also convinced that the process of spiritual growth needs to be recognized as active in earlier life stages. Issues of meaning, purpose, and relationship are particularly relevant for children and young adolescents, and the major identity shifts which occur during these years raise the importance of understanding how spirituality emerges at this point in life. What factors in a young person’s environment can be seen as helping formulate a healthy spirituality and propel that young person onto a lifelong path of spiritual growth? What are the factors that can stunt such growth? Benson sees the lack of investigation into the spirituality of children and adolescents, especially those outside of Western industrial countries, as a gaping hole in the research that ignores a potent,

274 For an overview of the pertinent issues, see Billiet, ibid., pp.342-349
276 Glock and Stark, ibid., p.81
277 Glock and Stark, ibid., p.16
positive force for both society and the young people themselves. So with his recognition of the role of the individual in choosing his or her own spirituality, his acknowledgment of the role of culture in that choice, and his championing of the benefit of researching the spiritual growth of adolescents outside the Western world (all of which are characteristics at the heart of investigating intercultural Bible reading with adolescents), it would appear that Benson himself could provide a clear definition of spiritual growth - unfortunately, however, that is not the case.

In the end, Benson himself runs into the same problem of presenting spiritual growth in terms that are too general, especially for the purposes of the pursuing specific research goals:

Spiritual development is the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental “engine” that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices.

While Benson’s definition can be appreciated for its attempt to provide an alternate perspective, it appears to be empirically limited for the purposes of this project. How does one account for the spiritual development “engine”? Even though Benson is to be commended for his attempt to move away from measuring spiritual growth as simply a cognitive gain in understanding, his definition is still not specific enough for the purposes of this research.

2.5.2 Guidelines for Researching Spiritual Data

At this point it is helpful to examine the work of Moberg for general guidelines to assist in forming a definition of spiritual growth for the purposes of this project’s research question. The first guideline Moberg offers is to readily acknowledge the complexity inherent in investigating spiritual growth due to the sheer number of operational and conceptual nuances which run through research in this area. Because researching spiritual growth deals with such open-ended questions as the human need for transcendence, the relationship between language and what it represents, the linkage between personal perceptions and core realities, and the need for interpretation, any claim of achieving complete satisfaction or description is unfounded and unnecessary.

Second, the indicators used to understand and measure spirituality are reflections, accompaniments, and/or consequences of the spiritual factors being measured rather than the phenomenon itself. Moberg suggests that such typical categories of behavior, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, interpersonal relationships, social participation, love, stewardship responsibilities to God, self, humanity, and the environment are all indicators completely subject to misinterpretation, hypocrisy, and deceit whether intentional or not. For example, when more than 95% of American adults say that they believe in God, Moberg asks who or what is the “god” they believe in? Here Moberg equates...
measuring spirituality to measuring food and exercise in the study of health—food and exercise can affect physical health, but to study them is not to study health itself. In the same way, when one talks about spiritual growth the reality is that one is only able to talk about indicators of spiritual growth.  

Third (and this is related to Moberg’s second point) is the need to realize that reductionism is “inescapable” in any research about spirituality. Studying such a nuanced and complex concept as spiritual growth necessarily requires that one makes the concept more basic. Also, typically only a few observable data points can be used to approximate any discoveries, and because of that fact many of the facets which are a part of the real-life experience will be lost or underrepresented.

Fourth, just as physical feelings can be illusions which do not convey the truthfulness of physical health, people may be deceived into thinking or feeling (and reporting) that they are in one type of spiritual process when in reality they are in a completely different one. Moberg summarizes it by saying that feeling well is not necessarily the same as being well. For example, someone could be quite content to rate himself or herself as spiritually healthy where an observing clinician would rate that person as very spiritually unhealthy. In this way, research that relies on self-ratings are useful but need to be recognized as of limited value when trying to project larger or overarching implications, especially when recognizing that there is typically a motivation of social desirability in being perceived as “spiritually healthy.”

Fifth, trying to satisfy the universality of spiritual experience by coming up with “universally applicable measures” will in the end fully satisfy no one (this is the difficulty with Benson’s definition). When research is designed with terms defined to fit many different kinds of people in many different kinds of situations, the implicit ideologies, subtleties, and values that creep in seriously undermine the results while making it difficult for the participants. Instead, Moberg says it is much better to recognize the unique characteristics of the particular group one is studying and adapt appropriate measures for that group in order to prevent losing the nuances which keep that group distinct. To him it is like trying to fit religious phenomenon underneath a secular umbrella of social science; in the end, the most important element—the spiritual—is the one element which gets left out in the rain.

Sixth, and the final of Moberg’s insights to be listed here, is to employ methods which resonate closely with spiritual issues. Using storytelling and listening (and other ethnographic techniques) to explore perceptions about spirituality probably does come closer to the essence of “spirit bearing witness with spirit” than what he refers to as cold statistics from polls or surveys. But Moberg also cautions that one should not only use ethnographic methodologies since all investigations have the

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286 Moberg, ibid., p.54
287 Moberg, ibid., p.54
288 Moberg, ibid., p.55
289 Moberg, ibid., p.55
291 McMinn and Hall, ibid., p.5
293 Moberg, ibid., p.56
potential to shed light on people’s experience of spirituality, and multiple approaches will increase the opportunity for significant discoveries.\textsuperscript{293}

It would appear then, that, any research into spiritual growth is served well by an overarching attitude of humility. Spirituality is a complicated area to investigate, and researchers place themselves between twin errors of over-emphasizing that which is of little importance or under-emphasizing that which is of greater importance in their research. The goal for this research is, of course, to keep just the right balance by arriving at a definition of spiritual growth which has been necessarily reduced so that it can be measured but not at the expense of losing what is essential to the concept. Keeping in mind Moberg’s caution that what is measured in spiritual studies can only in reality be an indicator of spiritual growth, and that as much specificity as possible is helpful, it is at this point beneficial to see how the Bible itself defines the concept of spiritual growth before a final definition is settled on for the research.

### 2.5.3 New Testament Metaphors

In keeping with intercultural Bible reading’s goal of highlighting the approach of the ordinary reader who looks to the Bible for personal application, it seems appropriate to limit an examination of the Bible’s examples of spiritual growth to those passages which are immediately helpful. The following section, then, presents two metaphors for spiritual growth that are readily found in the New Testament; agricultural growth and the growth of a child.

#### 2.5.3.1 Agricultural Metaphor

The first Biblical metaphor is that of agriculture. This metaphor provides the imagery of seeds, physical development, fruit, and exponential multiplication such that the end result is many times greater than the initial investment. Jesus himself uses the imagery several times. First, in the well-known passage about the sower and the soils:

[Jesus] told many stories such as this one: "A farmer went out to plant some seed. As he scattered it across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The plants sprang up quickly, but they soon wilted beneath the hot sun and died because the roots had no nourishment in the shallow soil. Other seeds fell among thorns that shot up and choked out the tender blades. But some seeds fell on fertile soil and produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted." Matthew 13:3-8 (NLT)

The seed that falls on fertile soil (which Jesus later tells his disciples represents hearts that are receptive to his message (v. 23)), produces a crop that is much larger than the amount of seed which was sown. The abundance of the crop, though, is well within the normal range of expected return. This fact may mean that Jesus is implying that spiritual growth should also be seen as a natural process which begins small but ends up producing an incredibly rich result.\textsuperscript{294}

In another instance, Jesus implies the metaphor of the natural growing cycle with a grape vine:

\textsuperscript{293} Moberg, ibid., p.57
I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. You have already been pruned for greater fruitfulness by the message I have given you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful apart from me. Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. Anyone who parts from me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. But if you stay joined to me and my words remain in you, you may ask any request you like, and it will be granted! My true disciples produce much fruit. This brings great glory to my Father. John 15:1-8 (NLT)

The focus here is on the fruitfulness of those who follow and the need for them to remain attached to Jesus as the essential connection for growth. The passage also touches on the work of God as the Gardener who tends to the vine so that it will produce a maximum yield of “much fruit.” The opposite indication is also given, though, in that a lack of fruit means there is no connection to Jesus. Spiritual growth as described in this passage, then, could be implied to mean an on-going and active decision of intentionality in connecting with Christ. 295

Paul also uses the imagery of agriculture with the church in Corinth:

Who is Apollos, and who is Paul, that we should be the cause of such quarrels? Why, we're only servants. Through us God caused you to believe. Each of us did the work the Lord gave us. My job was to plant the seed in your hearts, and Apollos watered it, but it was God, not we, who made it grow. The ones who do the planting or watering aren't important, but God is important because he is the one who makes the seed grow. The one who plants and the one who waters work as a team with the same purpose. Yet they will be rewarded individually, according to their own hard work. We work together as partners who belong to God. You are God's field, God's building—not ours. 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 (NLT)

In this passage the emphasis is upon the apparent partnership (although obviously unequal) between Paul and Apollo’s work and the work of God. Paul and Apollo were able to have a share in the spiritual growth of the Corinthian church, yet the mystery of the process is that God takes these efforts (and gives rewards for faithfulness in carrying them out) as useful for enabling the growth which only he can make happen.

And finally, although by no means exhaustively, is the imagery Paul gives of the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s work in a believer’s life:

But when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Here there is no conflict with the law. Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)

This passage speaks of the end result of Christian spiritual growth with two characteristics to note. First is that the emphasis is on the natural growth of these character traits which, like fruit, appear in attachment to healthy believers – although the process of growth is mysterious (and from the Holy

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Spirit’s control), there is no question of the need for a healthy Christian, connected to God, as the starting point. Second, the singular nature of the word “fruit” in the original language implies that these characteristics, unlike the gifts of the Spirit which are given differently to different believers, are a unified grouping to be found in all Christians.296

2.5.3.2 Child Metaphor

Another metaphor which is readily seen in the New Testament is that of a child who must grow into maturity. Jesus used this imagery with Nicodemus:

Jesus replied, "I assure you, unless you are born again, you can never see the Kingdom of God." "What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus. "How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?" Jesus replied, "The truth is, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives new life from heaven." John 3:3-6 (NLT)

Spiritual growth is the growth of a type of life which is obviously very different than the physical and material, yet here Jesus draws a similarity between the two by explicitly linking spiritual growth to the journey an infant makes from the dependency of helplessness to full maturity — a long and slow process.297

As another example of this metaphor, Paul uses the imagery to help the church in Corinth see that their behavior is not what it should be at the time of his letter:

Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn’t talk to you as I would to mature Christians. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in the Christian life. I had to feed you with milk and not with solid food, because you couldn’t handle anything stronger. And you still aren’t ready, for you are still controlled by your own sinful desires. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn’t that prove you are controlled by your own desires? You are acting like people who don’t belong to the Lord. 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 (NLT)

The obvious import here is that although the church should have progressed in their spiritual growth into some semblance of maturity, their systems are still too undeveloped to handle the ‘solid food’ of more nuanced teaching.298 The continuation of jealousy and arguments in their midst show that their growth is stunted.

Finally, the writer of Hebrews also uses the imagery of an unnaturally immature child to spur the readers toward maturity in Christ:

You have been Christians a long time now, and you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things a beginner must learn about the Scriptures. You are like babies who drink only milk and cannot eat solid food. And a person

297 "Life Application Concise New Testament Commentary." John
who is living on milk isn't very far along in the Christian life and doesn't know much about doing what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who have trained themselves to recognize the difference between right and wrong and then do what is right. Hebrews 5:12-14 (NLT)

The writer here is noting that not only has there been a lack of natural progression, the phrase translated as “You are like babies who drink only milk” is better understood to indicate a regression backwards – “You have become having need of milk.”299 Spiritual growth in this case has become spiritual regression and is contrasted with maturity which shows itself by a self-motivated “training” in verse 14.

2.5.3.3 Implications

Although by no means an exhaustive treatment of the subject, three specific characteristics may be noted about spiritual growth as it is presented in the New Testament. First is the clear message that God is the power behind the process of spiritual growth. Whether it is in the growth of a seed from a tiny shell into literally hundreds of plants, or the growth of a completely dependent child into a fully functioning adult, there is no way to humanly recreate the process. One can damage, thwart, delay, or kill the growth, but there is in fact no ability to take credit for the function of growth itself since a connection with God must be maintained for the process to continue. The locus is outside of the individual, yet works in harmony with him or her.

Second, the element of time is involved in spiritual growth. The imagery discussed above and in other passages which speaks of spiritual growth in terms of building a structure (1 Peter 2:5) or a student/teacher relationship (Luke 6:40) consistently emphasize that it takes time for spiritual growth to occur. There is no ability to shortcut the process any more than one can shortcut the amount of time it takes for crops or a child to mature, so a certain amount of patience is needed before one will be able to see any results. While there will be movement toward maturity, the process is not necessarily speedy or obvious.

Third, although there is no ability to take ultimate credit for the process, there is a role for Christians to play in their own spiritual growth. Through nurturing their connection with God, creating favorable conditions, and training themselves, those who journey on a spiritual path with God through Christ are encouraged to be intentional as they strive toward the end result of the “much fruit” of which Galatians 5:22 speaks.

2.5.4 Defining Spiritual Growth for the Study

To investigate the effect of intercultural Bible reading on the spiritual growth of 13-20 year-olds, then, it appears that a multipronged search is in order. Glock and Stark’s four dimensions of religiosity (experiential, ideological, ritualistic, and knowledge) have tremendous value as empirical definitions of spiritual growth which allow for clear measurements to be taken as participants move through the process of intercultural Bible reading. Moberg’s encouragement to include multiple opportunities for discovery must be heeded as well, however, so there should also be a direct search in the groups’ report materials for spiritual growth in terms of a maturing and deepening of faith and

praxis over time (perhaps even unlooked for by the participants) in keeping with the New Testament metaphors mentioned above.

It appears, then, that a fittingly overarching concept to use in attempting to measure Christian spiritual growth in intercultural Bible reading would be simply that of a changing and/or deepening perspective, especially when it is understood to mean a significant and demonstrable change in the perspective, attitude, and/or behavior of the participants in alignment with Christian principles. In other words, are the participants moved through the influence of the intercultural Bible reading process from their initial participatory stance to another existential (and in this case, Christian) understanding of themselves, others, the Bible, etc.? One of the most helpful aspects of incorporating the idea of changing perspectives is that it does not imply the negation or destruction of the initial state of being, but instead points to a reconstitution which includes yet changes the primary stance. The adolescent participants will of course be bringing their internalized cultural and theological perspectives with them as they read together, but the question is not whether they will need to abandon them altogether but if they will allow those perspectives to be broadened, deepened, expanded, and activated; in other words, changed.

Change, too, is helpful in that it is a core theme which consistently runs through the heart of Christianity. Genesis 1 can be seen as expressing God’s initial act of transformation as He creates fullness from emptiness, and this type of divine activity continues through the entirety of the Bible even until the picture of Revelation 22 which describes God’s changing of His creative handiwork yet again into the perfected version of His first act. The risen Christ also clearly points to God’s work of transformation which takes the old and incorporates it into the new: although the Bible records that his friends had no doubt He had really risen from the dead, there were several instances where even they had difficulty recognizing this changed Jesus who was the same and yet not.

Change, then, is a useful conceptualization for spiritual growth which fits well with intercultural Bible reading’s promise of breaking through fixed cultural and theological presuppositions to create a third space of understanding with personal, communal, and interpretational implications. Looking for evidence of movement in the participants’ responses will give space to subtle nuances in the data (per Moberg’s suggestions) while also allowing for Glock and Stark’s more defined dimensions to surface. It is a tricky balance to be sure, but in this way both theological dimensions and sociological implications have opportunity to surface.

2.5.5 Spiritual Growth: Summary and Conclusion

There can be no doubt that identifying spiritual growth is difficult work. Yet utilizing an approach which allows for empirical measurement through Glock and Stark’s dimensions of religiosity, ethnographic approaches, and specific spiritual understandings which are central to the spiritual tradition being researched will enable useful (and beneficial) information to be gathered. Moberg’s caution to approach the task with a clear view of the limitations is critical, and so the next chapter will present a methodological framework for the study which incorporates these factors into a cohesive protocol for studying intercultural Bible reading with adolescents.

2.6 Summary and Conclusion
This chapter has established the theoretical frameworks for the project by first detailing the concept of adolescence and showing the nearly global recognition of the life stage as a valid societal factor in eight different regions of the world. Next, culture was defined in an empirically measurable way before the characteristics of intercultural communication were examined along with a brief note of the developing role of globalization in cross cultural relationships. Finally, an understanding of spiritual growth as a changing and/or deepening of perspective was offered which allows for measurement along Glock and Stark’s predetermined characteristics of spirituality as well as more subtle signs of maturing in keeping with New Testament metaphors. With adolescence, culture, and spiritual growth now defined for the purposes of the study, the next chapter will discuss the creation of a methodological approach which is able to accomplish the difficult task of maintaining enough structure to capture measurable data yet open enough to allow for the appearance of significant yet unlooked for factors.
3. The Research Method

3.1 Introduction

Any process in motion is extremely difficult to capture and examine because of the reality that there are typically many more factors in play than are readily apparent; what one sees on the surface is in general only a hint of deeper forces at work. In hoping to explain, illuminate, and clarify specifically spiritual processes, then, empirical theological research in particular faces significant challenges. The following chapter, then, will outline the bases for the methodological framework chosen for this study by first presenting foundational concepts of empirical research in practical theology and offering a detailed examination of the difficulties which arise from the specifics of this research question in particular. Next, grounded theory will be explained and proposed as the most suitable methodology for this study before an examination of the resulting protocol of this project is given.

3.2 Issues for Empirical Research in Theology

Baranov, in his book *Conceptual Foundations of Social Research Methods*, distills the issues of empirical discovery in regards to social research down to four basic conceptual questions which also apply to this discussion of practical theological investigation. The first issue is the role of the European Enlightenment ideal of positivism which proposed that research discoveries could be self-standing truths relatively free from bias. Even though most researchers today would hesitate to wholeheartedly adopt this perspective, the specter of positivism still shows itself through the continuing discussions about the degree to which discoveries can be made “unblemished” by the subjectivity of either the researcher or the researched. Reactionary or oppositional methods which embrace subjectivity to the point of almost singular emphasis do not themselves escape the issue since they still tend to be defined by where they line up along the objective/subjective continuum, showing how deeply ingrained the positivistic bias about data collection remains. The field of practical theology itself is not unaffected by this tension as there remains a significant amount of debate within the field as to how much objectivity is needed in order for discoveries to be considered academically appropriate and/or helpful.

The second issue Baranov mentions is the strain which arises from the comparison between exploration and discovery in the physical sciences and exploration and discovery in the social sciences. He attributes this tension to the fact that the development of the social sciences came after the development of the physical sciences. Because research methodologies in the physical sciences were developed first which proved helpful (especially in the areas of astronomy and physics), there was an implied pressure for the social sciences to follow similar research traditions and understandings. Although there has obviously been benefit gained from this arrangement, Baranov believes that as the study of the social sciences has matured this coupling has proven increasingly more burdensome and detrimental to the development of new social research models (including ones appropriate for investigations in theology).

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301 Baranov, ibid., p. 4
Baranov’s third foundational issue has to do with the difference between the types of information which the physical sciences and the social sciences are seeking to discover. Physical scientists are looking to make discoveries about neutrally perceived facts such as the density of a star or the composition of the atom. Social scientists, however, are attempting to discover attributes which are laden with socially defined values and definitions. To use Baranov’s example, attempting to research and define “prisoner” is a much different subject than attempting to research and define the composition of a particular mineral. Add in practical theology’s goal of describing the workings of God as seen from within the intersection of faith and praxis and the differences between the subjects of discovery in these unlike disciplines become even more apparent. It is a very real concern, then, whether one may use the same research methods for understanding such dissimilar subjects.

Fourth (and final for Baranov) is the “perennial struggle between advocates of rationalism and advocates of empiricism regarding the proper foundation for truth.” On one hand, there are those who see truth as possible only after rigorous and structured deductive logic has been applied so that conclusions emerge from a base set of premises. On the other hand is a group which sees the role of experience and direct observation as crucial to a sense of certitude. Neutrality is a virtual impossibility yet many researchers inevitably side-step the issue of defining their own held assumptions about the nature of truth. According to Baranov, not being required to examine one’s own assumptions and presuppositions is where the real danger of empirical research lies. One could argue that a method like framework analysis can effectively compensate for the researcher’s hidden truth presuppositions by explicitly using subjectivity to propel the research forward, but in the end Baranov posits that the best route is for the researcher to explicitly claim whether rationalism or empiricism serves as his or her foundational understanding and then proceed from there.

It is at this point of the researcher’s foundational understanding of truth where an interesting juncture forms between Baranov’s understanding of these critical issues and Swinton and Mowat’s ideas as presented in Practical Theology and Qualitative Research. Because Swinton and Mowat see the role of practical theology as the exploration of “the implications of the proposition that faith is a performative and embodied act; that the gospel is not simply something to be believed, but also something to be lived,” one begins to see that any empirical studies in practical theology are ultimately attempts to understand the activity of God (the purview of theology) through the performance of human experience (the purview of the social sciences) with the foundational assumption being the veracity of the gospel.

For Swinton and Mowat, practical theology becomes the study of “truth in action” where truth is defined through a theological definition including sin, redemption, and the “inevitable uncertainty and fickleness of human knowledge and understanding.” The issues which Baranov describes (objectivity/subjectivity, departure from the methodologies of the physical sciences, defining the

302 Baranov, ibid., p. 4
303 Baranov, ibid., p. 4
304 Baranov, ibid., p. 5
305 John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, Practical Theology and Qualitative Research (London: SCM Pr, 2006). p. 5
306 Swinton and Mowat, ibid., p. 10
nature of truth, etc.) are indeed foundational for practical theology, yet at the same time practical theology pre-assumes a stance of theological conviction. In the end, then, it is theology which must have final priority in the research process as an independent source of knowledge that draws on empirical research for clarification rather than substantiation. While practical theology must address the issues which Baranov raises, it cannot afford to be completely defined by them. In the same way that physical sciences and social sciences have non-negotiable differences at their core due to their very natures, so, too, does practical theology.

Even so, it remains true that studies in practical theology can and have benefitted from the history and experience of research in the social sciences. For example, if a postpositivism approach is used, then the assumption will be that the research topic is one that can be observed and measured but does not necessarily have to be expanded into some type of universal and timeless truth claim. Discovering indications or signs alone will be enough to confirm the accuracy of the research, but more study which results in intersubjective agreement can help to show that the findings are “as close to the truth” as possible.

If a structural methodology is followed, then the research should emphasize approaches which analyze the whole in order to better understand the parts. A rational process of discovery should be chosen (especially over and against a more empirical route), and the role of structures which may provide shape and definition to the problem must also be examined. In general, this approach would mean the researcher needs to look for those forces which impact the area of study rather than focusing on specific examples of the topic itself.

Research that desires to focus on achieving an understanding of what is being studied rather than explaining it indicates that a hermeneutical methodology should be used. Researching along this path will provide a rich, detailed description of the topic, and although the discoveries will not lend themselves to broad generalizations they should increase knowledge about the context of the problem by allowing for multiple interpretations of the research results. In hermeneutical studies, the meaning that people construct around the issue is the focus of the study, not necessarily the mechanisms of the issue itself.

Finally, if pursuing research from an antifoundationalist perspective, the researcher should look for narratives which illustrate power structures and dominant norms. Special notice needs to be taken of the choice of metaphors and models, and intensive case studies may be pursued as a means for overturning existing generalizations since most generalizations are viewed by this methodological standpoint as artificial (especially linear ones).

By keeping a mutually constructive and critical dialogue open between these different social research perspectives and practical theological research, the theologian can help to ensure that his or her work serves as a bridge between the socio-historical context and the tenets of the Christian

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307 Swinton and Mowat, ibid., p.85, 87
308 Baranov, Conceptual Foundations of Social Research Methods. p.166
309 Baranov, ibid., p.167
310 Baranov, ibid., p.169
311 Baranov, ibid., p.170
Practical theology’s assumptive claim to a certain level of truthfulness does not mean that it can abandon its responsibility to remain connected to the rest of academic discovery, so by adopting Swinton and Mowat’s understanding of “hospitality” toward the social sciences, “conversion” by grafting social research into God’s redemptive purposes, and “critical faithfulness” to both Scripture and the workings of the Holy Spirit it is hoped that a study of 13-20 year-olds in the intercultural Bible reading process can function in a corollary relationship between the methodologies of the social sciences and practical theology.  

3.3 Problems in Researching Intercultural Bible Reading with Adolescents

Because the research question of this project is one with a decidedly hermeneutical bent, and because the central components are Bible reading, intercultural exchange, spiritual growth, and cultural understanding, the research question itself serves to illustrate well the connection between practical theology and social research as it demonstrates a blend of subjects typically found in both disciplines. Sitting as it does so directly in the crossroads of these two disciplines, however, also means that difficulties quickly become apparent. Before moving on to detail the specifics of this project’s specific research methodology for investigating intercultural Bible reading with 13-20 year-olds, it is important to first recognize inherent problems which are posed by the research question.

The first of these difficulties is to be found in defining the research terms themselves. While every one of the choices can be justified, every choice does in some way limit the research. For example, the concept of spiritual growth for this project (defined in the last chapter as a changing and/or deepening of perspective) provides the opportunity for empirical measurement (including Glock and Stark’s dimensions of religiosity) yet remains open enough to keep from negating the opportunity to discover unlooked for data. With that choice, however, it became understandably harder to quantify the results (how can one look for something that is by definition not expected?) because there is no predetermined set of characteristics. The choice for using Hofstede’s cultural dimensions is made because those cultural factors have served well as orienting points in a wide range of research among groups of different sizes and backgrounds, yet here, too, one had to be careful not to impose such deterministic rigor that those factors themselves defined the interpretation of data as it came in from the groups. The ages of 13-20 years old for the participants is chosen because youth at that age are decidedly in the developmental throes of puberty (which brings an increased ability for abstract thought as was shown in Chapter 2) and sit squarely in the life stage of adolescence, but it cannot be presumed that these ages apply equally well to every group in every region. Each of the different understandings were defined in ways which allowed for more openness in the research process, but that openness also meant that a more open approach was needed as the content of the groups’ data was analyzed.

Deciding upon suitable definitions for the research terms, though, was not the only difficulty for this research. Another major obstacle was the lack of directly applicable precedents to follow in researching adolescents in intercultural Bible reading. As was detailed in Chapter 2, there is a tremendous lack of theological research on how adolescents function as Bible readers, and it

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312 Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*. p.79
313 Swinton and Mowat, ibid., p.93
appears that virtually no research has been done on what happens when adolescents function in intercultural Bible reading groups. Researching this subject, then, was a leap out into the “experimental” reaches of both theology and religious studies.

And then a final major obstacle appeared when planning for the logistical challenge of generating and gathering the research data. To put it mildly, research designed to recruit and empower participants in different countries scattered throughout the world is an extremely complicated and daunting task. Difficulties that have come to bear in similar research with adult participants that also appeared in this study were groups that dropped out or disappeared from the project, reports that varied widely in depth, style, and length, translation difficulties, and different cultural understandings of how to lead a group through the reading process. It posed a tremendous task to undertake gathering and organizing materials in such diverse situations, yet the hope is that the complexity of such an effort will be ultimately overshadowed by the demonstrable richness of the gathered data. For that to happen, however, there had to be an intentional and strategic approach to the method of research.

The next section will present the research model for studying intercultural Bible reading with 13-20 year-olds which was adapted from a similar model developed for the “Through the Eyes of Another” project. While the research model reported in the following pages can in no way be offered as a perfect measuring instrument devoid of identifiable shortcomings, nonetheless it can hopefully serve as a helpful effort forward into what could become a useful paradigm for empirical research in bible reading processes with ordinary readers.

3.4 Grounded Theory Approach

The research method which appears to hold the best possibility for investigating how intercultural Bible reading can foster spiritual growth and broaden cultural understanding in 13-20 year-olds is the grounded theory approach as explained by Glaser and Strauss in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Grounded theory is an inductive approach where the researcher focuses on a specific area of study, gathers information through interviews and observations, and then begins to look for correlations and comparisons as data collection and analysis happen at the same time. By using this approach, the hope is that a theory will ultimately emerge from the data rather than as a result of seeking to prove a pre-research hypothesis. As Glaser states, the goal is to “generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior which is relevant... The goal is not voluminous description, nor clever verification. The goal is generation of theory around a core category.” For the purposes of exploratory research such as this study, the benefit of using grounded theory is that the emerging understandings will be based on the data rather than on a presuppositional hypothesis and thus able

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316 Terence D. Linhart, “Grounded Theory as a Scientific Methodology for Youth Ministry Research,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 1, no. 2 (2003), p.28
to withstand prediction, explanation, perspective, and guidance in developing later theoretical understandings (in keeping with modest aspirations of course).\textsuperscript{318}

There are, however, some critiques of grounded theory which highlight the need for intentional transparency in applying the method. One such critique is that the resulting categories and theories can be forced from the data in order to adhere to the desires of the researcher rather than being allowed to emerge. This “forcing” of the data short-circuits grounded theory’s promise of allowing the hypothesis to arise after the research and has in fact been one of the main complaints against the methodology.\textsuperscript{319} The problem here is the potential for the researcher’s unexamined or unnoticed foundational hypotheses to become the motivating factor for whatever discoveries arise. Further sampling and study help to compensate for this weakness and expose any irregularities, but the potential for clandestine assumptions to hijack the data remains in place. Another difficulty with grounded theory is that the researcher maintains a level of involvement in the research process which in effect transforms him or her into a co-participant. The concern here is that the ideas which come from the data may actually reflect the social construction between the researcher and participant rather than any justifiable theory.\textsuperscript{320}

3.5 Applying Grounded Theory: The Protocol for the Study

A high level of transparency maintained by researchers, however, can significantly offset and raise the researcher’s awareness of the particular concerns mentioned above, so with due respect to the potential pitfalls of grounded theory let us now examine the details of the research method as it was used to investigate intercultural Bible reading with 13-20 year-olds. Please note that an example of the protocol has been attached in full as an appendix to the end of this thesis.

The first phase of study was the exploratory phase where the researcher began the process of creating an open environment of mutual contribution to request initial materials and observations from the participants. To begin with, facilitators were contacted and asked if they could assemble a reading group with participants of either mixed or single gender between the ages 13 and 20 (although in one group the ages of some of the participants crept upward to 22) in their respective cultures. Because the process of ICB is designed to utilize cultural differences as the primary axis upon which to generate hermeneutical and theological reflection, each participating group was then paired with a group which was from a different culture. Although other differences are sure to be found between the participating groups along such factors as socio-economic standing, male/female ratio, level of education, ecclesial affiliation and so forth, it must be kept in mind that these other differences were not primary factors upon which to decide the pairings. In fact, one of the groups (the Yamato group from Japan) was made up of Buddhist students who volunteered to participate so they could learn about the Bible as an influential book of western literature. These students came to be involved through their facilitator’s relationship with the VU, and illustrate the opportunity (and challenges) which ICB brings in attracting readers with varied reasons for participating. Interestingly enough, and as will be shown later, the Yamato group’s materials clearly and uniquely demonstrate

\textsuperscript{318} Glaser, The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research. p.3
\textsuperscript{320} Linhart, “Grounded Theory as a Scientific Methodology for Youth Ministry Research.” p.30
the power of allowing for a plurivocity of interpretive voices. During this gathering phase the assumption was made (and later proven true) that the participating adolescents in each group would all have a reasonably uniform cultural background since they were being assembled in their local communities.

For these groups (as was also true in TEA) the role of the facilitator was critical for making sure that meetings were organized, records were kept, and materials were sent and received in a timely manner. In this project the researcher was able to personally serve as the primary facilitator for five of the groups, and the other participating groups had at least one adult who kept in contact with the researcher over the lengthy course of the exchanges. The role of the facilitator is necessary to the ICB process, yet it must be remembered that within that much-needed procedural and task-oriented role there also exists a participatory function which, as TEA discovered, opens the possibility that facilitators will employ a wide range of leadership styles as they engage with their group members. While researching the dynamics of facilitation in ICB would be an intriguing area for future study, for the purposes of this project the facilitator was considered more as a participant than a “director” in keeping with TEA’s protocol.

The groups were all asked to read the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, and that passage in particular was chosen due to a number of issues in the text which the researcher anticipated providing direct connections to the adolescents’ stage of life. The first and most obvious dynamic is that the younger son acts out in a classically adolescent rebellious way against his father. Other issues in the passage, however, appeared to also have the potential for connection with adolescent sensibilities such as the text’s hints about the relationship between the two brothers, the younger son’s impulsive and reckless lifestyle in the far off land, the father’s unexpected display of affection and mercy, etc. Before they read the biblical passage together, the participants were given the entire protocol (see Appendix) which included a background questionnaire for the group as a whole as well as a spirituality questionnaire for each individual participant to answer. This initial individual questionnaire was used to provide a “point zero” which could then be compared with the participant’s second questionnaire (with the same questions) which was given at the end of the group’s exchange in an attempt to identify changes between the first and the second surveys. Also, as the groups were being formed, one of the group members was asked to serve as a reporter who would be responsible for gathering materials and keeping records of the meetings. They then read the passage together to arrive at a group interpretation which was written down along with some type of transcript (which was a summary report, a verbatim report, or a recording) of the interaction between the group members during the meetings. These first documents (the background report, the individual surveys, and initial group interpretation of the passage) were then sent to the researcher.

In the second phase, the theoretical framework began to develop through analysis of the gathered materials and as the groups started initial communications with their partner groups. Different cultural, adolescent, and interpretive characteristics were noted by the researcher as reoccurring

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themes, and the groups themselves began their first exchanges which included contact with their partner group’s perspectives. In grounded theory terms, this was the crystallization or specification phase of the project where decisions began to be made about which factors appeared to relate or give evidence to spiritual growth as a change or deepening, or brought to light the participants’ own awareness of the role of culture in their faith. The materials of groups which were unable to continue in the exchange process for a variety of reasons to be examined later were also kept and collected at this point.

In the final phase of the project the coding began. In grounded theory, codes are regarded as a means to categorize texts into segments which represent units of content. The goal is for the researcher to move back and forth between collecting data, revising, and formulating so that as codes and categories begin to form they are constantly compared to previous codes. During this part of the research process, inductive insights begin to emerge about how codes may fit together with the hope that eventually the researcher will arrive at a “saturation of data” where no new codes or categories appear and at that point it becomes possible to for a theory or hypothesis to emerge.

While there is some discussion on whether or not a pre-existing coding paradigm has legitimacy in a grounded theory approach, in the case of this project the beginning research codes were adapted from the framework of the research project “Determining Relative Adequacy in Biblical Interpretation” under the leadership of Louis Jonker (University of Stellenbosch) and Ernst Conradie (University of the Western Cape). Jonker’s and Conradie’s codes had been adapted for use in the initial TEA project, and that study’s final adaptation (which was used as an initial code list for this project) is given below:

1. Did the group give any indication that they took notice of the textual features (e.g., genre, narrative or poetic structure, wider literary context, intratextual parallels or references, rhetorical structure, etc.)? [ATTENTION TO TEXT ITSELF] 2. Did the group give any indication that they took notice of the possible history or origin of the text, its possible compositeness, or the circumstances (political, historical, cultic, cultural, economic, social, etc.) from which it originated? [ATTENTION TO THE WORLD BEHIND THE TEXT] 3. Did the group pay attention to the different ways the text has already been interpreted by other individuals/traditions/theologies? [ATTENTION TO THE TRADITION OF INTERPRETATION] 4. How did the group link the text to contemporary life/experience/worldview? What status does the text have for them? Do they regard the text as having an influence on their lives, behavior, etc. or is the Bible an ‘object of study’? Did they associate with the characters in the narratives (where applicable), and did they allow the plot of the narrative to change them? Which interpretive strategies did they use to bridge the gap between the text and their life? Did they perhaps try to identify eternal values/truths which can comfort

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322 de Wit, "Objectives and Backgrounds." p.399
323 de Wit, ibid., p.400
324 Linhart, “Grounded Theory as a Scientific Methodology for Youth Ministry Research.” p.29
325 Glaser, The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. p.104
them/assist them/strengthen then in their own earthly struggle? Or did they see their life/experiences/suppression/political, social, economic exclusion as sequel to the biblical salvation history? Or did they find fulfillment of God’s promises in their life/experience?

[INTERPRETATIONAL STRATEGIES] 5. How did the group fill in the gaps of the narrative?

[STRATEGIES OF IMAGINATION] 6. Which actor did the members of the group identify with?

['READING WITH'] 7. What model was used for the appropriation of the meaning of the text (e.g., allegory, typology, correspondence of terms, correspondence of relationships, etc.)?

[APPROPRIATION STRATEGIES] 8. Did the groups develop new praxes out of their understanding of the text (e.g., new forms of social or political action, involvement in resistance movements, forms of diakonia, assistance)?

[PRAXELOGICAL EFFECT] 9. Which heuristic keys or codes did they use to unlock this meaning from the text? Are there specific themes/concepts, etc., which originated in their experiences of life that provided them with mechanisms to unlock meaning from the text (e.g., poverty, feelings of exclusion, richness, injustice, etc.)?

[CODES/HEURISTIC KEYS] 10. Which reading attitude does the group have (e.g., literary, dogmatic, liberative, contemplative, psychologizing, pietistic, transformative, with suspicion, to retrieve something, as a means of survival, resistance, productive, reproductive, etc.)?

[READING ATTITUDE] 11. Did the group give any indication of self-awareness, of an understanding of who they are, and what the contexts and cultural settings are in which they live? Did they give any indication that they are aware of how these contexts influence their reading? Did their reading influence their way of thinking about their contexts/cultural settings?

[ATTENTION TO THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF INTERPRETATION] 12. Did the group show any awareness of ideologies or power relations that may orient, influence, guide, or distort their interpretation of the text?

[ATTENTION TO THE WORLD BEHIND THE INTERPRETATION PROCESS] 13. Describe the interaction in the group. Was there a strong leader, different factions, outsiders, insiders in the group? What rhetorical purpose does their interpretation serve in terms of the group’s self-understanding, self-esteem, convictions, faith, values? Could a process of development (in terms of trust, intimacy, nearness, solidarity) be witnessed in the group? Or just the opposite? Was the communitarian character of the reading process experienced as enriching, or rather deconstructive?

As the material was examined, however, these initial codes were adjusted and new codes were developed until an adapted and expanded coding system arose which met the specific needs of this research. Some of the emerging codes (all of which are listed in full in the Appendix) were structured to organize basic group gender and location information, group processes in the meetings, how the group expressed cultural awareness, characteristics of adolescence, cultural characteristics, hermeneutical approaches to the text, and evidences of spiritual growth. Other codes were developed to organize the appearance of factors connected with Glock and Stark’s dimensions of religiosity, to recognize theological insights which the groups generated, to capture the participants’ feelings about the ICB process itself, to categorize the group’s reactions to their partner group, and finally, to highlight the appearance of transformational moments. It must be kept in mind that the goal of this research was not to attempt to show causality between intercultural Bible reading and spiritual growth, but to determine if spiritual growth appeared during the process of reading and exchange - thus the need for a wide range of codes that could help identify characteristics of both the reading process itself and the groups’ interpretations. With over 173 primary documents
submitted by the groups (many of which were several pages in length), the software program ATLAS.ti became indispensable for developing codes, annotating the written reports, and examining the abundance of materials for significant patterns or themes.

3.6 Summary and Conclusion

Empirical research is difficult in any context, yet forays into the area of theology may be said to add an extra layer of complication which tend to increase the difficulty in navigating through issues of bias, objectivity, and empirical perspective. Although a grounded theory approach was used before by the TEA study, because this research was looking for clues as to whether spiritual growth appears during the process with adolescents (which was not an objective of the TEA study) there was a need to maintain open-handed and modest expectations of what the material could show. This research method, then, was constructed with the hopes of offering enough structure to unearth significant discoveries while also allowing for the appearance of the unexpected.

To conclude, Linhart, in his article “Grounded Theory as a Scientific Methodology for Youth Ministry Research,” views grounded theory as one of the most promising methods for researching adolescents in particular. He sees it as “an intriguing alternative to statistical and descriptive research designs because it offers researchers and youth workers a way to explore the theoretical underpinnings of various aspects of youth ministry with freedom and purpose.” Linhart is convinced that grounded theory’s argument from the data (using abduction and induction) creates an assurance of validity that using the data to support an original hypothesis cannot. While no research tool or methodology can be judged as the perfect approach, it is indeed hoped that the research model and protocol developed for this project could provide a helpful blueprint for other studies as they develop analytical tools which can bring to light the experience of adolescent participants in intercultural Bible reading groups. Now it is to that experience in particular to which the next chapter turns.

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327 Linhart, “Grounded Theory as a Scientific Methodology for Youth Ministry Research.” p.27
328 Linhart, ibid., p.30
4. Adolescents as Participants

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the experiences of the adolescents in the project and is separated into four distinct sections to assist in ordering the expansive volume of material. The first section will focus on summarizing each exchanging group’s experience according to the following information: the group’s culture (including their church culture and ecclesial affiliation if available), the appearance of adolescent characteristics, the groups’ intercultural communication process, their feelings about their experience of intercultural Bible reading, and the appearance of spiritual growth as it aligns with Glock and Stark’s dimensions of religiosity. The second section will then highlight the emergence of more subtle signs of spiritual growth which were captured in the data before the third section makes a closer examination of how well the groups negotiated the dynamic of intercultural openness. Finally, a discussion of the different interpretive themes which surfaced from all the groups (even the ones which did not exchange with a partner group) will be offered as insight into how the adolescent participants understood the meaning of the text. It should be kept in mind that the source material presented throughout this chapter is gathered directly from the reading reports of the groups themselves, and in keeping with Moberg’s encouragement to avoid reduction when faced with the complexity of studying spiritual themes, every attempt has been made to allow the variety, plurality, and range of material to speak for itself as an accurate representation of the data.

4.2 Summarizing the Experiences of the Groups

Due to the sheer volume of the gathered materials, this section will necessarily be limited to describing the characteristics and experiences of the participating groups which are directly related to the overarching research question, and each reading group will be examined in a similar way such that each group’s data will be directly mapped to the sub questions posed in the earlier methodology chapter. To start, were there expressions of culture that appeared in the group’s materials? Here Hofstede’s dimension will be used as a guide, but only those characteristics which appeared will be noted. Next, did any of the characteristics of adolescence as discussed in Chapter 2 appear? This section highlights where the characteristics such as abstract thinking, relational awareness, and reflective individualization showed themselves. Next, what dynamics of intercultural communication can be observed and were the adolescents able to display such things as mindfulness, skill, and a positive motivation in the exchanges? Then finally, how did the participants feel about the reading and exchange process itself and did identifiable spiritual growth along the lines of Glock and Stark’s dimensions of religiosity present itself? Quotes from participants will be used in the course of the discussion, but in order to preserve anonymity group members will be identified only through abbreviations (for example “GIY”) or an anonymous term like “Group Leader.” When a conversation or exchange is quoted, each speaker will have his or her own abbreviation.

4.2.1 Brookwood Group

The Brookwood Group was one of the first to offer to participate in the project. The group was comprised of four high school girls in a church in South Carolina who participated together in their church’s youth ministry and was organized specifically together to take part in the study. They were facilitated by a youth ministry adult leader who also served as one of the church’s youth ministry
staff and met in a room in the church on Sunday afternoons. Another characteristic they mentioned in their background report was that they opened their meetings with prayer. Other cultural and church characteristics will be specifically noted in a section at the end of the description of the groups’ cultural characteristics.

Appearance of Cultural Characteristics
This section will describe the cultural characteristics of the group first through the lens of national culture (in reference to Hofstede’s dimensions), then second with a brief description of the local or regional culture if available, and third with a portrayal of the group’s church if such a description was also available.

National Culture: The United States

Power Distance
The United States scores low on Hofstede’s Power Distance, indicating that Americans tend to operate with a belief that communication should be informal, direct and participative, and these traits were reflected in the way the Brookwood reading group interacted internally and in its communications with the partner group. The group was very talkative, and its members communicated easily with each other as they freely shared their thoughts with much discussion. Then, in their first reading, they even spoke directly to their partner group in Malta in the same informal way.

[Group remarks about the music playing in another room that you can hear on the video. GIB leans into the camera and says: “You guys can hear some ballin’ music!”]

GIY: I would not use the word “ballin”; I would use the word “awesomeness” music.

GIS: They’re gonna translate it anyway...

GIY: And this is America signing off!

M: Everybody want to sign off?

[All wave at the camera]

GIR: Nice meeting you!

GIY: If I come back with like a really cool translation and it’s not my voice, please laugh!330

Their expressed desire to connect with their partner group through Skype or Facebook also suggests the American cultural understanding that communication should be a casual and unstructured event between equals.331

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330 Brookwood, "Brookwood Group Reading 1 Transcript," (South Carolina, United States: 2009).
Individualism

The United States, with a score of 91 on this dimension, scores as a highly individualistic culture where the expectation is for people to look after themselves. Self-reliance is praised, individuals are expected to speak their mind, and a cultural anticipation of being judged on one’s own merits can set up an environment of competition and comparison.

The Brookwood group reflected this especially as they referred to their own family members in their discussions. They did not hesitate to express their disapproval, whereas in a collectivistic culture such opinions would tend to be more tempered as a means of protecting the “in-group” of their family.

GIB: Ummm. I guess I can say it relates a lot to my own life because my brother is this huge troublemaker and he goes out and I guess you can say he’s the (does quotes with her fingers) “big sinner of the family.”

GIY: He lives a (quotes with her fingers) “wild life.”

GIB: Yeah he lives this wild life and I get a little jealous sometimes because here I am I’m making good grades and I’m cleaning the house and I feel like I’m slaving but then my brother does one thing right and he gets praised for it. And I’m over in the corner like, “What about me? I never do anything bad and you don’t give me any money!”

An individualistic bent also showed up in the way the group described themselves in the background section of their initial report (see below).

Masculinity/ Femininity

The United States is considered a masculine society with a shared cultural value that each person should strive to be the best that he or she can be in seeking socially recognized achievement. In the Brookwood group, this characteristic showed itself primarily in the way the participants referred to their standing in school as a main source of societal valuation at this age. For example:

GIY: I’m the oldest but I still, like, get the not perfect grades and stuff like that.

GIS: That happens with grades too. Like I get good grades, and my brother’s like failing all his classes and he gets one ‘A’ and it’s like, “Oh my gosh!”

Uncertainty Avoidance

The United States scores 46 on this dimension, highlighting that American society could be described as “uncertainty accepting.” This openness to the unknown speaks to an ability to generate and assimilate new ideas or opinions, and this approach to the “other” was very apparent in how the

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332 Brookwood, "Brookwood Group Reading 1 Transcript."
333 Brookwood, ibid.
334 Brookwood, "Brookwood Group Reading 2 Transcript," (South Carolina, United States: 2009).
members of the Brookwood group were willing to express themselves quite freely in the process and offer highly personalized applications of the parable. The group’s failure to recognize significant cultural or interpretational differences from their partner group, however, would indicate that they were not as able to identify or internalize new ideas as they were willing to offer them.

**Long-Term Orientation**

The United States scores low on this dimension which reflects a short-term oriented culture striving for quick results and resolutions. This value was hard to discern in the Brookwood group, although their inability to meet for almost two months between the first and second reading could be interpreted as reflecting the culture’s general ambivalence toward maintaining long-term motivations.

**Local Culture**

Greenville, South Carolina is located in the northwestern corner of the state in the southeastern Atlantic region of the United States. The city and its surrounding area is situated in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and its location on one of the busiest interstates in America in one of the most rapidly growing areas of the country has given the community of around 450,000335 a growing economy. The area is also home to more than 250 international firms from 26 nations, including BMW and Michelin.336

In the group’s description of itself which was sent to their partner group in Malta, the participants wrote that that they are living in a constitutional republic with a voting age of 18, they spend at least 3 hours per week at school, and that as female teenagers under the age of 18 they are not “part of those in power in the United States.” They also wrote that they “are hard to describe because we are all so different because we are free to believe what we want and express ourselves as we want with our clothes, music, speech, etc.”337 (a fact which also confirms the group’s positioning on Hofstede’s scale of individualism).

**Church Culture**

This reading group was situated in Brookwood Church, a community-model church in Greenville, SC that is from conservative, Southern Baptist theological roots. The church shares methodological ties with Rick Warren’s Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, CA, and as such is designed intentionally to “reach people who either had never attended church or had given up on going to church.”338 The messages are typically arranged to apply the Bible to a life interest or felt relational need, and the entire service is a professionally produced presentation of contemporary Christian music complete with extensive stage and lighting design. In 2009 the church had an Easter attendance of 10,322, and was named the 78th largest church in the United States.339 Although attendance has declined somewhat since then (presently an average weekend will see close to 6,000 people on the campus), the church is still a significant presence in the area.

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337 Brookwood, "Brookwood Group Background," (South Carolina, United States: 2009).
339 "Brookwood Church - the Brookwood Story."
Adolescent Characteristics

The characteristics of adolescence which were described in the previous methodology chapter included physical developments, cognitive changes (including an increase in the ability for abstract thinking), and psycho-social changes which move the adolescent toward both autonomy and an increased awareness of the relationships around them. This project asked groups to enlist participants aged 13-20 years to ensure that all group members had begun the physical changes of adolescence; the attention was then free to shift toward determining whether participants displayed other adolescent characteristics. What came to the fore rather quickly after the material was coded was that the participants did indeed display the ability for abstract reasoning and reflective thinking, and many times their first response to the biblical text was to seek to apply it to their own family relationships as a reflection of their newly found understanding of relational structures.

The Brookwood group was typical in this regard as they sought to find meaning in the text by wrestling with how the story applied to their own family dynamic.

GIR: I feel like I fit the older brother, too, because I get extremely jealous of my little brother. He’s home-schooled so he’s with my parents all the time he gets special attention. I mean I don’t know if it’s the fact that I’m a little bit older but I mean the thing is I don’t get to spend time alone with my parents and my little brother N gets to spend every day alone. I think it’s special when I get to spend that alone time and I don’t get that very much. So he’s just perfect student, he does all this stuff and I feel like I have to try really hard to match up with that. Like if I do something good it’s ‘Oh good job K...But N did this! Look what N did today!’

GIY: That’s great. Let’s get him a freaking star, okay? Like I used to always be like that...

Another participant reflected the adolescent awareness of autonomy and individualization as she expressed the pressure she feels in bearing responsibility for her own decisions.

GIR: It’s hard sometimes because it’s you know you want to be as good as you can... you want to try to never mess up and then you feel like if you mess it up you’re just gonna be completely ruined. Or even if you don’t mess up, I mean obviously you’re gonna mess up at some point, but even if you don’t make a humongous mistake like that it kinda hurts some people sometimes.

The Brookwood group provided a verbatim transcript only of their first meeting, but the summary they recorded for their second gathering shows that in that reading as well the participants were able to use reflective thinking to hypothesize and develop a rationale for their partner group’s perspective after they received the materials (“We think they interpreted the text in the same way as us because they are not so very different from us, culturally or socially.”) To sum up, the Brookwood reading group displayed expected adolescent developmental characteristics in their readings and over the course of their interaction.

340 Brookwood, “Brookwood Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
341 Brookwood, ibid.
Intercultural Communication

This section will intentionally focus on the experience of each group itself rather than detailing the dynamics of its exchange with the partner group as that dynamic will be examined in a later section. Still, a word here about the group’s perception of the intercultural communication process is warranted.

As was said earlier, the members of the group saw their interaction as positive and even proffered future contact with the Maltese group which indicates that they interpreted their exchange to be successful. While the Brookwood adolescents did recognize differences in their interpretation from their partner group, overall they were more focused on seeing themselves as similar which typically leads to a higher degree of satisfaction in intercultural communications.  

We noticed that we talked more about the older brother and how we related to him as well, if not better, than to the younger brother. We concluded that the partner group seemed more similar to us than different…We think they interpreted the text in the same was as us because they are not so very different from us, culturally or socially.

Feelings about the ICB Process

The Brookwood reading group had two specific comments about their experience of the intercultural Bible reading process. First, they explicitly stated that in their opinion, the process and exchange had not helped them grow spiritually. This fact, however, did not seem to influence their general feeling about the reading and exchange process as a whole.

Group Leader: Meeting, listening to the recording of the partner group, and discussing it was enjoyable for all. We all agreed that we would love to meet our partner group and are hopeful that they are able to Skype with us or that we can connect with them on Facebook.

Appearance of Spiritual Growth

At the beginning of the process, the Brookwood group expressed their spirituality mainly in terms of time spent in the activities of their church. They reported that they attend church regularly, meet together at a different time in the week in a smaller group to talk about the Bible, and read the Bible individually in their homes, but made no mention of other aspects of their faith or their theological beliefs.

During the process of the first reading, however, they began to use the parable of the lost son as an impetus through which they started expressing their spiritual understandings including their belief in God’s love and his salvific workings.

GIR: I think one thing that stands out to me is the unconditional love in here. And I think what Jesus was talking about in here is God’s unconditional love for his children. I mean, the

343 Gudykunst, Bridging Differences : Effective Intergroup Communication. p.174
344 Brookwood, “Brookwood Group Reading 2 Transcript.”
345 Brookwood, ibid.
346 Brookwood, “Brookwood Group Background.”
lost, the lost people are still loved just as much as the people who have never made a big mistake in their life.\textsuperscript{347}

The group members spoke often in their initial interpretation of seeing themselves in the story as the older son, and also saw the passage as a direct illustration of God’s desire for a fatherly relationship with humanity.

GIB: Yeah like when you make this mistake you ask for forgiveness and God just completely wipes it away and that’s what the Father does here like celebrating the new life that the son has with God.

GIR: Being born again.

GIY: Yeah, like he got saved.\textsuperscript{348}

GIR: We’re all God’s already, we, just some of us don’t know it yet. So when we come back to God he’s like, ‘My child has come back to me seeing that I really do love them and that I want them back...that there never was a mistake to begin with.’\textsuperscript{349}

The group also offered several moralistic (“I would say it’s about equality”\textsuperscript{350}) and psychological interpretations of the text. In fact, this group offered more psychological interpretations than explicitly theological ones during the course of the first reading.

GIY: Like internal conflict that the son feels, because he is struggling like when’s he’s out in that land he’s like dying or something so when he’s like in a depression it’s just like he’s working and he’s like ‘I treated my father like crap and I should go back’ and that then the external like his brother he’s like working externally with his hands and he comes back and he’s just like ‘Why are you being so nice to my brother who was mean to you’ that kinda thing...

GIR: ... No one likes to admit their mistakes and he went out and made a huge mistake and he’s like ‘Oh. I just spent all my money and now I’m working this terrible job and I don’t get fed and I’m here crawling back to my father who’s money I took and tell him that I made a mistake and that I messed up.’ So he’s probably having a problem with that, with just admitting the fact that he messed up...\textsuperscript{351}

The Brookwood group did not mention theological or spiritual concepts again in their final materials after they exchanged and read their partner groups’ interpretation, specifically stating that they saw their partner group’s interpretation to be the same as their own.\textsuperscript{352} When the group members were asked explicitly if they had grown spiritually through their participation in the exchange, their answer was, “No,”\textsuperscript{353} yet in one of the meetings they described the process as “educational and

\textsuperscript{347} Brookwood, “Brookwood Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
\textsuperscript{348} Brookwood, ibid.
\textsuperscript{349} Brookwood, ibid.
\textsuperscript{350} Brookwood, ibid.
\textsuperscript{351} Brookwood, ibid.
\textsuperscript{352} Brookwood, “Brookwood Group Reading Final Letter.”
\textsuperscript{353} Brookwood, ibid.
enriching." It would appear from the data that the intercultural Bible reading process for them, then, was more about creating a space to interact with the Bible, discuss their beliefs about God, and offer their understanding of the human psyche than about spiritual growth. The group members also offered no evidence of changed behavior other than attending the meetings themselves.

4.2.2 Malta Group
The Malta Group was also one of the initial groups that participated in the project, and was facilitated by an adult missionary from the U.S. who was working with the group and their evangelical church. The group was comprised of four girls and one boy who ranged in age from 14 to 17 years of age. They met in the church building (a converted bar) and prayed together during the meetings. Other cultural specifics will be given at the end of the section which discusses Maltese national culture.

Appearance of Cultural Characteristics
National Culture: Malta
Power Distance
Malta scores high on this dimension (score of 56) which indicates that people in this culture are typically very accepting of a hierarchical structure in which everyone has their place. Inherent inequalities are culturally acceptable, centralization is popular, and an ideal leader may be someone who functions more or less with a stern benevolent authority. In the Maltese group, these cultural leanings could be seen in the way the participants viewed the father in the parable as a powerful figure of authority.

C: So he still loved him, why do you guys think that’s a big deal? Why is it a big deal that the father still loved him? Don’t all fathers love their sons?

M: But not after what he did.  

M: He showed big love to him, like God would show to us. I would not accept this from my father.

C: That would never, you don’t expect it to ever happen?

M: If I did what he did I don’t think so.

C: Oh, interesting.

R: I don’t accept it either from my daddy or from my mom. What I accept is, not accept, what I will wait for is punishment.

C: Well, what do you think the younger son was thinking when he was headed back?

M: The same as us.
Individualism
Malta, with a score of 59, appears to be a less individualistic society which implies a higher concern for one’s social circle. While the church culture of this group (as an Evangelical Baptist church) would tend to emphasize the need to evangelize, the cultural value of social concern may also have shown itself in the fact that the group focused on the need for evangelism with their friends, a topic which did not surface in other groups.

C: But I mean, how would this story help a friend of yours relate to God? Think of your own friends the friends you have, could this story help them change the way they look at God? How would it do that?

R: Because everyone’s a sinner. So it’s like although I am a Christian I am still a sinner because I sin. So, everyone’s the same in the end.

C: How would you use this story? Think about a specific friend in your mind. How would you use this story with that friend? What part of the story do they need to hear or needs to be emphasized to them to help them? Do your friends need to hear that God’s waiting? He wants to throw a party for you if you’ll just turn to him? Do your friends need to hear, maybe they’re like the older brother, they think nothing’s wrong and their upset...

R: Maybe they think by their good actions they’re saved, so it’s like they think they’re doing everything right.

G: They need to realize their mistakes.

R: It’s like with the older son, the father had to tell him like, why are you jealous? So it’s like you have to tell them, why do you think you’re going to heaven?357

Masculinity/Femininity
Malta scores 47 on this dimension and can be considered a relatively feminine society where consensus is valued, and conflicts are resolved through compromise and negotiation. Their reading reports show that the Maltese group was quite willing to discuss the passage and their differing interpretations in a non-competitive and friendly way, and group leader wrote that they have “a lot of trust because they have known each other a long time. I don’t think this particular exercise increased the trust level much.”358

Uncertainty Avoidance
With a high score on this dimension (96), Maltese culture scores a high preference for avoiding uncertainty. Countries exhibiting high uncertainty avoidance maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are less tolerant of unorthodox behavior and ideas. The Maltese group affirmed the younger son’s “good plan” to come home as a servant, and felt it was right that he should suffer the natural consequence of his offensive decision to leave his father.359 When it came to the exchange

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357 Malta, ibid.
358 Malta, “Malta Group Reading 2 Transcript,” (Malta: 2009).
359 Malta, “Malta Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
process, the group expressed surprise that their partner group (Brookwood) used the word “crap” during their discussions and that one of the Brookwood members wore a sleeveless shirt during their Bible study. Finally, the group referred to their “persecution” as non-Catholics who live in a predominately Catholic milieu.

Long-Term Orientation
Hofstede’s studies provide no score for Maltese culture on this particular dimension, but the data compiled in this study could be argued as pointing toward more short-term orientation in Malta since cultures with a high long-term orientation (such as Japan or China) typically do not evidence widespread belief in a knowable God. The noted prevalence of Christianity in Malta (whether Catholicism or Protestantism) therefore, would seem to indicate a more short-term orientation, as would the group members’ own willingness to belong to a new church (the church to which they belong is an independent Baptist church).

Local Culture
In the group’s own description of its local culture, Catholicism looms large. This would suggest that for these adolescents, church culture and local culture may be difficult to separate.

Group Leader: In general to be Maltese is to be Catholic. The Evangelical church has traditionally been seen as a sect. Younger generations are bringing certain changes and Malta will continue to be shaped by its participation in the EU.

The youth come from families that belong to different political groups which is not a normal conversation they engage in much. Socially they each have their circle of friends depending on the activities they are involved in. They all have faced some awkwardness/pressure concerning the fact that they are not Catholic. Each family although working class spends their money differently, i.e. some take holidays off the island while others do not. I think besides the fact that they see themselves as Evangelicals the youth consider themselves average.

Church Culture
The youth are part of an Evangelical Baptist Church which is independent but has working relationships with other Baptist groups on the island. The building in which they meet was once a bar for a local football club, and is on a common street with other houses and stores in the middle of the island. Group participants live both in the city and in surrounding villages, and the intercultural Bible reading gatherings were held in English although the group is comfortable to speak in both Maltese and English (they typically mix the two languages in their worship services). Because of their own minority status as Protestants, the Maltese group was shocked that their partner group Brookwood came from a church with an attendance of around 6,000 people, saying that in their context an attendance of that size “was nearly impossible for our group to even imagine.”

Adolescent Characteristics

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360 Malta, “Malta Group Reading 2 Transcript.”
361 Hofstede, “Countries - Geert Hofstede”.
362 Malta, “Malta Group Background and First Surveys,” (Malta: 2009).
363 Malta, “Malta Group Reading 2 Transcript.”
The group from Malta displayed typical adolescent characteristics throughout the process, including the ability to engage in reflective thinking and abstract reasoning. They were also very ready to personally apply their interpretation of the passage’s family dynamic to their own situations, a sign of their adolescent awareness of relational interconnectedness.

Group Leader: I think the most interesting area talked about was how the two sons related to the father. I think it was here that more interpretation was done by the students as they sought to understand the younger and older son and how they related to their own world.364

C: Do you feel like you relate or connect with any of the characters?
G: Maybe the older son.
C: Ok, in what ways?
G: Because he was angry and sometimes I’m angry. He did not like his father’s actions.
C: Hmm, interesting. Now do you relate to him because you relate that way to your own earthly father? Like sometimes you don’t like his decisions or are you are thinking even about your relationship with God?
G: No, with my father.365

Intercultural Communication
As has been stated earlier, the Maltese group found very little difference between their interpretation of the text and that of the partner group. They did, however, comment on cultural differences such as the clothing of the Brookwood group, the large size of their drinking cups, and the bareness of the room in which their partner group was meeting. They also assumed the American adolescents were wealthy ("all Americans are rich compared to us"366) although the American group did not explicitly state that to be the case. The Maltese group interpreted the Brookwood group as very friendly, and in the end they found themselves identifying with their partner group’s social and familial struggles.367 Due to their ability to recognize obvious cultural differences at play, the Maltese group was able to appreciate their contact with their partner group and found that the process of exchange was valuable.

Feelings about the ICB Process
The Maltese group had technical difficulties as they tried to record their meetings, and in the end had to discuss the passage three times before they were able to successfully capture a “first” reading. As a result, they felt that the process was “laborious” even though in retrospect they said that the first time they met together to discuss the passage was enriching.368

Appearance of Spiritual Growth

364 Malta, "Malta Group Background and First Surveys."
365 Malta, "Malta Group Reading 1 Transcript."
366 Malta, "Malta Group Reading 2 Transcript."
367 Malta, ibid.
368 Malta, "Malta Group Background and First Surveys."
The members of the Maltese group were one of the most spiritually expressive of all the groups in the project as they began, very often describing their involvement in their faith community or their personal feelings of closeness to God.

M: God is also love for me and my best friend that is always there to listen to me. I pray every day and I have a relationship with God. I also took two courses and I sometimes go to prayer groups and meetings. I also read the Bible, at least I try every day.\textsuperscript{369}

R: [God] is great and good. He has helped me through a lot of stuff but I have to spend more time with him and have a better relationship.\textsuperscript{370}

This group also mentioned evangelism as one of their Christian activities, a characteristic which did not show up in any of the other groups, and they referred to being persecuted for their beliefs as evangelical Protestants in a predominately Catholic country.

Group Leader: All of them have faced tension over the fact that they did not grow up participating in Catholic traditions (first holy communion, religion class at school)... Malta is a very small country and the Catholic Church has great influence. In general to be Maltese is to be Catholic. The Evangelical church has traditionally been seen as a sect.\textsuperscript{371}

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the group’s first reading of the passage is mostly focused both on a personally applicable piety and uncovering theological themes.

R: So when he went back he told his father to forgive him and so that shows how when we get saved. You know that you are a sinner and you tell God to forgive you and you accept Jesus Christ.

M: In a way it’s showing salvation.\textsuperscript{372}

C: Yet, as Gabriel was saying this is a picture kind of, of people. What’s actually the end result?

G: The younger son is the good one.

R: It’s like he’s a hero.

M: But in God’s eye, every sin is the same. If the older son sinned and the second one sinned, if the second one like, for example, makes a big sin it’s still the same like the first son did.\textsuperscript{373}

\textsuperscript{369} Malta, ibid.
\textsuperscript{370} Malta, ibid.
\textsuperscript{371} Malta, ibid.
\textsuperscript{372} Malta, “Malta Group Reading 1 Transcript."
\textsuperscript{373} Malta, ibid.
M: It’s encouraging because you know that God is always there, that’s what’s encouraging about it. So, if something bad happens you can always turn to God.  

After the group exchanged with the Brookwood adolescents, however, there was no further mention of spirituality from the Maltese participants, perhaps because they found their partner group’s interpretation to be so similar.

Group Leader: There was a consensus that their interpretation was very similar to ours and none of the students found any real points they wanted to argue. Our group felt that the central message of the text was on forgiveness and unconditional love which they also felt was what this group focused on. The conclusions and interpretation were personal and focused on how they related to God. Our group did not feel a need to change or adapt their interpretation because they found almost complete agreement with the other group.

In the case of the Maltese group, then, it would appear that the intercultural Bible reading process did not stimulate any identifiable spiritual growth or change.

4.2.3 Crossroads Group
The Crossroads Group was a group of teenagers who met together as part of the youth ministry of an international church in Amsterdam. The teens all described themselves as Dutch since all have lived in the Netherlands from the time they were very young, yet in many cases their parents immigrated to the Netherlands from another country. The group was a mix of boys and girls, all between the ages of 15 and 19 and while the first meeting was made up of five teens (three boys and two girls) and two adults, the subsequent meetings had more students (both boys and girls, but no total count was given) and five adults. Meetings began with prayer, and a more complete description of the church culture is presented at the end of the culture section.

Appearance of Cultural Characteristics

National Culture: The Netherlands
Power Distance
The Netherlands scores low on this dimension (score of 38) with the implication that Dutch culture may expect more informality and a participative communication style. Although Crossroads is an international church, interestingly enough the teens in this group exemplified this value through their obvious willingness to engage in discussion both about the meaning of the text and about the process itself. Participants freely entered into the conversation, and sometimes even redirected it a bit prematurely. They could also be casual in how they talked about God.

B: My only problem with God? He pulls the skateboard away...[and] every time I try to light a cigarette the wind blows it out.

One member of the Crossroads group also noticed that the parable mentioned slavery, the only instance in the study where that aspect of the story was recognized and commented on by a group.

Individualism

374 Malta, ibid.
375 Malta, “Malta Group Reading 2 Transcript.”
The Netherlands, with a score of 80, tends to be more of an individualistic society. This trait became especially apparent when the group had to respond to the Bolivian group’s question of how to describe their own culture.

Y: We’re very honest to each other but that can be offensive to other cultures.

M: Outspoken

Y: Sometimes in other cultures you hold back a little, you kind of go around it. Somebody asks you a question and say, “How do I look?” and maybe here you’ll say, “It’s actually pretty dreadful!” And maybe in another culture you’ll say, “Yeah, it’s okay!”

J: Not abundantly blessed with the gift of nuance!377

The group also admitted that there is no communal approach to solving problems because they don’t rely on each other for community but saw this fact as a natural result of their direct communication style which kept them from having problems with each other in the first place.378

Masculinity/Femininity
The Netherlands scores 14 on this dimension and can therefore be seen as a more feminine society where consensus is valued. Quality of life is also highly emphasized even if it means sacrificing economic achievement. In the Crossroads group, the members specifically talked about how their culture values “normalcy” as opposed to and above affluence.

J: And they don’t like rich people. In England people are like, “Oh, I wish I could go shopping there or water my plants with champagne!” whereas here people think that’s just sad!

Y: And we don’t like all the made up stuff. We like real. It has to be honest and true. No fake emotions.379

Uncertainty Avoidance
The Netherlands scores 53 on this dimension and which indicates a preference for avoiding uncertainty. Yet in the process with their Bolivian counterparts, the Crossroads group was quick to ask questions about the culture of their partner group and note the differences, even questioning whether the status quo in their Dutch culture was a better approach. For one participant, the Bolivian group’s description of themselves as poor caused him to ask why they would include that in the description of their group. His question launched a thread of discussion not only in the second reading but also in the final one as well with the Dutch group admitting that the Bolivian’s final answer that being poor meant “to work in a way in the community so progress affects everyone” was a markedly different understanding of poverty than their own. Perhaps one clue why the Crossroads group did not exhibit a reticence to approach the uncertainty of an intercultural exchange may be found in the fact that the group members are attending an international church and many of them come from families that are first generation Dutch immigrants (as noted above).

378 Crossroads, ibid.
379 Crossroads, ibid.
Long-Term Orientation
The Dutch score on this value is 44, highlighting a culture with a more short-term orientation. As it had in other groups, one way this short-term orientation showed itself was in the group’s dissatisfaction with the long amount of time it took to complete the exchange (over one year).

Local Culture
When the Crossroads group described itself, the members identified themselves as belonging to the middle class with their political, social, and economic situation stable and comfortable. As middle-class teenagers, they have many freedoms while still living with their parents (which can be normal until after university studies). Because some of the group members come from minority groups, however, and because there is a certain amount of cultural tension as the Netherlands struggles with defining what a “true” Dutch person is, the Crossroads adolescents did admit to feeling powerless at times in the culture. Also, the fact that these adolescents go to church at all (very few Dutch people around Amsterdam go to church) and that it’s a church in English makes them different from the typical Dutch teen who would typically have no interest in church whatsoever. This group lives in a world that is very different from the Bible in customs and social traditions, and within their culture lays a strong belief that scientific truth is more “true” than a spiritual belief which is modeled in church and the Bible.\(^{380}\)

Church Culture
As was stated earlier, the Crossroads reading group is part of an independent church called Crossroads International Church which meets in a school building in Amsterdam. The church is an evangelical, protestant church that was started by missionaries from the United States in 1987, and uses small group bible studies as the main discipleship tool. The church language is English, and the church has gone on to start other similarly styled churches in Utrecht, Den Hague, and Rotterdam (the Rotterdam church is conducted in Dutch). The worship service typically uses contemporary music and a message that is delivered in plain language and a casual style.

Adolescent Characteristics
This group from the Netherlands appeared to be very comfortable in discussing the story and their interpretation of it, operating for the majority of the process in the realm of abstract reasoning. They were quick to look for nuances in the text, and even noticed a subtlety in the wording of the story itself.

Ta: Okay. So reading that, what are questions you have?

G: Why does the father think his son was dead?

B: Metaphor.

Ta: What does that mean?

B: It’s a metaphor. He was dead, he went away, and he came back to life.\(^{381}\)


\(^{381}\) Crossroads, “Crossroads Group Reading 1 Transcript."
The group also questioned the younger son’s motive by wondering whether he came back home because he was hungry or because he was looking for forgiveness. This is a critical observation which only appears in one other reading report in this entire study.

Th: I have a question. The son decides to go home again when he sees like the servants get more food than he gets, and then he thinks like, okay I’m going back. And then he says take me as one of your servants, right? I’m wondering why does he come back, is it for, because he understands that he needs food or something?

Ta: Yeah, that’s right because when you’re talking about forgiveness…what does he come back for, is it for the food… is that your question?

Th: Yeah, because he decides to go back when he has nothing.382

The group members were also quite willing to highlight the familial ties in the story and put themselves into their interpretation of the parable’s family as they displayed the typical adolescent’s increasing awareness of their own role in their family setting.

B: There are times where I feel more like the son who strays away and there’s other times where I feel more like the son who really works for it.383

Ta: What stands out to you?

Th: The older brother. He has a point in saying that he never got an animal to feast with his friends. And he never went away. And I understand he’s jealous.

Ta: So why does that make sense to you that he’s jealous?

Th: Yeah, his younger brother had all this money and did all these things, and he was always with his father and helped him and...

Ta: It was like the younger brother got special privileges or something.384

Intercultural Communication
The Crossroads group spent much time talking through and analyzing the cultural characteristics of the text and of their partner group. They were eager and excited to exchange interpretations with a group in another country, and were quick to point out their realizations about their own culture. They offered that a typical Dutch father would not be quick to disown a son (“I don’t think the Dutch would do it, they’re too analytical...too self-centered.”385), wondered if their partner group’s indigenous Aymara language was comparable to Frisian, saw the Bolivian’s interaction as warm and friendly, struggled to understand poverty from a different cultural perspective, and in general expressed curiosity about both their partner group’s culture and their own. This openness to discussion and willingness to engage in the process led them to a favorable feeling about the exchange, and thus to a positive intercultural communication process as expressed in their final meeting.

382 Crossroads, ibid.
383 Crossroads, ibid.
384 Crossroads, ibid.
385 Crossroads, ibid.
M: Thank you for being honest!

Ta: And being willing to open up and answer questions.

T: I’m impressed by how close their relationships are...

Y: Their community...

Feelings about the ICB Process
As for how the Crossroads group felt about the ICB process itself, the group expressed both anticipation for their exchange with the partner group (“The group said that they enjoyed the process of reading the text, but they are more looking forward to their exchange”387), and then satisfaction during and after the process as they made suggestions for further connections in both their second and third gatherings.

Y: It looks like a great place to visit.

W: We want to do an exchange of people!

G: It was nice of them to each send a bio and the nice pictures!

Ta: Would you like to do this again?

Group: Yes. But don’t take so long!388

Appearance of Spiritual Growth
The members of the Crossroads group primarily expressed their spirituality at the beginning of the process by reporting their attendance at church, reading their Bible, or praying, but at the same time most of them said they were not necessarily consistent in these activities. One girl reported, “I don’t really know how I feel about God. My faith isn’t very strong. I mostly depend on my own.”389 The picture that emerges, then, is of a group of youth who are engaged in their faith but not perhaps with the same intensity as other groups in the project.

In their first reading of the text together, the group highlighted God’s love and forgiveness as one of the main themes of the parable, which in the discussion they then recognized as complementary to another passage with a similar meaning.

B: The story is about the father who lost his son and the son comes back. It could also be, the whole story just to say that if you, if there are sins, or you do something that goes contrary to God’s will he can still forgive you if you come back if you’re really, really repenting he can always still just forgive you.

M: There are lots of parables that connect to this, though. Like the one with the sheep, the lost lamb. He will try to find the one that is lost despite the rest that are not lost.390

386 Crossroads, "Crossroads Group Reading 3 Transcript."
387 Crossroads, "Crossroads Group Reading 1 Transcript."
388 Crossroads, "Crossroads Group Reading 3 Transcript."
389 Crossroads, "Crossroads Group Background Report."
390 Crossroads, "Crossroads Group Reading 1 Transcript."
The question of the nature of repentance also emerged as the participants wondered whether or not it was important for the younger son to openly admit his fault.

B: But it could be that you’re always welcome back with open arms anyway because definitely the kid was repenting, but before he even got there to tell his father he felt sorry for what he did the father was already welcomed him back.

Ta: How, what do you mean?

B: Well it says here…(reading) when he finally came to his senses he said to himself at home even the hired servants have food enough…etc. And then it says so he went to his father and while he was still a long way off his father saw him, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son and embraced him and kissed him. That’s already there, that already shows that he really welcomed him back even though he didn’t even know the repentance part. He wasn’t even told, the son didn’t even tell him that he was sorry about it. 391

The group also offered psychological interpretations of the passage as they sought to unravel the dynamic of the father and siblings, and most saw themselves as the acting as both the younger son and the older brother at various times in their lives.

In the group’s second reading, after the exchange was made with their partner group in Bolivia, the Crossroads group did not feel the need to adjust their interpretation of the text but did notice that the Bolivian group read the Bible from a different standpoint.

M: I think...they question more...when we discuss, we say what we think about it, we don’t ask questions.

T: Why do you think that is? Is that cultural or…?

Th: They compare the story to their own life, to their own family lives more than we did. We just look at the part in the Bible and we thought how it had a meaning at that time.

Y: So it’s more interesting for them.

Ta: So you see that they do more of looking at the text, interacting with their life with the text and circumstances, and we tend to do more of...this is just what it means? Which way do you like better?

Th: I don’t know.

Y: Well, what I feel right here is that we read texts, we talk about it, we think about it, but we don’t really ask ourselves how we can change it in our real life, in our own life. We say, well this is how it happens over here, this is how it goes in Holland but we’re not keen on changing…and I don’t know if they are keen on changing stuff.

Tr: It makes a connection...a lot of them said the same thing, why they were there...to help one another. Maybe their whole focus is more...if you can call it application-based versus

391 Crossroads, ibid.
cognitive knowledge. It’s more than, ‘How do I make this real, how do I turn this into an activity?’

Yo: Which makes sense though, actually. Why would you go to a place to learn stuff if you can’t really use it?\(^{392}\)

Although the Crossroads group showed much interest in the cultural differences which became apparent between the two groups, the only mention of spirituality in the later phases of the project came in the last meeting of the group after they had answered the Bolivian’s questions about Dutch culture and the dynamics of the Crossroads group.

Tr: I think we read it more for knowledge and to be reminded…it reminds you to be faithful in this, be hopeful in this.

Ta: Do any of you have friends who are Christians? Put your hand up if you have a friend who is a Christian…who is not here…

Y: What if they just say they are?

Ta: Do you see that reading the Bible is a part of their walk with God? Would they read it a lot, for direction?

Group: No!\(^{393}\)

In the end result, there was no appearance of an increase in either the depth or frequency of spiritual measurements over the course of the project.

4.2.4 Bolivia Group

The Bolivian group was the last of the first four groups who participated in the early stages of the project and was comprised of 15 youth – seven boys and eight girls. The group ranged in age from 14 to 22 years (there were two 21-year-olds and one 22-year-old), and when members met together they sang hymns to begin their meetings. They met at their parish church over the course of three Sundays. It is not known how the facilitator led the meetings since a verbatim transcript was not provided (the meetings took place in Spanish), and more details about the church culture are given at the end of the section describing their national culture.

Appearance of Cultural Characteristics

Discerning the cultural characteristics of Bolivia is a bit difficult as Hofstede does not provide a definitive map of that country’s specific values. Although there are dimensions which can be seen as generally true across Latin America (such as a lower individualism score and a higher uncertainty avoidance value), it is helpful that this group’s members referred to themselves as belonging to an indigenous culture called Aymara which locates them close to Lake Titicaca on the border of Bolivia and Peru. It is Hofstede’s Peruvian values, then, which will be used as a general guide to surface cultural characteristics with the caveat that they can necessarily only serve as an approximation of this group’s cultural values.

\(^{392}\) Crossroads, “Crossroads Group Reading 2 Transcript.”

\(^{393}\) Crossroads, “Crossroads Group Reading 3 Transcript.”
Approximated National Culture: Bolivia

**Power Distance**

This area’s intermediate to high Power Distance score of 64 can show itself in perceptions of difference between agricultural workers in the area (who may identify more with an Andean culture) and an upper class which is more likely to be well-educated, financially well-off, and choose to identify with their national citizenship. The Bolivian group described themselves as belonging to (and working for the betterment of) the identifiably poor in their society.

> Group Leader: Everyone who makes up the group comes from poor families, many of us study and work, to succeed and to fulfill our goals. One of the characteristics that identify us is respect, because each one is different from each other. 394

They also mentioned their indigenous Aymara culture.

> Group Leader: We are part of the Aymara culture. It is an ancient culture that survived the conquest of Spain. We have sacred places such as Lake Titicaca and Tiwanaku. Although we speak Spanish, our fathers, mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers speak Aymara, the language of our ancestors. 395

> Re: I lived in a town where the language was Aymara and I feel proud and not ashamed of my roots, but because of immigration and lack of knowledge we see speaking Aymara as something to be ashamed of. 396

Their interpretation of the text potentially showed this higher Power Distance value as they expressed their suspicions that the father was exercising his familial authority unjustly in his dealings with what they considered to be a faithful elder son.

**Individualism**

With a value of 16, the area appears to be a collectivistic culture which is consistent with most other Latin American countries. The connection of the Bolivian group with their community is clearly reflected both in their self-reported background description (“What always makes us happy is that everyone in the group participates actively in various activities that are organized as a group.” 397) and in the way they interpreted and discussed the parable almost exclusively in terms of the story’s family relationships.

**Masculinity/Femininity**

On this value, and in keeping with other Latin American countries, the area scores a 42 which places it as a rather feminine society with a preference for relational connections over achievements or wealth. The group’s background report mentions a high unemployment rate for their city, which could be a reflection of this value, but almost all of the participants who were of university age reported that they were enrolled and mentioned either their area of study or the school which they attend. With such a strong showing of participants who are highly engaged on an educational track (with the eventual promise of employment), this group in particular, then, may have been displaying

394 Quispe, "Quispe Group Background," (El Alto, Bolivia: 2010).
395 Quispe, ibid.
396 Quispe, "Quispe Group Reading 2 Transcript," (El Alto, Bolivia: 2009).
397 Quispe, "Quispe Group Background."
a higher level of motivation than the value would suggest.

**Uncertainty Avoidance**

In keeping with other countries in the region, especially those that historically belonged to the Spanish kingdom, this area scores high on Uncertainty Avoidance with an 87, indicating that there would be elaborate regulations to structure the culture even though the enforcement of these rules may be weak. For the Bolivian group, this value would fall in line with the group’s own explanation that the church’s custom for adolescents who want to become involved is not merely based on an individual’s desire to attend. Instead, they engage in a highly structured process which has the youth first complete catechism training, after which they are asked to join and if they accept they are then sent out two by two on “mission.”

**Long-Term Orientation**

Although Hofstede provides no values for this dimension for the countries of Latin America, one can reasonably expect a more short-term orientation in this area since cultures with a high long-term orientation (such as Japan or China) typically do not evidence widespread belief in a knowable God. The noted prevalence of Catholicism (in similar fashion to Maltese culture), therefore, would seem to indicate a more short-term orientation for the area. This value (in addition to their readily expressed eagerness for the exchange process) may have been at least part of the reason for the group’s gently expressed dissatisfaction with the premature ending of their exchange.

**Local Culture**

As was stated previously, the group members identified themselves more closely with their Aymara roots (which they share with approximately 25% of the Bolivian population) than their Bolivian nationality, but they make their homes in the area of Villa Ingenio in El Alto outside of the city of La Paz, the country’s capital with a population of more than 1.6 million. The city sits in an economically impoverished area which until recently had seen political instability, racial tension, and protest. Since 2009, however, the area has been on an economic upturn with the country as a whole recording the highest growth rate in South America.

**Church Culture**

In their background report, the group described their local church setting in El Alto (a suburb of La Paz). The young people’s group was formed in 1992 by Sister Sofía Chipana (who is still currently active) and is a part of the parish of Christ the Redeemer. They meet at the church on Sunday afternoons where they sing, read the Bible, and organize ways to help the community. The members also participate in other activities which are organized by the church as a whole.

Group Leader: Already 17 years that we collect and not forget who started this mission, girls and boys, who are young now. They had the hope that their mission remains in the hearts of those who come here and are continuing the mission.

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398 Quispe, ibid.
399 Hofstede, “Countries - Geert Hofstede”.
400 United States, “The World Factbook (Bolivia)”, The United States
401 Quispe, “Quispe Group Background.”
Adolescent Characteristics
The Bolivian group had no problem using abstract reasoning to process the text, and the members were able to easily choose which character they would most identify with (the majority said the older brother) and offer their thoughts on the theological implications of the passage. The participants were also able to make applications to their own lives.

Group Leader: How is the text capable of transforming your own life?

Edw: Think things through before doing them and not make mistakes and then repent.

Fr: Transform my life to forgiveness.

Mi: Do not make the same mistakes that the youngest child.

Fa: Reflecting on my life before reading the text.

Wi: It is a living example that can help.

Ed, So, Qu, Al say that the text can transform your life because it is fairly clear explanation.

The group also spent much of their time talking through how the text applied to their own family situations, a major point of concern for adolescents.

Group Leader: What thoughts or experiences you remember your own life the text?

Fa: When my brother asked for part of my mother’s house.

Ru: The fight between my brothers for my father’s house.

Wi: The departure of my sister from my house right now.

So: The experience of having preferences among siblings.

Al: The hatred of my brother toward my father.

Finally, the Bolivian participants expressed a sense of injustice for the way the story leaves the reader with the understanding that it is the older son who is meant to be seen as the villain. In their eyes, he has been faithful yet has received little reward and their indignation points to their ability to exercise reflective thinking.

Fr: (Indignant) Why does the father give the best to the ungrateful child and the one who sacrifices the most gets nothing?

Al: There is injustice, seeing the reality that the people who work do not get what they deserve.

Da: The favoritism and making it look like the villain of the story is the eldest son.

Fr: [The] older brother works hard but receives little from the father.
Intercultural Communication
The Bolivian group expressed eagerness for the exchange process, and said they received the Dutch group’s first exchange materials with “surprise and joy.”405 They readily answered all the questions they could understand from their partner group, and both groups were willing to utilize rudimentary (and sometimes frustrating) translations from English into Spanish and back again using Google Translate and other online tools to help the communication process. The Bolivian participants did express disappointment at the length of time the process took, and in fact the groups were not able to completely finish the exchange through to a final letter of appreciation which is a recognized difficulty of the intercultural Bible reading process.406 Whether or not the Bolivian participants would express overall satisfaction with a partial exchange is difficult to say, but it does appear that they were in fact able to engage in successful intercultural communication as seen in their openness to their partner group.

Feelings about the ICB Process
The Bolivian group expressed excitement when they received materials from their Dutch partners, but then as time passed with no contact they sent emails wondering why the process was taking so long. Although the group leader was very gracious, there can be no doubt that the group would have preferred to complete the exchange all the way through to the exchange of a final letter which, unfortunately, did not take place in this exchange.

Appearance Spiritual Growth
As the project began, this group was the only one to list efforts for social transformation as a part of their spirituality, and the most mentioned focus was on helping children.

So: I’m in the group because one of my dreams is to educate children and help them to have hope of living each day.

Wi: What I like the most in the group is the enthusiasm to grow and develop people with values.

Ma: I’m in the group because I like to help people who need it most, such as children.

Ja: The reason I’m in the group is because I felt called to help my neighbor.

Ru: It is necessary always to think that the mission is to help our brothers and sisters.407

Every group member also mentioned their connection to their faith community, and seemed to view their involvement with that group as the primary outlet for their spirituality. Many of the participants related that they had been a part of the church for several years. There was no mention, however, of personal devotional practices such as praying or reading the Bible on their own.

404 Quispe, ibid.
405 Quispe, “Quispe Group Reading 2 Transcript.”
406 See the discussion of known issues in the chapter describing the project’s research methodology.
407 Quispe, “Quispe Group Background.”
In their first reading, the group was quick to decide on the central message of the text as the forgiveness of the father toward the son, and in that example saw a picture of God’s love for humanity.

Ci: A reconciliation between God and us.

An: The return of the child to the father, is an example: God forgives us when we repent.

They also, however, saw the text as one that gave several moral (rather than explicitly theological) teachings from which they could make personal applications (as evidenced by the earlier quote in adolescent characteristics in which they discussed how the text was capable of transforming their lives).

After the first exchange was made, the Bolivian group answered the primarily cultural questions of their Dutch partner group but did not refer to their partner group’s interpretation at all. They did, however, answer the Dutch group’s questions about how they read the Bible by saying that it “it feeds our faith and strengthens our faith in God…it make us see things in a different way and reflect.”

The group also, like the other groups, spent a lot of time in talking through the psychological issues they felt the parable raised, especially in regards to the relationship between the father and the older son. Ultimately, though, the exchange was ended before the last materials could be sent and in the end there was no evidence of a change in spiritual growth.

4.2.5 LaBelle Group

The LaBelle Group was another group from Brookwood Church in South Carolina, and this group was comprised of 17 teenagers (9 boys and 8 girls) all of high school age. The group was an ongoing small group Bible study which participated in the exchange as a part of their normal involvement with their church’s youth ministry. The group met in the home of a volunteer adult leader who also led the Bible readings along with the same facilitator who assisted with the Brookwood Group. They opened their meetings with prayer.

Appearance of Cultural Characteristics

National Culture: The United States

Power Distance

The LaBelle group, like the Brookwood group, also reflected the United States’ low score on Hofstede’s Power Distance dimension. Their meetings were participative and informal, and several of the participants felt the freedom to offer their opinions even if they weren’t sure how they would be received.

B5: I was going to say that that story might not be realistic at any time, but then do you think that’s realistic that God would forgive us? No, but he does because he loves us and that’s why it’s a shocking story and that’s my two cents on the table.

There was laughter during the sessions, and both the group leaders and adolescents shared freely throughout their meetings which were held in the leader’s home.

408 Quispe, “Quispe Group Reading 2 Transcript.”

409 LaBelle, “Labelle Group Reading 1 Transcript,” (South Carolina, United States: 2010).
**Individualism**
As an individualistic society, the United States tends to encourage competition, and the group members commented on the stress that cultural expectation brings as they spoke of their sport schedules.

B: I think, too, we get like so busy in America. Soccer practice, swim practice, homework, go to bed, wake up, eat cereal, you know school, lacrosse, soccer, ballet, whatever. You know, it’s just the, like, cycle you keep going and going and going...

Ldr: I think that this generation is a unique generation that is sadly on that cycle that B said. And I often wonder if you guys get tired of it. Just, you guys don’t know any other way than the way you’re living. Sports year round, sports all week, even Sundays... ④10

**Masculinity/Femininity**
The United States, as a masculine society, values achievement and effort over and above quality of life. In a somewhat unique dynamic, the LaBelle members appeared to apply this cultural value to their spirituality, and in one meeting the members talked about wanting to become more intense about their Christian faith by holding themselves to a “higher standard” of spiritual focus. ④11

B: There’s a quote that says passion isn’t a result of spontaneous combustion. You have to set yourself on fire. So I guess that’s what we’re doing.

B2: Who said that?

B: I don’t know. Just read it somewhere.

M: Does someone, can you give us your interpretation of it?

B: Um, like, you don’t like just like become passionate over something, you work at it, you have to like thrive, strive to be passionate over it. ④12

**Uncertainty Avoidance**
The United States’ score on this dimension indicates that Americans are typically open to new ideas and input. The LaBelle group found their interaction with the Japanese partner group stimulating and surprising, and not once did they voice that they felt threatened in any way because of the process of exchange with a group from such a different culture. Even before the actual exchange, when they weren’t sure which group from which country they would be partnered with, they were already asking questions.

B5: This is kind of off topic but, um, I have a question. Like, we’re a pretty lazy society, like Americans as a whole. Are people in Dutch like... [lazy]?(group laughs). I’m sorry I’m just curious (someone in group says “Dutch people?”)

④10 LaBelle, "Labelle Group Reading 2 Transcript," (South Carolina, United States: 2011).
④11 LaBelle, ibid.
④12 LaBelle, ibid.
After their exchange with the Japanese group, as differences in the interpretations became apparent (and the Japanese group telling the LaBelle group that, as Buddhists, they were curious about Christianity and the Bible), the group members remained open to try to understand their partner group’s perspective.

B: I’m surprised they didn’t see, like, any forgiveness. I was waiting for that when we read the last part. Not any kind of forgiveness...

M: I think B, though, that you’re right. [T]hey’re starting to understand that the God that’s in this Bible that you read is a forgiving God. And that’s why you got forgiveness out of the story and that’s just not something that they had ever heard before.413

Long-Term Orientation

The United States scores low on this dimension and operates as a short-term oriented culture. It is here where perhaps the casualness of the LaBelle group’s commitment to their scheduled meetings (which were moved several times to a later date) caused the most frustration to their Japanese partner group who had only a set amount of weeks allotted for their involvement. The result was that the exchange process ended before it could be totally completed with a final letter of acknowledgment.

Local Culture/Church Culture:

These cultural attributes are the same as the Brookwood reading group since both groups are from the same church in Greenville, SC.

Adolescent Characteristics

Like most of the groups in this project, the LaBelle group also demonstrated the ability to think abstractly about the parable and filled in the gaps of the story to make connections that were not explicitly stated.

B3: I thought it was cool like how they put in, “While he was still a long way off the Father saw him,” instead of just saying he came home. Because, like, that meant that his father was looking for him every day if he saw him a long way off.414

The adolescents also made applications to their own family situations.

B6: Yeah. In our house we have something called the good child and whenever the other two are in trouble the other one is the good child. So it kinda rotates around. Sometimes I’m the one messing up and like breaking rules and like doing stuff that I shouldn’t be doing, like, at least according to my parents. But then other times, other times it’s like S is the one doing something wrong and then they’ll forgive her and I’m like, “I didn’t do that in the first place, why didn’t I get anything?”415

413 LaBelle, ibid.
414 LaBelle, “Labelle Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
415 LaBelle, ibid.
Then, in a nod to the adolescent process of individualization, several of the members mentioned that they were personally motivated to stay involved in their church because of how it helped them with their lives.

M: They are interested to find out what kind of benefits you have in mind here, in regard to being involved in a church.

G: Helps you grow as a person. Like, being involved in a church just helps you grow as a better person and in your faith.  

B: It’s just a desire. I think, you know, once you become believers it’s a desire in your heart that you want to do this. It’s not like you’re forced to by your strict father who won’t hug and kiss you or anything, but it’s like you know...you have this, like, desire to, like, go search for him or something like that.

Intercultural Communication
When one examines the depth and quality of the LaBelle group’s exchange with their Japanese counterpart, the group’s willingness to recognize (but not shy away from) the cultural differences that appeared and their openness to answer their partner group’s questions leave no doubt that they were able to experience a successful intercultural exchange. The aforementioned scheduling issues and premature end to the process, however, leave the question of whether their partner group viewed the exchange in the same way as an open question.

Feelings about the ICB Process
After the LaBelle group had completed their reading process, the group members were asked to give specific comments about their experience of intercultural Bible reading. Among the responses they turned in was that the experience had been thought provoking, enlightening, informative, wonderful, eye-opening, and a culture shock; all of which are indicative of a positive engagement in intercultural Bible reading.

Appearance of Spiritual Growth
This particular group was one which was already meeting as an ongoing small group Bible study, and in the beginning of the project the members mainly described their spirituality in pietistic terms of personal devotional activities such as prayer, reading the Bible, and involvement in their church. Then, in their first reading, the group became focused on seeing the parable’s story primarily as a means to convey the role of God and his forgiving relationship with humanity.

G1: I think the Dad kinda represents God, like when you do something wrong or you like you disobey or whatever he always forgives you without making you do something like he forgives and forgets about it. Like he welcomed him back and like he didn’t, like, wasn’t mad at him for doing what he did.

416 LaBelle, ibid.
417 LaBelle, "Labelle Group Reading 2 Transcript."
418 LaBelle, "Labelle Group Survey 2," (South Carolina, United States: 2011).
419 LaBelle, "Labelle Group Reading 1 Transcript."
B6: Maybe like how God could be like the father, how he’s like, he’s not telling to you to, like, ditch him and live your own way, like, all the bad stuff, but he allows it so you can learn and come back to him...  

They also spent much time discussing various psychological motivations which they perceived to be at work in the story, such as the role of jealousy and disrespect. There was also a brief discussion referencing the historical setting of the story after a participant mentioned that Jesus was telling the parable in the presence of the Pharisees.

After the LaBelle group exchanged with their partner group in Japan, however, the participants began to express their spirituality in greater detail, ranging in topics from their desire for a more passionate motivation in their Christianity to talking through their understanding of the importance of reading the Bible.

M: They’re interested to know what you receive from reading the Bible.

B1: Um. The Bible deals with things that happen in everyday life, shows us how to deal with situations and how to overcome things. That’s why we read some stories.

B2: You find help in the Bible. You just pick it up one day after you’ve been struggling for a while and then like you can just open it up and God will like show you a passage you needed to see to like put things back in perspective. Like, “Oh, these things have been going on for a reason, and like, this is why or maybe it’s deeper than that. Like, I need to stop doing this because this person in the Bible did this and look what happened to them.” It just, like, helps you get through things that you’re dealing with without you even knowing it, but then, like, it’s kind of a subconscious thing where you’re just like “Oh. I read about that and that’s kinda what I needed to hear at the time.”

They also briefly touched on their understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit (“I think the Holy Spirit stirs your conscience...”), sought to process how their spirituality was different from the Japanese group’s, and expressed the importance of their church relationships.

Girl: I think the church keeps you accountable from becoming materialistic because it makes you remember that the things you have is because God gave it to you. So the church keeps you from sinking into all of this mine, mine, mine...

Both in terms of quality and quantity of discussion, it is apparent that the LaBelle group benefitted from the exchange. The depth of their theological expression changed significantly from the first to the second reading, with the implication that the process at the very least was able to motivate them to express themselves more theologically than they did in the beginning. The question of whether or not this is indicative of spiritual growth, however, is a more difficult one to answer as the group members did not openly express any changes in behaviors or understandings. The fact that this exchange (like the one between the Bolivian group and the Dutch group) ended before the final

420 LaBelle, ibid.
421 LaBelle, "Labelle Group Reading 2 Transcript."
422 LaBelle, ibid.
423 LaBelle, ibid.
letter could be sent is also an unfortunate reality in keeping with the difficulty of the process of intercultural Bible reading.

### 4.2.6 Yamato Group

The Yamato Group was comprised of students from Hokkaido University in Sapporo, Japan and included three girls and two boys. The facilitator was a visiting researcher at the university, and none of the student readers were affiliated with a church or religious group. The group met together four times to discuss the passage and respond to their partner group’s reading reports, but provided no details as to where they met or the setting in which they discussed the text.

#### Appearance of Cultural Characteristics

**National Culture: Japan**

**Power Distance**

At a score of 54, Japan presents as a mildly hierarchical society without much formal division between leaders and subordinates. This value could be seen in the way the Japanese students were quite ready to offer their own and differing opinions (not stopping to wonder how they could be received by their partner group), and in fact the group talked quite a lot as they met together. They were also willing to voice a different perspective from their leader.

> Ar (Group Leader): You said that the older brother is pure; I would say he is jealous.

> Ta: Yes, he is jealous, but still very pure. He is not hiding his feelings; the older brother is an open person.\(^{424}\)

After the exchange, the participants also asked very direct questions of the counterpart group, an indication of their expectation of shared equality with their partners.

> Er: I would like to know whether they think about God in their daily life, whether they have a particular lifestyle as a consequence they are Christians and also whether, in case they do something wrong, they stop doing it because of God.\(^{425}\)

**Individualism**

Japan scores 46 on the Individualism dimension, and as such does not show itself to be as collectivistic as other Asian cultures. The most popular explanation for this fact is that Japanese society does not have extended family systems at its base in the same way that more collectivistic societies such as China and Korea do. In their meetings, the Yamato adolescents focused in on the younger son and wondered if his individualistic act would be possible in their culture. They reasoned that it would but that there would also be negative consequences for his relationships in the family, illustrating the tension between a tolerance for such individualism and yet the possibility for very real relational repercussions.

> Er: I also think the way younger son asks for money is weird. I think it could not happen in Japan, such a thing.

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\(^{424}\) Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 1 Transcript," (Sapporo, Japan: 2010).

\(^{425}\) Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript," (Sapporo, Japan: 2011).
Ar: Erina, you said before that the father is foolish, what should he do in such situation to act properly, then? What would the ordinary Japanese father do, what would be his reaction?

Ern: Father ... he doesn’t act as a proper father should. He accepts his younger son straight away. He should first ask the younger son about his reasons to explain what he has done, and accept him back only after his son gives him sound, proper explanations.

Ta: A typical Japanese father would probably become incredibly angry with his son. Only when his son proves that he wants to change and after he has worked hard ...after showing such attitude, only then a Japanese father would pardon him.  

Masculinity/Femininity
With a 95 on the Masculinity dimension, Japan scores as one of the most masculine societies in the world along Hofstede’s dimensions. Interestingly enough, this characteristic showed itself when the Yamato members began discussing how the father in the story greeted his lost son.

Ern: When the father kisses the son. This would not happen in Japan. We don’t kiss when we meet each other, and, in this situation, father would not run to meet his son, let alone kissing him. Yes, it feels strange; my father would never kiss me.

Ar: Is it so strange to kiss a child?

Ta: It depends on age, maybe not if the baby is young.

Ar: How old baby are we talking about here?

Ta: Maybe two or three years old, not older.

Ar: Who would kiss such a baby? Both parents?

As: Maybe mother would.

Ar: What about the grandparents?

As: No, they wouldn’t.

Ern: I don’t remember my parents kissing me, so if they did I was probably too young to remember.

Ar: Does anyone of you remember your parents kissing you?

(Nobody remembers to be kissed by her/his relatives)

Er: My mother hugs me... it is ok, but if my father kissed me... I would think that there is something wrong with him.... you know it feels... even.... gross.

As: Yes, it feels weird, such a thing.

426 Artimova, “Yamato Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
Ern: We watch the kissing on TV. In American movies... there is kissing all the time... (laugh)... I mean, we have seen parents kissing their children, but in Japan only a man and woman would kiss.\textsuperscript{427}

\textit{Uncertainty Avoidance}
At 92, Japanese culture ranks as one of the most “uncertainty avoiding” countries on earth with a goal of creating an environment of maximum predictability. From cradle to grave, life is highly ritualized, so it is no wonder, then, that the Yamato group grew frustrated with trying to connect to their U.S. partner group that could not meet on a fixed and consistent schedule.

\textit{Long-Term Orientation}
With a score of 80, Japan presents as one of the long-term oriented societies where life is seen as a very short moment in the long history of humanity. From this perspective, an overarching sense of fatalism is common and the idea of one God is not a familiar concept in the culture. The Japanese tend to live their lives guided by virtues and practical good examples, and Buddhism (whether cultural or practiced) serves well as a shared societal standard. In their exchange with the LaBelle group, the Yamato adolescents recognized how their perspective on the Bible and religion was different from their American counterparts.

Er: They are trying to connect the Bible to their lives, they are reading it from this perspective...

As: We Japanese do not talk about religion, so when they openly discuss their religious feelings it is earnest. And ...yes, Japanese are afraid to get into the discussion... [we] are afraid of doing mistakes...\textsuperscript{428}

\textit{Local Culture}
The Yamato group members were all students at the Hokkaido University in Sapporo, Japan. Sapporo is the fourth largest city in Japan with a population of close to 2 million people, and is located in the northern area of the country on the island of Hokkaido.\textsuperscript{429}

In the description of themselves, the group expressed that they were organized due to their shared interest in discovering other cultures and that they were “eager to experience what the ancient stories of the Bible may be like and learn more about people and culture of the Bible. We are also prepared to share our opinions, feelings and emotions with the members of other cultures.”\textsuperscript{430} They also stated that “none of the readers is affiliated with any church or religious group. For us the Bible is much more a piece of Western literature than a religious book.”\textsuperscript{431}

\textbf{Adolescent Characteristics}
This group represented a possible first in the study of intercultural Bible reading in that none of its members professed to be Christian and they were not affiliated with any church or religious group. Also, the fact that the participants were Japanese provides an important glimpse of how other

\textsuperscript{427} Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 1 Transcript."
\textsuperscript{428} Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript."
\textsuperscript{429} "City of Sapporo", City of Sapporo http://www.city.sapporo.jp/city/english/.
\textsuperscript{430} Artimova, "Yamato Group Background," (Sapporo, Japan: 2011).
\textsuperscript{431} Artimova, ibid.
members of that culture might interact in a Bible reading exchange with members from a western country. The characteristics of adolescence, however, are remarkably consistent and identifiable across cultures and this group displayed reasoning and individualization markers similar to the other groups in this study.

For the Yamato group, the Biblical text’s cultural “otherness” was a prompt for them to exercise their abstract reasoning skills as they asked questions and openly wondered about the meaning of the text.

Ar: What is there that is hard to understand and why?

As: The reaction of the father to the return of the younger son. The father is very kind to his son.

Ni: Already, the beginning of the story is weird. It would be very unusual if a son asks for his father’s money like that.

Er: I also think the way younger son asks for money is weird. I think it could not happen in Japan, such a thing.

As: Kindness, the father in the story is extremely kind to his son. My overall feeling is positive. I think it is a nice story; the father is truly very, very kind, but I think there is envy there too; I think the older son envies his younger brother for the celebration that father has prepared for him. 432

They also put themselves in the story, expressing their sense of self and utilizing the dynamic of their own family relationships.

Ar: Ni, what would your father do in such a situation?

Ni: He would say: “You are dead!”

(All laugh)

Ni: He would have never forgiven me... and I think... I would never... probably...I would never return home.

Ar: As?

As: At the beginning my father would get very angry, but later he would probably have forgiven me. But one thing is for sure, he would never ever entrust me any money again. 433

After the exchange, the Yamato participants continued to ask questions and demonstrated complex reasoning skills as they struggled to understand why their partner group would interpret the father as God and then worked together to determine what that interpretation could mean for understanding the rest of the story. 434

432 Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 1 Transcript."
433 Artimova, ibid.
434 Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript."
Intercultural Communication
Although they expressed frustration about the mechanisms of the exchange process itself, the Japanese adolescents did demonstrate the characteristics of a positive intercultural interaction. They were willing to offer their opinions to their partner group, recognized and discussed cultural differences which they saw both in the passage and in the LaBelle group’s interpretation, and readily asked questions of the American adolescents. They remained engaged and curious, were not quick to be offended, and in the end not only demonstrated a willingness to attempt to understand American culture but also showed the greatest amount of spiritual interaction of any of the groups.

Feelings about the ICB Process
While the Yamato group members openly expressed their enthusiasm for the back and forth of the exchange, unfortunately they found the process itself (specifically the length of time it took) frustrating. Many times they were scheduled to meet in anticipation of receiving the LaBelle group’s materials but found that their partners had not kept to their schedule, and thus none were available for the Yamato students to examine. The LaBelle group themselves had difficulty meeting due to church staff changes which shifted scheduling responsibilities for their involvement, and then the group leader’s father passed away which understandably delayed them further. The Japanese group was very gracious and sympathetic, but in the end still found the delays demoralizing. With the Yamato group members needing to disperse for the end of their term before the final letter could be written, there was no opportunity for them to comment directly on the process.

Appearance of Spiritual Growth
As was stated earlier, the members of the Yamato group were motivated to take part in the exchange as a means of gaining a better understanding of Christianity and the Bible. As was stated earlier, this group in their background report wrote that, “For us the Bible is much more a piece of Western literature than a religious book.” Their first reading of the passage demonstrated this understanding as they focused on moralistic and psychological themes in the parable, and in the end they were able to offer views on what were for them core messages of the text: endurance, kindness, thinking well before acting, continuing to love family even if they do not behave in good ways, learning from experience, and avoiding jealousy.

After reading their partner group’s interpretation, however, the Yamato group saw that their partner group read the text in a very different way which led them to ask different questions.

When Asako reads the sentence “I think the Dad kinda represents God”, Erina is completely amazed).

Er: So the father from the story is God?

Ar: Yes, this is one of possible, and in this case a highly probable, interpretation.

Er: But how do they know it? ... I think it is a completely different story now. If the father represents God, you know we said that father is very kind. I think what we should

435 Artimova, “Yamato Group Background.”
436 Artimova, “Yamato Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
understand from the story is the kindness of God and not the forgiveness! ...And how can the father be God when he runs to meet his son?  

Er: For me it was just a story, but for them it is a holy book, so they definitely must take it differently.

Ar: Do you think that when they read the Bible it makes them to stop and contemplate about it?

Ern: I think they must receive something from it, otherwise they would not do it...but it is questionable what it is... and it would be interesting for me to find out what is it.

The dynamic of the Yamato group changed after the exchange, and they began to ask about their partner group’s motivation for reading the Bible, wondered why the LaBelle group would do an exchange when they already had such a firm opinion on the meaning of the text, and finally came to agree with the LaBelle group’s understanding that the central message of the text is God’s mercy and forgiveness (although the Yamato group also recognized that there are other messages in the parable as well). The contact with their partner group led them to wonder about the impact of the Bible, the presence of God in daily life, and how being a Christian would change lifestyle choices. In short, the Yamato group members were clearly impacted by their exchange and led to consider spirituality in a way they had not before, and in that way showed spiritual growth due to the process.

4.2.7 Gateway Boys Group

The Gateway Boys Group was made up of 10 high school age boys in Columbia, South Carolina. They were part of an ongoing small group Bible study which met as a component of their church’s youth ministry, and their meetings took place in one of the buildings on the church grounds on Sunday evenings. They opened their meetings with prayer, and there were two adult leaders (one of which was the author of this study) who assisted with the readings and exchange.

Appearance of Cultural Characteristics

National Culture: The United States

Power Distance

Perhaps because the Gateway Boys group was already established as regularly scheduled small group Bible study, the participants were very relaxed and talkative, and freely shared their opinions in a typically casual American communication style which belies the United State’s low score on this dimension.

B: We’re not very shy.

J: Yeah, we’re very outgoing. We’ll just put ourselves out there...

P: I’m shy!

J: No you’re not P!

437 Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript."
438 Artimova, ibid.
Al: If you were shy you wouldn’t say anything right now!  

**Individualism**

While the group did not surface themes of competition or achievement to illustrate this value in a similar way to other groups in the project, the Gateway Boys members did notice a certain reticence on the part of their partners to speak and share their thoughts, highlighting the normalcy to them of the highly individualistic culture of the United States where individuals are encouraged to speak for themselves.

T: Yeah, you notice that. It’s not a lot of information. It’s not a lot of...

A: Like only a couple of their lines...what they said lasted like two lines.

B: There was, like, a definite, like, couple people that would always answer.

T: Is there a lot of discussion? You already said there wasn’t (groups says, “No.”). But they would say, when somebody would say something other people would affirm it.

D: Yeah, feedback...

J: After one person answered they might all have a general consensus almost.

**Masculinity/Femininity**

The United States’ score on this value identifies it as a culture where achievement is valued and promoted, but as the Gateway Boys group did not talk much about themselves it was difficult to discern its appearance in their meetings.

**Uncertainty Avoidance**

The United States’ score on this dimension indicates that Americans are typically open to new ideas and input, and the Gateway Boys group illustrated this best by their continued insistence on trying to set up a meeting with adolescents they’d never met before, from a country they’d never been to, who explicitly stated during the course of the exchange that they also did not hold similar religious convictions. Someone from a higher uncertainty avoidance culture would have certainly been less eager to attempt such a gathering.

**Long-Term Orientation**

Operating in a short-term oriented culture, the participants in the Gateway Boys group felt that even waiting a few weeks for their partner group to have a chance to meet and ready their final interpretation was too long.

**Local Culture**

The Gateway Boys group is located in Columbia, SC which has a population of over 700,000 and serves as the state capitol. The area is home to several colleges and universities (including the

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439 GatewayBoys, "Gateway Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript," (South Carolina, United States: 2011).

440 GatewayBoys, "Gateway Boys Group Reading 2 Transcript," (South Carolina, United States: 2012).

441 GatewayBoys, ibid.
University of South Carolina with an enrollment of 45,000), and sits in the middle of the state as one of the three main population centers.442

In the group’s description of itself, the members said that they had a middle and upper-middle class social standing, and that, “things are kind of handed to us...” The school system where the group members live is known for being rigorous (it ranks fifth in the state), so most of the participants’ lives and schedules are organized around their schooling.

Church Culture
Gateway Baptist Church, which the group members attend, is an evangelical Baptist church affiliated with the Southern Baptist convention. The attendance of the church on Sundays is around 1,000 people, and the style of the church is contemporary with a modern pop musical style and a message delivered in a casual, conversational style. This church is another which, similar to the Brookwood reading group’s church, shares methodological ties to Rick Warren’s Saddleback Community Church in Orange County, CA, and as such is designed intentionally to reach people in the community who typically would not attend a church.

Adolescent Characteristics
The Gateway Boys, a group of American adolescents who became one of the last reading groups to join the project, continued the pattern of adolescents performing well in the exchange process. For them, as with the other groups, intercultural Bible reading served as an inviting setting in which they could exercise their burgeoning cognitive skills. This particular group talked quite a bit, and in those discussions brought their abstract reasoning to bear as they worked through the nuances of the parable.

Ta: Is there anything in the passage that you would say is kinda confusing or something that you don’t understand?

B: The fact that the father welcomed him...

J: He was almost like wanting to come back, like missing him in a way. Like, he must’ve been really upset that his son left and took that path in life, so whenever he came back he was really happy that he chose to come back and kind of humbled himself.

Ta: How is that confusing?

J: Well it’s kinda confusing cuz you think the father would be, you think the father would be angry at the son for leaving, that he would say, you know kinda like, “You blew it, there’s no second chance. Go away.”443

A: But I mean if you were the younger son you’d want to be treated like that. You wouldn’t want to be like, “Oh good! You’re back!” and then kinda like still kept at an arm’s length, you


443 GatewayBoys, “Gateway Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
know? You’d still want to be welcomed in, but I could definitely understand the older son’s point of view too.444

Members of the group were also able to make a personal application of the themes they saw in the text.

Al: I can think of an instance when I was younger... I’m talking like 2nd grade and I’m in this class. These two kids were always doing bad stuff. They’re always getting the class in trouble and they would get the whole class in trouble instead of just those people, and so then our teacher wanted us to, wanted the class to decide if we should forgive them or not. And I remember me specifically saying I don’t think we should let them because this is what they did and this is what they deserved. And then now I think about it...

Ta: [T]hat still haunts you to this day doesn’t it?

Al: Yeah, I remember that, I remember the two kids’ names – T and F. Yeah. I remember how I wasn’t showing God’s love and grace.445

Finally, the family dynamic in the story became a source for the group’s discussion as well.

Ta: Alright, so what stands out most to you in the passage?

B: The son being angry at the other son

J: I think he was kinda ungrateful, he was kinda like ‘that’s unfair that my younger brother has been like slacking off and I’ve been doing all this work and then he gets this big party but then he doesn’t realize that his father’s already left all the wealth and all the stuff to him so he’s kinda like ungrateful.

P: He was doing the right thing but when it came down to it he was doing it for the wrong reasons. He just wanted to, uh, have the party thrown for him cuz he did the right thing. And his brother was off doing having parties and such...446

The Gateway Boys group had no difficulty engaging in the process of intercultural reading, and displayed an expected adolescent aptitude for the method.

Intercultural Communication
While there may have not been a tremendous amount of informational flow back and forth between the Gateway Boys group and their partner group, the way the Gateway group pursued further contact with their partner group and the satisfaction they expressed with the overall experience points to a successful intercultural exchange. By the end of the cookout, the boys were trading Facebook and email addresses with the members of the Ben Lippen group and making plans for when the international students (who were leaving to go back to their home country for the summer) would come back in the fall.

Feelings about the ICB Process

444 GatewayBoys, ibid.
445 GatewayBoys, ibid.
446 GatewayBoys, ibid.
When it came to their feelings about the intercultural Bible reading process, the boys reported very positive responses.

Al: Very interesting, and fun to see their perspectives in life and God. Also helps me understand their cultures and life. Do it again!

B: AWESOME! I have learned a lot of new things and it has been great to gain another perspective that I have not even thought about before.

J: Interesting looking on other points of view through other cultures.447

Because this group was exchanging with a group of international students who were attending school in their local area, the Gateway Boys group expressed their desire to meet their partner group for a social activity (they mentioned paintball or a local amusement park). So in a unique opportunity in the project, this group, the Gateway Girls group, the Ben Lippen Boys group, and the Ben Lippen Girls group were all invited to a cookout together after the exchanges had been completed and the last surveys turned in. While only a minority of the Ben Lippen boys and girls were able to attend, all the youth from the four groups mingled easily for several hours and during a time of group discussion about the process all said that they enjoyed being involved in the readings.

Appearance of Spiritual Growth
In their first meeting, before they read the passage together, this group mainly described their spirituality in terms of personal devotion and connection to God (although one participant did say, “I would love to say he is my best friend, but I don’t have that relationship.”448). They also mentioned church as a positive place to gather with peers, and many talked about reading the Bible on their own and praying.

Then when they read the passage together for the first time, the members primarily offered pietistic interpretations as they sought to arrive at a central message.

B: I think it’s because it was Jesus telling the parable, it’s supposed to represent that we’re the lost son and then that God is the father and then that we do sin and we’re thankful to him at first and then we leave him to go do our own thing and then we realize that we’ve gone astray and then we come back to him and again he doesn’t look at the negative but he looks at the positive...

J: Humble.

P: Yeah, begging forgiveness.

B: And is like, “Thank you for coming back! Let’s hold a party because you realize what you did wrong and you’re forgiven.” And I think that the older son, who would he be?

An: Satan?


J: Well, if he’s kinda like ungrateful, the ungrateful person could be like the selfish, well not selfish but maybe, maybe he’s still lost...

An: It’s just an attitude of some people.\textsuperscript{449}

Interestingly enough, though, the group spent a significant amount of time sifting through the way the father ran out to meet the younger son, the jealousy of the older brother, and the motivation for the older brother to stay at home without necessarily turning their conversation about the passage in an explicitly spiritual or theological direction. In general, their answers referenced their position and relationships to their own families rather than any type of theological undertones represented in the parable. As such, then, their interpretation was primarily psychological rather than theological.

The Gateway Boys then exchanged interpretations with their partner group (the Ben Lippen Boys), but that exchange resulted in a discussion mostly centered on the cultural differences which they observed in their partner group’s reading since they said they found almost nothing to which they could respond in their partner groups’ reserved interpretation (“They couldn’t really express themselves...or they’re just really closed up. Or shy.”\textsuperscript{450}). At the end of this meeting, the Gateway group decided to ask the Ben Lippen Boys (a group almost completely comprised of international students from China attending a local private Christian school) if they would consider themselves Christians, and at the same time extended an offer to meet together for a social outing.

In the Gateway Boys group’s final meeting, after they looked at their partner group’s response there was no discussion of spiritual themes, so ultimately, then, this particular exchange provided no evidence of spiritual growth in the Gateway Boys group’s participants.

4.2.8 Ben Lippen Boys Group

The Ben Lippen Boys Group was made up of 11 high school age boys from China who were attending a Christian international boarding school in Columbia, SC. The meetings took place on Sunday mornings when the students were brought to Gateway Baptist Church for the morning services, and although none of the teens professed to be Christians their attendance at church on Sunday mornings was mandatory. The author of this study served as the facilitator who assisted with the groups’ readings and exchange.

Appearance of Cultural Characteristics

National Culture: China

Power Distance

At 80, China sits in the higher rankings of Power Distance and as such generally operates as a society which believes that inequalities amongst people are acceptable with a wide separation between superiors and subordinates. This value came to the fore in the group dynamics as the members were extremely hesitant to offer personal suggestions when given the freedom to do so. The conversation would stop in complete silence while the floor was open for general input, but when the leader would ask each participant specifically then he would offer his answer.\textsuperscript{451} This dynamic seemed to

\textsuperscript{449} GatewayBoys, "Gateway Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript."

\textsuperscript{450} GatewayBoys, "Gateway Boys Group Reading 2 Transcript."

\textsuperscript{451} BenLippenBoys, "Ben Lippen Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript," (Asia/International: 2011).
improve over time, but it was especially clear in the first meeting that the members appeared much more comfortable volunteering information to the leader only when it was explicitly requested.

**Individualism**

With a score of 20, China present as a highly collectivist culture where people act in the interests of the group rather than themselves, and groups have no hesitation in keeping up a boundary against “outsiders.” In their initial meeting, the Ben Lippen participants would only answer questions which were specifically addressed to them and remained silent when any general questions were asked. As soon as the leader’s attention was directed elsewhere (like when starting the recording or gathering materials to pass out), however, the group members began immediately to speak and laugh with each other in Mandarin. No attempt was made to relationally connect with the leader by the younger participants throughout the entire process of exchange, but by the last meeting a few of the older boys would include the group facilitator in conversations.

**Masculinity/Femininity**

China is a masculine society with a score of 66 which ranks it as a more success-oriented and driven culture. The need to ensure success is illustrated in the fact that many Chinese are willing to sacrifice family and leisure in order to “get ahead” at work. The Ben Lippen participants openly stated that the main reason they were studying in America was to achieve a high academic standing and thus be more likely to realize success back in China. For some of the participants, they had been told at the age of eight that they would be studying in America, and the group members talked about getting themselves mentally prepared to leave home and study abroad at the age of 12. The participants also talked through the academic differences between the U.S. system and the Chinese system (in China they attend school from morning until mid-afternoon, then return for more studying from 19:00 until 21:00), and shared that their parents typically don’t end their work day until 22:00.452

**Uncertainty Avoidance**

At 30, China has a low score on uncertainty avoidance and the Chinese are on average very comfortable with ambiguity. Certainly this factor might help explain why families from a country with such a different political and social makeup from the U.S. (which, in fact, some would see as antithetical) would send their children to study there, even enrolling them in a school which espouses a completely foreign spirituality. This factor could also be partly responsible for why the Ben Lippen Boys would offer sometimes simplistic answers during the meetings which seemed to be taken directly from the spiritual vocabulary of their school (i.e. “You’re always able to come back to the Lord”) with no hint of irony or sarcasm, and accept the mandatory requirement to attend the school’s religious functions even though they did not personally agree with the spiritual focus.

**Long-Term Orientation**

With a score of 118, China ranks as a highly long-term oriented society in which persistence and perseverance are normal, and it is a culture which does not typically operate in the sphere of “potential” but rather in the “what is.” It is no wonder, then, that an exercise such as intercultural Bible reading with its focus on generating potential meanings for the text seemed to be a more difficult one for this group than for others in the study, with the result that the Ben Lippen group offered a low number and narrow range of interpretations for the parable.

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Local Culture/Church Culture

The school which the participants in Ben Lippen Boys group attend is a private Christian school located in Columbia, SC, the demographics of which are discussed in the Gateway Boys group summary. The school was founded in 1940 by Columbia International University (an evangelical Christian university), and has approximately 800 students in grades Pre-K through 12 with nearly 100 of them being international students who live on campus (the countries represented include Brazil, China, Germany, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, Trinidad, United States, and Vietnam). A total of 13 boarding students live together in each of the school’s same-gender boarding houses, and the homes are supervised by house parents who themselves come from a variety of international backgrounds. Weekends allow for free time, social events, and sports, and on Sundays all students participate in worship services and small groups at local churches and on campus. All boarding students in the history of the program have been accepted into college, and each graduating class of international students has received over $3.5 million dollars in renewable scholarships.453

Adolescent Characteristics

The Ben Lippen Boys group was made up of international students who were attending a private Christian school in Columbia, SC. All but one was originally from China (though that participant’s parents were first generation immigrants to the United States), and they had been studying in the U.S. anywhere from five months to three years. The participants typically still went back home for the Christmas holidays, spring break, and summer vacation. It should be noted that even though the members of the group attended a Christian school, none of them claimed (nor were required by their school to claim) Christianity as their own spirituality.

This group talked less than the other groups, but even without providing as much information it was still possible to see adolescent cognitive and developmental processes in their interactions. For example, they, like the other groups, were able to think abstractly and reason out a potential meaning behind the structure of the parable.

T: What are the main points to the story?

P: Express his, like, his relationship between human being and himself...He’s trying to express the relationship between he and human beings

T: Okay, so which one do you think Jesus is saying that he is?

P: He must be the highest

T: The highest? Which would be...the...

P: Father

T: Father. Okay.

J: He’s trying to teach through the father in the story, maybe

The group members were also able to put themselves in the story and relate it to their own family dynamics.

T: What would you be?

J1: Younger son

T: Really? Younger son? Why?

J1: Yeah, I’m more like it or. Because we have three children in our family, and I’m the only boy. And I’d say in Asian culture the boys are under more pressure than the girls.

T: Okay. What’s the pressure, like, to succeed or....

D: Yeah. I mean, the boys more like to take over the fathers...455

E: I’ve made some mistakes sometimes but my parents have forgiven me. They would forgive me.

T: They would forgive you?

E: Yeah, but sometimes when I’ve made some mistakes that my sister did as well my parents would forgive me and my sister would get angry

T: So your sister would be the older brother?

E: Yes, in that case

T: P, yes? Something?

P: I have a cousin who used to be addicted and he’s like come back to the family. Yeah. He went to a regular university in Berlin. That’s it.

T: So is this a story that’s just, could be a part of your families and... you would hope that that’s the way the family would do you.456

Intercultural Communication

In determining how the Ben Lippen Boys group functioned in the process of intercultural communication, the answer is somewhat mixed. While they did express overall satisfaction with the intercultural Bible reading process, examining the data from their meetings and the way they interacted with their partner group reveals that they offered a very limited amount of personal insights, opinions, and views. They were not quick to ask questions of their partner group, and

454 BenLippenBoys, "Ben Lippen Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript."
455 BenLippenBoys, ibid.
456 BenLippenBoys, ibid.
functioned more as respondents than initiators. There was some self-evaluative cultural understanding (as in one session where they mentioned that a Chinese father would be more likely to spank than hug a son who had squandered his money\textsuperscript{457}), but especially when compared to some of the other groups in the project it appears that the process was neither natural nor easy for them.

Feelings about the ICB Process
When it came to expressing their feelings about the process, the Ben Lippen Boys group surveys showed answers such as “good,” “fun,” and “interesting.”\textsuperscript{458} Also, their willingness and desire to attend the voluntary cookout at the end of the exchange to meet their partner group speaks to their seeing the process in a positive light.

Appearance of Spiritual Growth
None of the students in this group professed Christianity or any religious convictions at all. Yet when they were asked to fill out a survey at the beginning of their involvement in the project and finish the sentence, “God is...,” some in the group did surface rather concrete ideas such as “the invisible and indescribable spirit in nature,” “a person [who] may exist, may not,” “something that is above everything,” “a holy spirit,” and even “a shadow of uncertainty and humans’ internal desire.”\textsuperscript{459} All expressed in the same survey that they read their Bibles when they are required to for class, and then when asked to finish the sentence, “For me, prayer is...” the participants again gave a variety of responses: “having faith in God,” “able to calm one’s heart,” “a way of communication with God,” as well as “the thing that Christians use to comfort themselves.” On the final question, “I feel God’s presence when...” there were also a number of answers given: “the school becomes incredibly emotional,” “people have problem and need help,” “I have a hardship,” “Other people describe Him,” along with “seldom feel it,” and “maybe in the future.”

When the group read through the parable for their first interpretation, they were very quiet and did not discuss it much. Eventually, one of the members offered that the story made sense with the older brother getting angry and they began to talk about how in China a father would only run to his disobedient son to discipline him. Finally, near the end of their meeting, one of the students said that the story was Jesus trying to express his relationship to humanity, and they finished by offering that the central messages of the story were moralistic truths.

D: I think it’s trying to say that, um, like, everybody has a second chance even though you have done a bad thing you still have a chance to turn back.

E: Life can be unfair but you just have to deal with it.\textsuperscript{460}

After the Ben Lippen Boys group received their partner group’s interpretation, there still was not much interaction or discussion, and they determined that the Gateway Boys group had an interpretation similar to their own.\textsuperscript{461}

\textsuperscript{457} BenLippenBoys, "Ben Lippen Boys Group Reading 2 Transcript."

\textsuperscript{458} BenLippenBoys, "Ben Lippen Boys Group Survey 2."

\textsuperscript{459} BenLippenBoys, "Ben Lippen Boys Group Survey 1,” (Asia/International: 2011).

\textsuperscript{460} BenLippenBoys, "Ben Lippen Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript."

\textsuperscript{461} BenLippenBoys, "Ben Lippen Boys Group Reading 2 Transcript."
When they received the questions from their partner group, however, the Ben Lippen Boys began to offer some clues to their spirituality. When they read that the American group wanted to know if any of them were Christians now or had been Christians in China, the group answered, “No,” and went on to offer that at their school they’re required to attend church but that “the school has mentioned at the beginning of the school year that they won’t force us to be a Christian.”

When they saw that the group wanted to know what they thought was the central message of the text, however, one of the Ben Lippen participants said, “You’re always able to come back to the Lord,” a rather pietistic summation. The conversation then turned to discussing what it was like for the Chinese students to move to America and the offer from the Gateway Boys group to meet together for a social activity.

Before the meeting was over, however, the Ben Lippen group filled out surveys again which asked the same questions as before. This time, one of the students offered a response that was more definitive than his previous answer on the question “God is...” by writing “the perfect person who would like to save people.” While it certainly could still be true that the exchange process helped this group of adolescents to develop spiritually, in looking at the sum total of the materials it must be admitted that there is no demonstrable evidence in the data to suggest such a finding.

4.2.9 Gateway Girls Group
The Gateway Girls Group was made up of seven girls who ranged in age from 14 to 15 years old. The girls met together as a group which was organized specifically to take part in this project, and they met on Sunday mornings at their church, Gateway Baptist Church. The author of this study and one other female adult leader facilitated the discussion and exchange process, and the meetings were opened with prayer.

Appearance of Cultural Characteristics
National Culture: The United States
Power Distance
The Gateway Girls group operated in keeping with the United States’ low score on Hofstede’s Power Distance dimension. There was much discussion, much opportunity for clarification, and as was mentioned in the previous section the group felt free to ask very direct questions of their partner group without any hesitation.

Individualism
With the United States scoring high on this value, Americans typically embrace the expectation that they should be self-reliant, able to manage their own lives, and receive the direct consequences of their actions. In the Gateway Girls group in particular it was interesting to note how the participants did not shy away from sharing negative traits about their family members (especially siblings). In a more collectivistic society there is a motivation to try to protect the standing of those included in one’s ‘in-group,’ but these adolescents were willing to allow their family member’s actions to be made plain for all in keeping with a more individualistic understanding of personal responsibility.

Masculinity/Femininity

463 BenLippenBoys, ibid.
464 BenLippenBoys, "Ben Lippen Boys Group Survey 2."
As a masculine society, the United States encourages talking about achievements and successes, and this value showed up in the willingness of the group members to talk about their large homes, expensive technological gadgets, and fashionable clothing in their description of their local culture (see below) before they knew whether those things could be potentially offensive or awkward to a partner group who may have been in a situation of economic hardship.

**Uncertainty Avoidance**
Here, as with the Gateway Boys group, this group illustrated the United States’ low score on uncertainty avoidance as they made an offer in their second meeting to arrange for further contact with their partner group and then actually followed through and went to meet them at the cookout. This value also came to light in the way the group members eagerly decided to continue the exchange process with another group in a different country than their initial Chinese partners.

**Long-Term Orientation**
One of the ways the orientation of the United States on this value showed itself in this group was through their expressed concern for the Ben Lippen girls to become Christians (“I mean obviously we’d like to reach out to them…”

A short-term oriented society sees good and evil in universal terms (thus motivating the need for evangelism) whereas a long-term society has a more nuanced and variable understanding of good and evil depending on the circumstances.

**Local Culture/ Church Culture**
While the church culture for this group and the Gateway Boys group is the same (and so does not need to be repeated here), the Gateway Girls group did offer a different take on their local culture as they described themselves to their partner group.

This group wrote that they were middle or upper-middle class, mostly live in larger homes, have easy access to technological “toys” (like cell phones and iPods), and wear up-to-date clothing. They also mentioned the cultural acceptability and even encouragement to attend church in this area, saying that, “calling yourself a Christian is not considered unusual or strange [because] so many teenagers attend church or church activities... Church is one of those things where you don’t really have to be a Christian to go, it can almost be like a social thing especially in the South. Just kinda like one of those things you do.” At a later point, the group members also explained that the South is known for its food and hospitality.

**Adolescent Characteristics**
The Gateway Girls group is made up of American adolescents from the same church as the Gateway Boys group, and like that group had already been meeting as a small Bible study in their church. The participants were very talkative and managed the nuances of the interpretive process well with no difficulty in using their abstract thinking skills to generate possible understandings of the passage, even going so far as to make connections between the parable of the lost son and other passages in the Bible.

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466 Hofstede, "Dimensionalizing Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context."
467 GatewayGirls, "Gateway Girls Group Reading 1 Transcript," (South Carolina, United States: 2011).
EG: I sort of think about that thing with Nicodemus about having to be born again, um, like about how, um he realized he was wrong and like, you’re lost and then found. I sort of think about how Jesus said to Nicodemus how you must be born again, and this son, he was sort of born again with what he experienced. 468

The group members were also able to place themselves in the passage and understand the implied nuances of the relationships in the story, reflecting their growing realization of relational interconnectedness and how the passage illustrated relationships which they themselves were experiencing. One member said it this way:

H: Um, I guess I’m debatable. I was never really given a choice, not that I, I would choose it if I had been given a choice... because my brother of course would be the one who would run off and stuff and we’d sit at home and wait for him to come. [M]e and my sister, we never really were the ones who would run away. [W]e were not necessarily mad that he’s gone, just... it was kind of a usual thing so it wasn’t really open arms. I know that sounds awful but it just happened almost every week... I don’t think we could go to the extent of the younger son, and he hit complete rock bottom, but I mean I still think we’re all capable of being like that. 469

The theme of family showed up consistently in this group’s discussions, and was the first thing they spent time talking about after they received their partner group’s interpretation as they initially quickly skipped over that group’s other interpretive themes. 470

Intercultural Communication
When it comes to evaluating how the Gateway Girls group did in the intercultural communication process, their willingness to generate meaning and offer opinions about the text for their partners to discuss, the way they asked questions of their partner group, and their ability to change their perspective on the motivation for the younger son’s return based on their interaction all point to a successful process. Also, the group’s desire to continue in another process of exchange and their attendance at a social gathering for face-to-face conversation affirm that the Gateway Girls group successfully navigated their intercultural interaction.

Feelings about the ICB Process
When the Gateway Girls group participants were asked to write about their experience of exchange, they responded very positively; “interesting and cool to see another point of view,” “interesting and eye-opening to see how something I always thought of in one way can be thought of in a different way,” “It’s been cool to hear what they have to say and look at it in a different way,” “interesting - it really changed my view on how I view things in the bible/world.” 471 This group was also one which voluntarily attended the cookout with the other Gateway and Ben Lippen participants, and is currently active in an exchange with another reading partner in Oudekerk, Netherlands. For them, then, the process of intercultural Bible reading was an enjoyable one which they have desired to continue.

468 GatewayGirls, ibid.
469 GatewayGirls, ibid.
470 GatewayGirls,”Gateway Girls Group Reading 2 Transcript,” (South Carolina, United States: 2012).
Appearance of Spiritual Growth

As the process got started, the Gateway Girls group members described their spirituality on a survey in very personal and devotional terms, using phrases like “God loves us very very much and he wants us to be with Him,” “my friend,” “my Father,” and “my savior.” The majority of the group members wrote that they read their Bible especially when they are looking for guidance, and that they feel God’s presence again typically in personal times of devotion (singing, praying, or singing). 472

Then, in this group’s first session, they generated theological interpretations of the text and applied the parable to wider Christian understandings such as the sinfulness of humanity and the grace of God.

H: And I do think that it’s kinda like showing the grace of God and how Jesus died on the cross and everything. [W]e don’t deserve that, and no one deserves that, and the younger son didn’t deserve any of that. He deserved to wallow in the streets because he spent all the money and he couldn’t be trusted but the fact that his father welcomed him in... with, like, open arms and gave him a party and was so happy that he was back... it just kinda shows, like, it gives a real-life example for people to understand how God’s grace works. 473

Like the other groups in the project, however, they spent a larger amount of time developing psychological and moral interpretations of the text as they offered up central messages about pride, jealousy, and the father’s willingness to forgive the son as a relational insight rather than an explicitly theological application.

After the group exchanged with their partner group (the Ben Lippen Girls group), the members were able to note similarities to their interpretation.

T: So what did they see as the central message of the story? What did you hear?

A: Jealousy... That you’ll always need forgiveness

EG: How they can relate to jealousy. I didn’t really hear forgiveness. But I heard how they relate to jealousy 474

One thing in their partner’s interpretation that spurred them on to more discussion was when they read that the Ben Lippen Girls group had a question about the motivation of the younger son. This observation led them to wonder about the nature of repentance.

A: The fact that they were wondering, the younger brother, if he came home just for food, not really for forgiveness. I thought that was a really good point because I never really thought of that. You just kinda think, yeah, he was sorry and all that kinda stuff but like...

T: It doesn’t really say does it?

A: No. So there like wondering what the younger son’s motives really were.

S: I think she said if he wasn’t hungry would he have come home?

473 GatewayGirls, "Gateway Girls Group Reading 1 Transcript."
474 GatewayGirls, "Gateway Girls Group Reading 2 Transcript."
T: So here’s my question then...I guess my question is though if Jesus didn’t tell this part of the story, why would that not be part of the story, the parable?

EG: Because it wasn’t really relevant, or it was relevant, what was relevant was how accepting his family was in taking him back

T: So now I’m having another thought. So think about this - so if Jesus didn’t make clear what the motivation was, so is it enough to come back for whatever reason, whether it’s spiritual, physical need? Never really thought about that before...

S: Cuz isn’t that what the word ‘repent’ is? Turning?

T: So does it really matter why you come back as long as you come back?

A: God can use physical, like if you’re really sick or something, that can get you to turn back to God...it’s however God decides to do it...

The lack of spiritual or theological references, though, in their partner group’s reading brought up the question of whether or not that group was comprised of Christian members. A leader who was present in this second reading who was also involved with the Ben Lippen Girls’ group offered that she did not believe the girls would say that they were Christians, and one of the students in the Gateway Girls Group who attends Ben Lippen as a day student said that, “One of the girls in my class, she wants to be a Christian but she can’t because of her parents.” This led the Gateway Girls Group to ask very specific questions of their partner group, including whether or not they believed in God or Jesus, where they were on their personal “spiritual journey,” and if they ever attended a church back in their hometowns.

In their final meeting, the Gateway Girls Group read through their partner group’s responses which did not include answers to their questions, so the meeting did not prompt any spiritual conversations other than recognizing that their partner group did not claim Christianity for themselves. Also, when they filled out their survey questions at the end of the gathering, there were no significant changes in their answers other than one participant writing that God is, “someone who is always there for me but someone not everyone knows personally.” Due to the lack of lack of an increase in either the amount or depth of theological and spiritual content over the course of the exchange process, then, there can be no assumption that the intercultural Bible reading process spurred spiritual growth for the participants in this group.

4.2.10 Ben Lippen Girls Group
The Ben Lippen Girls Group was comprised of seven high school age girls who, like the Ben Lippen Boys Group, attended a Christian international boarding school in Columbia, SC. The girls met together on Sunday mornings specifically for the purpose of taking part in the reading and exchange process, and were facilitated by one female adult leader. The girls also, like the Ben Lippen Boys, did not profess Christianity, although after the process was completed one of them did say she had decided to become a Christian.

475 GatewayGirls, ibid.
476 GatewayGirls, "Gateway Girls Group Reading 2 Transcript."
477 GatewayGirls, ibid.
Appearance of Cultural Characteristics

National Culture: China and Vietnam
With the Ben Lippen Girls group having participants from both China and Vietnam, it is important to note that Hofstede ranks China as having a slightly higher Power Distance value (by 10 points), the same Individualism ranking, a higher Masculinity orientation (by 26 points), the same Uncertainty Avoidance score, and a much higher Long-Term Orientation (by 28 points). This section, then, will look for the appearance of the different cultural dimensions in general terms only in order to help orient the analysis.

Power Distance
With both China and Vietnam sitting in the higher rankings of Power Distance, one would expect this group to be somewhat less talkative than other groups from countries with a lower ranking as they interacted with their group leader. While that was the case initially (in the first meeting one can hear the facilitator offering clarification and encouraging the group participants to respond), by the third meeting the tenor of the group had changed and the girls started sharing much more freely. This may be due to the fact that in the course of time their facilitator (who they did not know before this project) became a member of what Hofstede calls their “in-group” and was seen to be a part of their social circle rather than a “superior.”

Individualism
With a score of 20, both China and Vietnam are highly collectivist cultures. In the beginning of the project, the Ben Lippen Girls group displayed the same tendency as the Ben Lippen Boys group to revert to their original language and exclude the facilitator who was present and sometimes even talking with one of the participants. Since she was not a part of their group, they didn’t seem to mind excluding her. By the end of the project, however, group members did begin to make sure she was included in their conversations, and if one of the girls slipped back into her native language she would then revert to English to make sure the facilitator could understand.

Masculinity/Femininity
On this value China ranks as masculine and Vietnam as feminine. Instead of seeing both values at work in the group, however, the members seemed to function with a more feminine orientation. So, for instance, their ongoing topics of conversation were much more life issues than school and achievement. Especially in the last two meetings, the group members talked the majority of the time about their relational struggles with friends.

Uncertainty Avoidance
Both countries have the same Uncertainty Avoidance value, and again with the Ben Lippen Girls group (as it was with the Ben Lippen Boys group) it was clear that the group members were comfortable with the ambiguity of attending a Christian school while not professing that particular spirituality for themselves. Their willingness to be involved in the intercultural Bible reading project to begin with (which was entirely voluntary), and then again to attend the social outing also speaks to their comfort level in nuanced environments.

Long-Term Orientation
While Vietnam does not score as high as China on Long-Term orientation, both cultures are more likely to promote an ethic based on a long view of history rather than on assumptions of universal religious guidelines of good and evil or a knowable God. It is completely in keeping with this cultural value, then, that the Ben Lippen Girls group members were more attuned to moral and psychological implications of the Biblical passage than to explicitly Christian ones. Even the fact that one of the Ben Lippen students (not involved in the project) told a Gateway student that her parents would be angry with her if she became a Christian speaks to the cultural power of this value, and begs the question of what will happen to the one Ben Lippen Girls group member who did claim Christianity for herself during the course of the project.

Local Culture/ Church Culture
This characteristic of the Ben Lippen Girls group is the same as Ben Lippen Boys group.

Adolescent Characteristics
The Ben Lippen Girls group, like their counterpart boys group, was made up of international students who were attending a private Christian school in Columbia, SC. Unlike the boys group, however, the girls were from both China and Vietnam. They were studying in the United States anywhere from five months to three years and typically returned to their home countries for the Christmas holidays, spring break, and summer vacation. As was addressed in the previous section detailing the experience of the Gateway Girls group, their exchange partners, the members of this group did not describe themselves as Christians.

The Ben Lippen Girls group exhibited adolescent characteristics throughout the process, including the ability to engage in reflective thinking and abstract reasoning as they developed different potential interpretations for the parable that ranged from moralistic (i.e., “love people equally,” “you should pay for your behavior,” “celebrate when people come back”) to examining the psychological underpinnings of those portrayed in the story.

G: If I’m like the hard worker and then I just like get nothing when the one who does not do anything gets like everything that would make me angry, too.

S: Okay, so you can understand that older brother, yeah?

G: Yeah

They also responded similarly to the other groups in this project with their willingness to personally identify with the relational tensions in the passage. When asked in their first meeting what in the story stood out to them the most, the group immediately said, “Relationships.”

S: You remember how the father runs to the son - would your father do that?

G: My father would but my mother would not.

S: So your father would but your mother wouldn’t. Okay.

479 BenLippenGirls, ibid.
L: I think, I mean, I hope they will... but I think they would.

Girl: I think they would, yeah.  

The participants were able to successfully grapple with the nuances of the parable, and by using their cognitive abilities brought up a question about the younger son’s motivation in a way that proved very thought-provoking to their partner group.

Intercultural Communication
There does appear to be plenty of confirmation that these group members did function successfully in their intercultural communication process. The participants were willing to offer their opinions on the text, talked through their personal and relational difficulties in moments of honesty and vulnerability, asked (and answered) questions when the opportunities arose, and not least of all voluntarily attended a gathering where they could engage in face-to-face contact with both their partner group and other Americans. This group, then, showed themselves to be extremely competent intercultural communicators.

Feelings about the ICB Process
In a similar way to the other groups, the Ben Lippen Girls group was positive on their experience of intercultural Bible reading in the project. On their surveys they said they found the process to be “interesting,” “cool,” a “help...to be more open,” and a way to “know different ideas from other people.” None of the participants gave negative feedback, and their group had the largest attendance for the post-reading cookout.

Appearance of Spiritual Growth
When the group members filled out a survey before the first reading, some of the members described God as personal (i.e., “a person who creates the world,” “the supreme being of all human - he is a father - he knows everything about the universe from the smallest to the biggest,”) while others said that they saw God in a less personal light as “creator truth,” “real, but other gods,” and one who would “help people to do good things, guide us to the right way.” As they wrote down their understanding of church, the same two perspectives appeared (“a place where help us know God” and “where Christians go to worship God together and they can talk to each other and know more about people”) and this dynamic was also evident in their responses about prayer and feeling God’s presence.

When given the opportunity to read and interpret the text in their first meeting, the group primarily offered psychological and moralistic interpretations of the text (dealing mostly with jealousy and tensions with siblings), and only one member hinted at a theological perspective when she said that one of the main lessons of the story could be “people have sin.” They spent a large part of the time talking through these issues, but it was at this time that one of the girls did ask a question which proved insightful for their partner group.

S: What part’s hard to understand?

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483 BenLippenGirls, "Ben Lippen Girls Group Reading 1 Transcript."
G: When the younger brother came back home I was wondering if he really knows what he did or he just wants to be home.

S: Okay. So what’s his reason?

G: Yeah

S: That’s... yeah. That’s good, that’s a great question.\(^{484}\)

After they received the report from the Gateway Girls group, the Ben Lippen Girls group did recognize a different perspective from their own (“I think most of them come from a Christian home and they grew up with this...”) but at the same time voiced that their partner group “had the same answers we did.”\(^{485}\) Perhaps due to this fact, there was no discussion of the text from a spiritual or theological perspective, but the Ben Lippen Girls did have specific questions for their partner group.

S: But do you have any questions that you would like to ask this group?

G: Maybe if even after this bible study if they still will try to learn about God at home, individually or out there in their relationship with God? That they’re not doing this just in Bible study?

S: Okay, great question!

G: Because their relationship with God is where they’re at right now, how do you feel? If they feel connected to God?\(^{486}\)

In the last meeting of the Ben Lippen Girls group, however, these questions (and their answers) were not brought up again. Instead, the group members answered questions from their partner group about their process of coming to the U.S. and the difficulty of making the cultural transition. When they were asked whether or not they believed in God or Jesus (a question from the Gateway Girls group), one of the Ben Lippen Girls members responded with, “Right now I don’t know what I believe in,” and the others nodded in agreement.\(^{487}\) When the group members filled out their surveys at the end of this meeting, there were no significant changes in their answers. Several weeks later, however, when the groups met for the cookout one of the Ben Lippen Girls group members told the entire gathering that she had become a Christian just two days earlier and shared that she had never felt such peace. Did the intercultural Bible reading process help her arrive at that decision? It is indeed possible, but in looking at the data it would appear that the process did not spur on the spiritual growth of the group as a whole.

4.3 Summarizing the Experiences of the Groups: Summary and Conclusion

This section summarized the groups’ materials by presenting evidences from the reading reports of cultural cues, adolescent characteristics, intercultural communication abilities (including with the groups’ feelings about the ICB process itself), and whether the groups demonstrated any observable

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\(^{484}\) BenLippenGirls, ibid.


\(^{486}\) BenLippenGirls, ibid.

\(^{487}\) BenLippenGirls, "Ben Lippen Girls Group Reading 3 Transcript."
spiritual growth along the axes of Glock and Stark’s dimensions of religiosity. From the data it would appear, then, that the adolescents in the study showed themselves to be extremely capable of participating in cross-cultural reading in many of the same ways as their adult counterparts in other studies of like kind. The adolescent groups interacted for the most part along the lines of generally anticipated cultural values (which they were often times able to recognize in both their own group dynamics and those of their partner group), and were even able to sometimes recognize signs of culture in their interpretation of the text itself. Their emerging adolescent ability to engage in reflective and abstract thinking became a helpful tool as they worked to re-imagine and appropriate the text, and the majority of the groups demonstrated a fairly high level of skill when it came to communicating with their cross-cultural partner group. Yet at this point the question remains as to the appearance of spiritual growth in the process due to the fact that the materials hint at very little movement along Glock and Stark’s prescribed dimensions. It would seem, then, that finding an answer to the question for which the research was undertaken (the potential for interplay between intercultural Bible reading and the spiritual growth of adolescents), will require a more subtle search for change. It is to that search, then, that the next section will turn.

4.4 In Search of Spiritual Growth

Having now summarized the experiences of the groups, it is time to return again to the research question: What (if any) Christian spiritual growth occurs in 13-20 year olds going through the process of intercultural Bible reading? In the chapter which detailed the research methodology for this project, it was noted that the nature of this type of investigation has inherent complications which arise from the difficulty of attempting to measure such notably opaque constructs such as culture, spiritual growth, and even the concept of adolescence itself. At that point it was also noted that an acceptable definition of Christian spiritual growth should reflect the Biblical metaphors of the growth of a seed and the growth of a child, both of which are nuanced processes that speak to a highly individualized, subtle and variable progression toward maturity. A more open research methodology was chosen in order to make allowances for what could be unforeseen yet significant discoveries along the way, and without there being any precedence for this type of research into adolescent Bible reading it was noted that the goal of “proving” the process of spiritual growth itself would be beyond the scope of the study. Instead, the hope was to at least be able to discover if there were any indications that adolescents might benefit spiritually from involvement in an intercultural Bible reading process.

As the previous summary made clear, when a timeline is constructed and the data is interpreted in an attempt to look for an increase in either the complexity or volume of spiritual markers such as those which Glock and Stark suggest, a positive result is difficult to decipher. In fact, if looking solely for those particular characteristics it is safe to say that the majority of the groups displayed minimal if any increase along those specific markers. The result is that an impression could be left that although the adolescent participants may have reported that they enjoyed the process, ultimately intercultural Bible reading is one which has almost no spiritual effect.

Yet woven throughout the large volume of gathered materials appear different threads of data which must be taken into account when trying to understand if intercultural Bible reading can truly serve as a catalytic environment for the spiritual growth of adolescents. In the same way that a few threads work themselves into the pattern of the whole to affect what the eye sees as an eventually
complete design, it would appear that in several instances the participants in this study did in fact reveal signs of spiritual growth even though those signs may not be readily apparent in the more structured methodological construct. The following, then, will elaborate on the presence and the power of these documented “revelatory moments” which appeared in the experience of the majority of the groups to demonstrate how engagement in the intercultural Bible reading process moved the participants further toward spiritual maturity by leading them into new insights about the text, themselves, and the other groups.

4.4.1 Learning to Read the Bible Differently

One of the characteristics of communal reading is that it opens up the interpretive process such that there becomes space for other voices to have input, and the normally individualistic procedure of constructing meaning changes when it is practiced in the presence of others. Because there must be an initial group interpretation which is shared and owned by all the members at the beginning of the intercultural reading process, even before the first reading report is exchanged there arises an opportunity for new insights from the participants. In some groups, it was even in this first process that the members saw a change in their understanding of the Biblical text as they talked with their fellow group members.

In the Crossroads group from the Netherlands, two members experienced how, even in the discussions at this initial phase there is the possibility of changing perspective toward the text.

M: That it doesn’t matter how far you stray from the path, that’s... if you come back and are truly sorry for what you’ve done then you can always be welcomed back into open arms.

B: But it could be that you’re always welcome back with open arms anyway because definitely the kid was repenting, but before he even got there to tell his father he felt sorry for what he did the father was already welcomed him back.

T: How, what do you mean?

B: Well it says here...(reading) when he finally came to his senses he said to himself at home even the hired servants have food enough... And then it says so he went to his father and while he was still a long way off his father saw him, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son and embraced him and kissed him. That’s already there, that already shows that he really welcomed him back even though he didn’t even know about the repentance. He wasn’t even told, the son didn’t even tell him that he was sorry about it.488

The statement of the first adolescent initiated the response of the second, and moved him from a suppositional stance (“But it could be...”) to a more definitive statement (“That’s already there, that already shows...”) through the course of explanation. Then later on in that same group’s first meeting there is another instance of a shift due to one of the members’ questions, and in this conversation it is easy to see how the discussion motivates the different participants to interpret the text in a way other than they had before.

Ti: I’m wondering why does he come back, is it for, because he understands that he needs food or something?

T: Yeah, that’s right because when you’re talking about forgiveness, is that, because your question I think is that... why he, what does he come back for, is it for the food, for, right, is that your question?

Ti: Yeah, because he decides to go back when he has nothing and he sees that at home they, well, I don’t know how to say...

Tr: Nah, it’s a good question. You have to ask, I think you’re asking the right question, why is it now that he’s gone back? You know, I mean, we know why he’s where he’s at today, why he’s lost everything we know what he did, but why is he going back? Is he going back for forgiveness or is he going back simply because it looks like a better place than he is now? That’s a great question.

T: Yeah, I think that’s a good question.

M: It doesn’t even matter why he goes back as long as he does go back. Well...

B: He realized he was better off there.

T: No, I think that’s legitimate too. Does it matter? Is this parable, what’s it speaking to? Because is it presented where he’s not, he’s not saying...

M: He threw away his pride so that he would go back so he loses something as well. He doesn’t only gain from it.

Tr: Yeah, I think that’s right as I think about more because of what he says in verse 21. I think he says it further up too. But I think he gives us an indication of what, of why he’s going back. Not, it’s not simply, ‘Oh it’s better for me’ but probably that as well but he realizes that he’s sinned. And he says it to himself and he says it to his, I think he says it further up...

T: Yeah in 18.

Ti: Yeah, he says it to himself.

T: I know but that’s a good question though, Ti, because...

Tr: It could be he’s just trying to play him.

T: Because he says in 17 at home, when he finally came to his senses he said to himself at home even the hired servants have food enough to spare. And here I am dying of hunger. I will go home to my father and say...

Tr: Yeah, not ‘and feel’...

T: Father I have sinned I’m no longer...please take me on...so here I am dying of hunger is his last thought.

Ti: Yeah, yeah.
T: Hmmm. That’s interesting. So then that makes me go back and wonder again about, since it finishes with the sticking point on the older son, you know, what does that mean? In other words, it’s not focused, I think by what you’re saying, it’s not focused on just that front, right, the story could have stopped right there. So it goes on to the older son.

Tr: I think maybe for us to understand it we need to, it says in the, at least in my translation, the beginning of chapter 15 it says now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathered around to hear him but the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable and he tells three different parables of lostness. So if you think about it in that why did he tell this parable of the lost sons to tax collectors and Pharisees what was he, what message was he trying to tell them specifically?

B: That... come back to God or Jesus, then be forgiven.

M: Everyone gets equal treatment

T: Everyone has equal treatment.

M: Especially in this case if the group also left and then came back he would also receive these...

There are many shifts apparent as the group moves through discussing the younger son’s motivation, and the end result is that the participants in the conversation end with a different interpretive perspective on the text than the one with which they began. The Ben Lippen Girls group asked a similar question in their first meeting, and that question ended up becoming an important catalyst for several later discussions as they continued to wonder about the younger son’s motivation for coming home.

Well and I know that, we’re done with questions, we’re really done, but it may have been you who said that it was also about forgiveness and that’s an interesting, you said, but was he really...he was asking for forgiveness but was he just hungry? And at the same time we may not know that, but I’m, in my heart it makes me thankful that if I’ve done something wrong I can try to make it right and go to God to do it. I may not be able to fix it by myself, I may need his help, but at least there’s a place to make a turn to try to make it right. And the only thing, because I’ve never thought about, you know, was he just hungry, but he’s at least having to admit where he said I have sinned against both heaven and you and I’m no longer worthy to be called your son. So he’s at least saying I’ve done this wrong and I need you to help me. And so that apparently was enough.

The group from Malta also saw that their discussion in preparation for the first exchange allowed them to learn from each other’s perspectives as they talked through their ideas on meaning of the passage.

G: The younger son is the good one.

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489 Crossroads Group, ibid.
R: It’s like he’s a hero.

M: But in God’s eye, every sin is the same if the older son sinned and the second one sinned. If the second one like, for example, make a big sin it’s still the same like the first son did.

G: The younger son realized his mistakes. The older one didn’t.

C: Ah. That’s a really good point.\(^491\)

While it must be admitted that these are examples of subtle shifts, at the same time they are nonetheless significant as they demonstrate a change in perspective and an opening of understanding. In one group, one of the participants expressed his awareness of how the process of changing perspectives on the meaning of the parable was indeed a nuanced one.

T: Did you learn anything from them though, did you think anything different when we talked with them? I think y’all did. There were some different things, some different perspectives...so what does that mean?

J: Well like with anything, it might even be like subtle changes.\(^492\)

In other cases a shift in perspective on the passage was much more obvious and expressed. When a different or new question was offered by a partner group, the receiving participants typically openly acknowledged the new viewpoint and then directed the course of their conversation to consider it. When the Gateway Girls group reviewed the transcript from the Ben Lippen Girls group and read where their partner group wondered about the younger son’s motivation for returning home, it became a focal point. As was quoted earlier, the conversation became singly attuned to discovering the younger son’s motivation (was it because he was hungry or “did he really want the forgiveness”?) before the group realized that Jesus does not make the son’s reasons explicitly clear in the parable. In the end, one of the group members says, “That was a neat thing we had never thought of, having heard the story many times growing up. I mean I’ve heard this story all my life and never heard that. That’s a whole new...and I have thought of that a lot.”\(^493\)

Sometimes the prompting came because someone in a partner group reacted to a small phrase or description in the passage which the receiving group hadn’t noticed, and in the resulting discussion the participants end up validating the new understanding.

T: How did the group see themselves in the passage? What would you say?

B: Mostly as the younger son

T: Yeah, mostly as the younger son. A lot of pressure. Feeling responsible.

B: Yeah. Stress with the family.

A: Like one of the guys expressed it when he said the servant...

\(^{491}\) Malta Group, "Malta Reading 1 Transcript," (Malta: 2009).

\(^{492}\) Gateway Boys Group, "Gateway Boys Reading 3 Transcript," (South Carolina, United States: 2012).

\(^{493}\) Gateway Girls Group, "Gateway Girls Reading 2 Transcript," (South Carolina, United States: 2012).
An: He said he’d just kinda go with whatever.

A: I’d never thought about that. 494

GB: Something that stood out, the brother was like you’ve been out with prostitutes. I think that stands out because how he didn’t say anything about that one part about how he knows, you know?

T: Right, so when he comes back, that the older brother says, “Yeah, but dad he’s been hanging out with prostitutes,” so how would he know that?

GB: Yep

T: Interesting! I don’t know - I don’t know if I’ve ever thought about that. 495

Finally, it was the Yamato Group which exhibited the clearest example of a change in their understanding of the text after they interacted with their partner group. In their background report they expressed that they were interested to read the Bible as a piece of Western literature and that they were not affiliated with any church or religious group. Then, in their initial interpretation, they discussed how the main themes for them were endurance, kindness, love for family, change, and doing good things. After they exchanged with their partner group in America, however, they began to shift their thoughts about the passage and remarked several times about the differences between their initial understanding and their new viewpoint which came after reading their partner group’s report.

E: They said the story is about forgiveness, without hesitation… this was very interesting for me; it was not in our report, it was very innovative for me. 496

E: Firstly they say the central message is God’s mercy and forgiveness, and only later they add jealousy and greed… but I do not think jealousy and greed are so central in the story. 497

(As. reads further on page 2; when As. reads the sentence “I think the Dad kinda represents God”, E. is completely amazed).

E: So the father from the story is God?

A: Yes, this is one of possible, and in this case a highly probable, interpretation.

E: But how do they know it?

A: The leader ask them to focus on the heading, on the title of the story… they say it is called parable...

E: Do they know how to read the story just because of its title?

494 Gateway Boys Group, "Gateway Boys Reading 2 Transcript," (South Carolina, United States: 2012).
495 Greene, "Greene Group Reading 1 Transcript."
496 Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript."
497 Artimova, ibid.
A: A parable is one of genres of biblical narratives. In this kind of stories the reader would look for something hidden beneath the literal surface. We could say that a parable is a short story with some lesson to be learned, you see? So when they read the title, they know... However, we were unable to find what is under the surface. I tried to push you in that direction, but you could not see anything. So what we did instead was a literal reading.

E: But I think it is a completely different story now. If the father represents God, you know we said that father is very kind. I think what we should understand from the story is the kindness of God and not the forgiveness! ...And how can the father be God when he runs to meet his son?

E: To find out that father represents God was certainly the most shocking thing for me.

Ta: It was definitely the forgiveness, when we read it together I did not think about it at the beginning. Now I can agree with them, but there are definitely more things besides that in that story.

This group’s response typifies the kind of opening and maturing in perspective toward the Biblical text which points toward spiritual growth, and also highlights why Glock and Stark’s measures of religiosity have difficulty in pinpointing the processes at work in intercultural Bible reading. The responses of the participants when examined in detail reflect their developing understanding of the plurivocity of the Bible (surely a component of spiritual maturity), yet because they do not (and perhaps cannot) clearly express in exact terms their finalized understandings, their spiritual growth becomes difficult to place on a clearly defined axis which attempts to measure a change from one point to another. Several of the participants changed in their understanding of the text, and while at times their expressions of these changes intersected with specific empirical categories, ultimately the measure of their spiritual growth from the intercultural Bible reading process cannot be limited to how well they were able to match their expressions of growth to predetermined categories. Rather, it is in the communal and conversational space which intercultural Bible reading creates where this change in perspective about the text surfaces.

4.4.2 Learning to See Themselves Differently

Another indication of change which showed itself more easily in the spaces between the fixed categories was the way in which the participants gained insight into themselves through their participation. As they read and exchanged their interpretations, the adolescents expressed that they were learning things about themselves and how they relate to God, the Bible, and the world around them.

Sometimes it was the differences with their partner groups which the participants saw as highlighting a deficit in their own approach to spirituality and commitment to change, such as these comments from a group in the Netherlands.

498 Artimova, ibid.
499 Artimova, ibid.
500 Artimova, ibid.
Th: They compare the story to their own life, to their own family lives more than we did. We just look at the part in the Bible and we thought how it had a meaning at that time...

Y: So it’s more interesting for them...

Y: Well what I feel right here is that we read texts, we talk about it, we think about it, but we don’t really ask ourselves how we can change it in our real life, in our own life. We say, well this is how it happens over here, this is how it goes in Holland but we’re not keen on changing...and I don’t know if they are keen on changing stuff...

Tr: It makes a connection...a lot of them said the same thing, why they were there...to help one another. Maybe their whole focus is more...if you can call it application-based versus cognitive (knowledge). It’s more than “how do I make this real, how do I turn this into an activity”...

Y: Which makes sense though, actually why would you go to a place to learn stuff if you can’t really use it?  

For the following participant, the fact that their partner group was not comprised of Christian participants gave a new insight into how God can use anything or anyone to bring fresh awareness and understanding.

S: But I think for me personally, that question you just asked, does that change anything knowing that now they’re not Christians, is... I still learned from them and their questions really actually changed some of my whole thinking about that story that I’d never thought of before. So it just shows me just to be open to new ideas and learning from whoever God wants me to learn from.  

In other instances, when the participants applied the specific dynamics of the parable’s story to their own life situations they gained insight and perspective on their own circumstances and attitudes due to a catalytic action of the text.

GIR: I feel like I fit the older brother, too, because I get extremely jealous of my little brother. He’s home-schooled so he’s with my parents all the time he gets special attention. I mean I don’t know if it’s the fact that I’m a little bit older but I mean the thing is I don’t get to spend time alone with my parents and my little brother N. gets to spend every day alone. I think it’s special when I get to spend that alone time and I don’t get that very much. So he’s just a perfect student, he does all this stuff, and I feel like I have to try really hard to match up with that.  

Tr: Because... I see myself in here. I don’t know if you see yourself in here, but I see myself in here a bit. When you’re working hard for something, you’re trying to do the right thing and someone else gets rewarded not for what you’ve done but for what they’ve done and you’re thinking, “I’m over here working my tail off,” and then you’re so, I’m so prideful, angry,

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501 Crossroads, “Crossroads Group Reading 2 Transcript.”
502 GatewayGirls, “Gateway Girls Group Reading 3 Transcript.”
503 Brookwood, “Brookwood Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
upset about it I can’t even go in to the party. I don’t even care, I can’t even be part of that.
I’m not going to do that ... 504

One of the girls compared it to an everyday situation at school. She worked hard to finish a
certain assignment in time, even though it meant that she had to make long hours and skip
some social activities. Later at school she found out that not all students had finished the
piece. The teacher reacted mildly and gave them more time to work on the assignment. This
girl got angry at both her fellow students that didn’t work as hard as she had done, and at
the teacher for not punishing the ‘lazy’ students. She could feel why the eldest son got angry
at his father.505

Al: I can think of an instance when I was younger, I’m talking like 2nd grade, and I’m in this
class. These two kids were always doing bad stuff. They’re always getting the class in
trouble and they would get the whole class in trouble instead of just those people and so
then our teacher wanted us to, wanted the class to decide if we should forgive them or not.
And I remember me specifically saying I don’t think we should let them because this is what
they did and this is what they deserved. And then now I think about it...Yeah, I remember
that, I remember the two kids’ names – T. and F. Yeah. I remember how I wasn’t showing
God’s love and grace...

T: Why do you think that made such a mark?

Al: Because how God has shown us grace and forgiveness us for everything we’ve done and
then it’s like that one thing, oh, I know the parable but I forget it’s in the back of my mind
how God loves us and how we should show the same love and forgiveness to other
people.506

Finally, when the participants were given an open-ended opportunity to describe their experience of
the project through the means of a second survey several of their comments reflected the fact that
they had changed due to their involvement. Responses included the following:

“Cool, interested, help[ed] me to be more open”
“Very interesting, and fun to see their perspectives in life and God. Also helps me
understand their cultures and life. Do it again!”
“Good, funny, gotten deeper into the truth”
“AWESOME! I have learned a lot of new things and it has been great to gain another
perspective that I have not even thought about before”
“Very enjoyable and has shown me what other people think of it”
“Helpful understanding the Bible”
“New and refreshing”
“Interesting and eye opening to see how something I always thought of in one way can be thought of in a different way”
“It’s been cool to hear what they have to say and look at it in a different way”
“Interesting. It really changed my view on how I view things in the bible/world”

504 Group, "Crossroads Reading 1 Transcript."
505 Douwe Wijmenga Group, "Douwe Reading 1 Transcript," (Oldemarkt, Netherlands: 2012).
506 Gateway Boys Group, "Gateway Boys Reading 1 Transcript."
“Thought provoking”
“A culture shock”
“Very interesting. Enlightening”
“Informative and wonderful for me”

These statements highlight that the intercultural Bible reading process served as a medium through which self-insight and awareness became possible for many of the participants. Regardless of whether or not they ultimately chose to completely internalize the new ideas or perspectives with which they were confronted (an investigation beyond the scope of this study), it was in this opportunity for a clash between their view of self and the principles in the parable or their partner group’s interpretation that they experienced greater insight into their own spirituality and so demonstrated spiritual maturation when they responded with openness to these fresh realizations.

4.4.3 Learning to See Others Differently

Another indicator of change which came to the fore in several of the groups was an increasing ability to see from the perspective of their partner group members and to factor that new awareness into their experience of the exchange. In many instances this ability came through the recognition that their partner group had a different approach to reading the text than they did, and ultimately this realization moved them to try to understand why those differences might be there.

T: Is there a difference in the way the group in Bolivia reads the Bible ... or does it feel similar?

M: I think...they question more...when we discuss we say what we think about it we don’t ask questions...[we say] what we think is the right answer.

Tr: Why do you think that is? Is that cultural or...?

Th: They compare the story to their own life, to their own family lives more than we did we just look at the part in the Bible and we thought how it had a meaning at that time...

Y: So it’s more interesting for them...

Tr: Maybe it’s...a different time...maybe here there’s still very much...an expectation that the land gets divided and they could really identify...

T: So you see that they do more of looking at the text, interacting with their life with the text and circumstances and we tend to do more of...this is just what it means...Which way do you like better?

Th: I don’t know. 507

Sometimes the circumstances of the other group prompted a sense of identification. For the Gateway Boys group, the discovery that church attendance was mandatory for their partner group created a feeling of empathy and awakened a sense of injustice.

507 Crossroads, “Crossroads Group Reading 2 Transcript.”
B: Well it’s almost like its kinda like a complicated situation because they’re being forced to do something that they, that’s like, when you’re forced to go to school you don’t like going to school. If you’re forced to go to church you’re not going to like it. You know, if it’s like a mandatory… like you have detention afterwards, of course you just want to get it over with, you’re not...

A: I don’t like that at all, especially when your, like B. said, being forced. Even if you might like it if you’re not being forced it puts a damper on things and you get that rebellious kind of feel because you just don’t want to.

Another striking result was the way that the adolescents many times saw themselves as similar to their partner groups who were in actuality from a culture with significant differences. Several of the American groups, the Maltese group, and the Asian groups identified with their partner groups on the basis of their perceived similarities, and that identification was then woven into the groups’ discussions when it came time to compare their interpretations of the text.

T: Problems that they wrestle with, what did you hear?

A: Jealousy and issues between family, like maybe brothers and sisters.

T: Yeah, which, I think that sounded pretty familiar. Which is interesting that teenagers from a completely different culture, it’s not American culture because it was done, the gals are from China and Vietnam… but sounds similar...

We felt the partner group interpreted the passage in much the same way as we did… we think they interpreted the text in the same way as us because they are not so very different from us, culturally or socially.

The exchange between an American group and a Japanese group, however, shows the most dramatic instance of how the adolescents learned to see their partners differently through the process. It became a major source for discussion when the American adolescents discovered that their partners were not Christians, and in the exchange which follows there is a definite tension as they seek to understand their Japanese partner’s point of view.

M: But what do you guys think about what we’ve just read on that page?

G: They’re just blind.

M: Yeah. They didn’t see it. They didn’t see what you saw.

B: I’m surprised they didn’t see, like, any forgiveness. I was waiting for that when we read the last part. Not any kind of forgiveness… they just concentrated on...

HF: Remember guys that Buddhism is a lifestyle of works, working and working and working so there’s so much pride, there’s so much honor, you know, these are the things that you hear about when you hear about Japanese lifestyle. You don’t hear about forgiveness, you

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508 Group, "Gateway Boys Reading 3 Transcript."
509 Group, "Gateway Girls Reading 2 Transcript."
510 Brookwood, "Brookwood Group Reading Final Letter."
don’t hear about second chances or those kinds of things. We...view the world from our viewpoint, from the viewpoint that there is a God in heaven who loves us and cares about us, and so that’s why it would be so difficult for them because they don’t. Their god is not a god of second chances.

B: So is that their, is that why she’s so amazed? Because she associates Buddha with God? And so she’s thinking whoa, Buddha is actually on earth.

Bo: Buddha’s not really a god...

B: But is that what she’s associating...that’s what she’s thinking...

Bo: Buddha’s the enlightened one.

F: He’s a teacher.

M: I think B., though, that you’re right. That they’re starting to understand that the God that’s in this Bible that you read is a forgiving God. And that’s why you got forgiveness out of the story and that’s just not something that they had ever heard before.511

Interestingly enough, the Japanese group as well goes through a similar process as they seek to come to grips with their American counterparts’ interpretation and perspective.

A: Why do you think they are praying at the beginning?

E: Because they are taught to do it this way? It seems to be important for them, but personally, I do not know how would this influence their reading... it can be just some kind of a ritualized behavior?

Ta: Perhaps they are showing respect to the Bible this way...

As: I also think they respect the Bible very much...

Er: For me it was just a story, but for them it is a holy book, so they definitely must take it differently.

A: Do you think that when they read the Bible it makes them to stop and contemplate about it?

Er: I think they must receive something from it, otherwise they would not do it...but it is questionable what it is... and it would be interesting for me to find out what is it...

E: Umm, ... their opinion is very ...firm... they immediately knew what is the story about... I don’t think they will change it because of reading the Bible with us... they have the access to the Bible for a very long time... and... they have somebody else to tell them what is this story about... I mean authorities from Church, their families... so I do not think they want to be challenged... I hope they will not be deeply shocked when they find out that we were unable to identify father with God.

511 LaBelle Group, “Labelle Reading 2 Transcript,” (South Carolina, United States: 2011).
T: Maybe they want us to change... maybe this is the reason they are in the project... or they are simply searching for a different feeling... as E. said, they know the Bible by heart, so maybe it is difficult for them to find any novelty there... and this way our reading may be interesting for them...

A: Do you think they will find our reading valuable?

Er: Our opinion does not have much significance for them... and they maybe become angry with me as I said that the father is fool.

Ni: Our opinion depends on feelings, emotions - their opinion is based on Christian knowledge, they certainly won’t change it because of us...

A: So, you think their reading is very much influenced by who they are, from what background they are coming...

Ni: Yes, certainly so.

A: Can you find anything in their report to support it?

Er: Prayer at the beginning, background knowledge of Bible, they recognize the type of story.  

One of the signs of spiritual maturity is the ability to develop a compassionate understanding and identification with others who hold a different perspective from one’s own. Through the process of intercultural Bible reading, a significant number of the group members found themselves challenged to undertake exactly that course as they attempted to see the Bible “through the eyes of another.” The resulting changes in their perspectives (and the empathetic ways in which they responded) during the course of this project points to the ability of intercultural Bible reading and exchange to assist in spurring on the spiritual growth of adolescents as it provides the opportunity to mature by means of a significant and meaningful dialogue.

4.4.4 In Search of Spiritual Growth: Summary and Conclusion

It would appear then, that an examination for more subtle signs of spiritual growth as a maturing of perspective (as compared to Glock and Stark’s dimensions of religiosity) yields evidence that spiritual growth did in fact occur for adolescents in this intercultural Bible reading process. As the participants were able to demonstrate a shift in their understanding that allowed them to recognize the Biblical text’s ability to take on a plurivocity of meanings, as they were able to voice new awareness in their understanding of themselves, and as they grew in their ability to identify and empathize with their partner group, these adolescents experienced development and change which speaks to the ability of intercultural Bible reading to provide a receptive space for adolescent spiritual growth.

To conclude, Moberg’s recommendation for measuring spiritual growth by using multiple approaches has shown itself in this study to be extremely helpful. Only through a willingness to embrace open and varied research methods has this project been able to capture indications of spiritual growth in the participants, but even then it must be recognized that they still remain just

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512 Artimova, “Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript.”
that - *indicators*. Spiritual growth is a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon to be sure, and the reality remains that the picture which has emerged from this project’s research is admittedly but one angle of a complex and elusive process. Yet at the same time, these are hopeful indications which speak to the ability of intercultural Bible reading to move adolescents further along in their journey of spiritual maturity.

**4.5 The Role of Intercultural Openness**

As was discussed in the chapter on intercultural communication, successful intercultural communication occurs when both parties understand and accept responsibility to maintain an attitude of “mindfulness” such that misunderstandings and the natural tendencies to misinterpret can be admitted and corrected, when they approach the process with positive motivating factors like hope and good intention, and when they have sufficient communicative skills to navigate through the ambiguous situations that will most likely arise in the process of intercultural communication. Since a previous chapter has already summarized the appearance (or not) or these characteristics in the groups’ exchange processes, the purpose of this section will be to examine if the case can be made that groups which demonstrated a high level of intercultural openness (as defined by Gudykunst) were also ones which demonstrated recognizable spiritual growth. The goal is not to show causality (which is not possible with such a small sampling), but to look for any indications that the two factors mutually appeared in the experience of the groups and especially how they may interact. The section will begin by presenting the group with the highest level of intercultural openness which also displayed the most change in perspective, examine two other groups which showed openness and growth, and then look at groups which demonstrated low levels of both intercultural openness and growth. The section will then conclude by offering two modest observations.

**4.5.1 Yamato Group: The Highest Level of Intercultural Openness and Most Evident Growth**

Of all the groups, it is the Yamato group which most clearly displays the highest level of intercultural openness along the three characteristics which Gudykunst describes as hallmarks of successful intercultural communication (knowledge, motivation, and skill). In terms of understanding the appearance and impact of culture, the Yamato participants were the only ones consistently able to identify different characteristics of culture during the reading process. Throughout the entirety of their exchange this group openly expressed their desire to discover other cultures, to understand how people in other cultures read the Bible, and its members were able to both discern cultural cues in the parable and recognize ways in which their own culture was different from that of their partner group. To use Gudykunst’s terminology, then, the Yamato participants displayed a consistent attitude of mindfulness throughout their participation. This group seemed to be constantly aware of the possibilities for pitfalls in the process of intercultural exchange and openly encouraged their partner group by clearly stating how much they were looking forward to sharing their group’s discussions with their counterparts.

First of all, our group is bound together by the interest in other cultures. On the other hand, we are also eager to experience what the ancient stories of the Bible may be like and learn more about people and culture of the Bible. We are also prepared to share our opinions,
feelings and emotions with the members of other cultures that are participating in the project Through the Eyes of Another.\textsuperscript{513}

The Yamato group seemed to have a clear grasp of their own culture, and when they saw differences from their own setting they were quick to notice them. When the participants applied this mindfulness to interpreting the passage, they recognized how their cultural backgrounds made certain facets of the story more complicated to understand.

E: When the father kisses the son. This would not happen in Japan. We don’t kiss when we meet each other, and, in this situation, father would not run to meet his son, let alone kissing him.

T: The ring. I don’t understand why father gives the ring to his younger son when he returns.

N: Already, the beginning of the story is weird. It would be very unusual if a son asks for his father’s money like that.

Er: I also think the way younger son asks for money is weird. I think it could not happen in Japan, such a thing.\textsuperscript{514}

The participants were even cognizant enough of the nebulous nature of cultural influences to recognize that often there can be no overarching declaration that a particular cultural facet is universally true for all. This understanding made it possible for the group members to amicably disagree with each other about how a Japanese father would receive the younger son in the parable after he makes the return home.

T: How can somebody... I mean, if a parent say that their son or daughter are dead or... that the child is not a member of the family anymore. I think this cannot happen in Japan.

A: I think it can happen in Japan, though. The father from the story is extremely kind; if he were strict, as some Japanese parents are, he would have probably not forgiven such a disobedient son.

E: Father ... he doesn’t act as a proper father should. He accepts his younger son straight away. He should first ask the younger son about his reasons to explain what he has done, and accept him back only after his son gives him sound, proper explanations.

T: A typical Japanese father would probably become incredibly angry with his son. Only when his son proves that he wants to change and after he has worked hard ...after showing such attitude, only then a Japanese father would pardon him.\textsuperscript{515}

The participants of the Yamato group also displayed the second factor of intercultural openness by repeatedly expressing their positive motivation to be involved in the process of exchange. As was quoted earlier, the group came into the process “prepared to share...opinions, feelings, and emotions” with their partner group.\textsuperscript{516} Their motivation also surfaced later on as they interacted

\textsuperscript{513} Artimova, "Yamato Group Background."
\textsuperscript{514} Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 1 Transcript."
\textsuperscript{515} Artimova, ibid.
\textsuperscript{516} Artimova, "Yamato Group Background."
over their American partner group’s interpretation after they received it. Due to the time constraints for their meetings, their group leader made copies of the partner group’s interpretation and gave it to the Yamato participants to take home. When they returned for their next meeting the members had all prepared notes of their observations and questions after reading it through, and as the group talked together it became apparent that the members had spent a significant amount of time on their own interacting with the interpretation. This was a group which was motivated to fully engage in the intercultural communication process even as the participants recognized the way inherent language and culture differences complicated the task.

E: It is quite difficult for me. It is spoken English, it maybe seems to be plain, but they barely finish the sentence and it seems to me that there is much more to be understood from the context as opposed to what is written in the report.

T: I agree it is not an easy thing to read this report.

Er: I could not understand their jokes. 517

Instead of finding this to be a discouraging or embarrassing discovery, however, the group ended up laughing together at the difficulty of understanding their partner group’s humour. The Yamato group also demonstrated a positive approach when faced with the question of why their partners would be interested in participating in the exchange in the first place. After the Yamato group received the American group’s interpretation, it became clear to them that their partner group was comprised of Christians who were very familiar with the Bible and already had definite perspectives on both the Bible as a whole and the meaning of the passage. Yet when the Yamato group’s facilitator asked them why they thought their partner group wanted to participate, the response showed a positive outlook:

T: Maybe they search for something new and fresh… this way they can teach us… and also learn from us… our way of thinking must be very fresh for them […]

N: And they also find the anger of the older brother natural… and maybe we are similar to them, or at least with that girl with the point that it wouldn’t be so easy to return home after all this…

A: Yes, this is maybe the point they read with us… 518

It is this continual focus on the positive in a search for ongoing points of connection that Gudykunst refers to as one of the foundations of successful intercultural communication, and the Yamato participants were able to maintain this pleasant tone even as they expressed disappointment when they discovered that the American group would be unable to complete the final exchange due to the American host home’s father unexpectedly passing.

In terms of communication skills, here, too, the members of the Yamato group displayed a remarkable aptitude. Effective intercultural communication requires participants to find their way through ambiguous situations while maintaining a sense of connection and empathy with their partners, stay flexible in order to adjust to changing situations, and take steps to reduce the level of

517 Artimova, “Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript.”
518 Artimova, ibid.
uncertainty in the communication process. The adolescents in the Yamato group were willing to meet more times than they initially anticipated in order to fully engage with their partner groups’ materials, openly expressed compliments toward the other group in their discussions (i.e. “they sound as easygoing and self-confident people,” “they sound to be satisfied with who they are,” “I liked the discussion”) and were also willing to clearly articulate their questions for the American group.

A: Good, thank you all for your participation, at the end of our reading session, what would it be you would like to ask our partner group?

Er: I would like to know whether they think about God in their daily life, whether they have a particular lifestyle as a consequence they are Christians and also whether, in case they do something wrong, they stop doing it because of God.

N: I would like to know what is Bible for them... do they think that Bible stories are just stories? Do they obey everything that is in the Bible - and as a future lawyer, I would like to know to what extent they observe the biblical law.

E: What is the meaning of the prayer at the beginning, why are they doing this?

As: What is the main reason, why are they interested in the Bible? And what is the reason they believe in it?

All of these factors, covered as they were by this group’s overarching humility, served them well in the intercultural Bible reading process. From the way they phrased their questions to how they offered their opinions, the participants in the Yamato group demonstrated the essence of hospitality and grace and in so doing were able to successfully navigate their intercultural process. As arguably the group which most clearly illustrates Gudykunst’s recommendations for successful intercultural dialogue, it should also be noted that this was a group which in an earlier chapter was seen to have demonstrated a tremendous amount of spiritual growth through the process; in fact, the Yamato group provided the most evidence of spiritual growth of all the groups. They changed from understanding the Biblical passage as a story primarily meant to communicate moral values to accepting their partner group’s view of the parable as an illustration of God’s compassion, began to see themselves in a different light as they recognized the appearance of their own cultural valuations, and transformed in the way they saw their partner group. In the experience of this group, at least, a high level of intercultural openness concurred with a clear display of spiritual growth.

4.5.2 Other Groups with High Intercultural Openness and Evidence of Spiritual Growth

While the Yamato group displayed the most measurable intercultural openness, there were other groups as well whose reading reports showed a similar awareness as they proceeded through their exchanges. The Crossroads group in the Netherlands, for example, was another group which demonstrated the factors that Gudykunst considers necessary for a satisfactory intercultural

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519 Gudykunst, Bridging Differences : Effective Intergroup Communication. p.117
520 Artimova, “Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript.”
521 Artimova, ibid.
communication. For these participants, it was their awareness of their own backgrounds and the
way their personal history affected their communication with their partner group which created a
space for connection through their open-handed approach to the process. When their partner group
in Bolivia asked them to clarify their comments about poverty which surfaced in one of the early
reading reports, one of the Dutch group participants offered a very personal response.

T: And here is a question for Tr... “Tr, what is poverty for you and what do you think of us?”

Tr: Poverty for me would have to be that you don’t have enough to provide for your basic
needs. Housing, clothing, food...you could also be impoverished with your emotions...I’d
have to say that I really appreciate what they said about they’re not poor just because they
don’t have a lot of money because I grew up that way and never knew I was poor. I had a
great childhood, I learned the value of relationship but we never had anything.522

The Crossroads group also was also quick to demonstrate its positive regard for their partners by
expressing in both the initial reading report and after the first exchange had been made how much
they would enjoy a visit with their partner group members in a face-to-face meeting.

Th said we should go visit and the whole group quickly agrees!523

Y: It looks like a great place to visit!

W: We want to do an exchange of people!524

As was noted in the earlier chapter on signs of spiritual growth, an examination of this groups’
experience of the intercultural Bible reading process reveals evidence of spiritual development as
they demonstrated changes in their understanding of the text, themselves, and their partners. Here,
too, it would appear that intercultural openness and spiritual development coincided in this groups’
experience.

The Gateway Girls group and Gateway Boys group, which were also mentioned in the chapter on
discovering spiritual growth, come to mind here as well since both similarly displayed intercultural
openness during the course of their exchange. For the Gateway Girls, mindfulness came through in
their ability to see similarities between their own familial experiences and their partner group’s
descriptions of tensions in their families back at home.

T: Problems that they wrestle with, what did you hear?

A: Jealousy and issues between family, like maybe brothers and sisters.

T: Yeah, which, I think that sounded pretty familiar.525

For the Gateway Boys, their mindfulness was displayed in the way they openly wondered about the
cultural differences between themselves and their partners in everything from having to conduct the

522 Crossroads, "Crossroads Group Reading 3 Transcript."
523 Crossroads, "Crossroads Group Reading 2 Transcript."
524 Crossroads, "Crossroads Group Reading 3 Transcript."
525 GatewayGirls, "Gateway Girls Group Reading 2 Transcript."
exchange in a second language (the Gateway Boys remarked on how difficult it must be for their Asian partners) to their understanding of China’s national population policies.

T: Right, but they did talk about the stress of, in the family...now you know China for a long time had a one child policy in their families.

B: Do they still have that?

T: I don’t know

P: They have to pay fines for extra children. They don’t kill them anymore.

A: We just learned about that in human geography (a school class). Yeah, some people actually still do kill them. I think it’s illegal but some of them still do.

P: You can have more than one child, you just have to pay extra if you do.\textsuperscript{526}

Both the Gateway Boys and Gateway Girls groups expressed their desire early in the process to personally meet their counterparts (since they were aware that the Ben Lippen groups were made up of international students from a boarding school in the same metropolitan area), and the Gateway Boys even went so far as to make suggestions for activities.

B: I think we should get together as their group and our group and kinda hang out. I think we should go to Frankie’s [a local arcade]...

P: Or bowling!

B: We should totally like hang out...

A: We should play paintball with them!

The meeting ends with the group deciding the Ben Lippen students should go to Carowinds [an amusement park] with them in May.\textsuperscript{527}

In May of 2012, after the exchange process had been completed, a barbecue was organized and members from all four groups (although not every member of each group) came together. The teens played volleyball, roasted marshmallows over a campfire, and many of the teens exchanged personal contact information. Then, as has been mentioned earlier, one of the Ben Lippen international students shared how she had recently decided to become a Christian based on her experiences of the preceding year. By the time the gathering was over, the Gateway youth were making plans to do another exchange and hoping to include the Ben Lippen students in a small group Bible study that following school year. One could hardly hope for a better chance to witness how adolescents function in an intercultural setting, and the Gateway adolescents’ behavior would seem to confirm that in those groups’ experience intercultural openness and spiritual growth (which was noted previously in this chapter) went hand-in-hand.

4.5.3 Low Intercultural Openness and Less Evidence of Spiritual Growth

\textsuperscript{526} GatewayBoys, "Gateway Boys Group Reading 2 Transcript."

\textsuperscript{527} GatewayBoys, ibid.
There were also groups, however, which displayed lower levels of intercultural openness along with less evidence of spiritual growth. The Ben Lippen Boys group, for example, gave very few opportunities for connection with their partner group. Beginning with their background report, it seemed extremely difficult for them to give a description of their culture (“Even in Chinese I don’t know how to describe [my city]. It’s like a simple city.”), and, when prompted for further details (“What cultural or historical information would help your partner group understand more about you guys and your life? Is there anything you can think of that would be helpful?”) none of the participants offered any characteristic to assist their partner group in understanding them.\footnote{528} This reticence of the participants to express themselves throughout the exchange was noted by their partner group.

A: I feel like you’re just repeating everything they say.

T: Yeah, because it was so quiet to try to get them to talk, and we’ll talk a little bit more about that.

B: Do they understand most of the questions or do they just not know?

T: What did you notice?

A: It’s very hard to read.

Al: How their sentences are really choppy, they couldn’t really like explain it as well.

P: They couldn’t really express their...

Al: Or they’re just really closed up. Or shy.\footnote{529}

While the Ben Lippen Boys did eventually offer their opinions about the way a Chinese family would respond to the younger son’s return with punishment, and three of the members of this group participated in the end of the process barbecue, their reserve during the exchange process did not display a high level of intercultural openness, and as was explained earlier in this chapter the group also did not display a significant level of spiritual growth.

4.5.4 Observations

At this point there are two observations from the project which seem to be warranted. The first of which is a foundational one which speaks to the future of intercultural Bible reading with adolescents, namely that the adolescents in this project did in fact show the necessary cognitive and emotional skills to successfully navigate the sometimes difficult seas of intercultural communication. While not all the group displayed the same level of aptitude for the process, the fact that these adolescent participants were able to complete the exchanges at all speaks to their capability to function in an intercultural setting. Even the Ben Lippen Boys group, which was noted for its difficulties to display clear markers of a successful intercultural communication process, still had some members who came to the closing barbecue and exchanged contact information with their American counterparts – a sign which would seem to indicate somewhat of a measure of satisfaction.

\footnote{528}{See BenLippenBoys, “Ben Lippen Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript.”}
\footnote{529}{GatewayBoys, “Gateway Boys Group Reading 2 Transcript.”}
with their exchange (one of Gudykunst’s indicators of a successful intercultural communication). The adolescent participants in this project, then, appeared to be able to work their way through the exchanges with a more than adequate amount of fluidity and adaptability.

While this news is positive, however, it still must be taken into consideration that not all of the adolescent groups who began with the project were able to finish the exchange process. There were fourteen groups which turned in initial reading reports, and of those fourteen only ten finished by completing at least two exchanges. Of the four groups which did not move forward, there was one which explicitly expressed a measure of dissatisfaction with the difficulty of getting materials from a partner group (which could be taken as an indication of frustration along Hofstede’s measure of time orientation). The other groups, though, simply stopped communicating, which, as unfortunate as it was, was not completely unexpected. In the TEA project as well, which utilized primarily adult participants, it became apparent that not all of the participating groups would be able to successfully navigate the intercultural Bible reading process. As that project progressed, only around 90 of the roughly 120 groups which began the process went on to the exchange phase and a much smaller number actually saw the process through to the end.530 This result, while somewhat disappointing to those researchers, was not surprising as that study (as did this one) relied primarily on voluntary participants. While it was not assumed in the original TEA project that every group which dropped out of the process did so because of their intercultural experience with their partner group, some clearly did. Likewise for this project, it seems fair to wonder if some of the adolescent groups did not finish due to their own difficulties in navigating cultural expectations and cues as well. While the truthfulness of this fact can never be discovered with certainty, the possibility that groups dropped out from the strains of intercultural communication in and of itself brings a needed restraint to any temptation to speak too glowingly about adolescents as intercultural communicators.

Due to this factor, the second and final observation to be made is that it is would appear to be critical to offer as much help as possible to adolescent participants such that they are able to fully embrace and prepare themselves for this type of intercultural communication process. With the Yamato group’s experience so clearly demonstrating both a high level of cultural awareness and an almost epiphanic experience in their spiritual understanding through the intercultural Bible reading process, one can only wonder if more time spent in preparing the groups along Gudykunst’s lines of mindfulness, positivity, and communication skills would lead to an increase in the appearance and magnitude of spiritual growth among the adolescent participants. For many of the project’s group members this exchange served as their first intercultural experience, and although the protocol materials briefly mentioned cultural factors such as timeliness, language difficulties, and the need for detailed communication, it would appear that more pointed instruction may be helpful to develop a level of self-awareness which could increase the impact of their intercultural reading process. An initial group meeting, for example, structured so as to include role-play and other practical teaching methods to deal solely with intercultural communication before even the first passage is read appears to be warranted to assist the adolescents in experiencing as significant an exchange as possible. Based on the results of this project, then, intentionally increasing the level of the participants’ proficiency in communicating across cultural differences seems to be a reasonable investment in order to promote as significant a return as possible in their spiritual growth.

530 de Wit, “Epilogue.” p.504
4.5.5 The Role of Intercultural Openness: Summary and Conclusion

To summarize, this section presented the Yamato group as the one which demonstrated the most skilful approach to their intercultural exchange while also revealing in their materials the greatest spiritual growth as seen in the way they changed in their understanding of the text, their partner group, and their own understanding of themselves. There were three other groups as well which displayed a significant amount of skill in navigating their intercultural exchanges while also showing spiritual growth, and one group was offered as an example of low intercultural openness with scarce evidence of spiritual growth. These examples, while not to be taken as evidence of a causal link between intercultural openness and spiritual growth, at least indicate a potential interplay between the two factors. When the process is taken as a whole and all of the groups’ experiences are considered, this project’s results would also seem to point to the positive effect that pre-training in intercultural communication would have in the quality of the groups’ experience and ability to grow from their involvement.

While it must continue to be said that this project can provide only a descriptive snapshot of the intercultural Bible reading process with adolescents rather than a prescriptive blueprint, when the process is framed from an angle which includes the component of intercultural openness a picture emerges which seems to suggest a significant dynamic. The TEA project also hinted at the same when describing factors involved in successful exchanges:

Successful interaction requires a basic attitude of openness, trust, vulnerability, and willingness to criticize oneself and to see one’s own faith insights as relative...Confrontation is allowed, but it must be based on trust...The group needs basic knowledge of how cultures operate...to see how these cultural differences can be identified and understood. The analysis of the partner group report will proceed more satisfactorily if this knowledge is available, and if participants are sensitive to the limits of the importance of culture so they are able to involve non-cultural factors into the discussion as well.\footnote{\textit{de Wit}, ibid., p.507}

It would appear that the more participants are able to understand their own cultural characteristics the more ready they will be to appreciate and open themselves to the impact of coming into contact with someone else’s. If the hope is for intercultural Bible reading to function as a catalytic tool for spiritual growth in adolescents, then, there can be little doubt that preparing participants for the intercultural communication component of the process can only increase its effectiveness.

4.6 Adolescent Interpretative Themes

One of the motivations for this study has been to capture and examine the interpretations which the adolescent participants generated as a window for insight into how adolescent readers function as flesh-and-blood readers of the Bible. A later chapter will compare their interpretations to more traditional understandings of the passage, so the purpose for this section, then, is to simply present the three most prominent interpretive themes which surfaced in the vast amounts of material (including reports from groups who were unable to complete the process) by using a comparative tool in the Atlas.ti software. These themes will then be compared to the results of the National Study of Youth and Religion in the U.S (the largest study to ever survey teens on their thoughts about
religion and God) before the section ends by offering modest observations about how adolescents today appear to be interpreting the Bible.

4.6.1 Dominant Themes

Psychological

As the data was examined, it soon became clear that a code was needed which could reflect the fact that the participants seemed to overwhelmingly offer analyses of the parable which dealt primarily in the realm of the human psyche and emotion. For the majority of the groups, the bulk of the meaning of the parable of the prodigal son was to be found in how it spoke to the reality of humanity’s experience of life and struggle without framing that experience in the context of an explicitly Christian or theological interpretation. In fact, as a whole, the groups overwhelmingly offered what came to be coded as a “psychological” interpretation over and above any other interpretations (for a list of all the codes, please see the appendix). A psychological understanding of the parable was offered 32% more than the next closest interpretive theme, and over 73% more than the most voiced theological interpretation. For the majority of reading groups, the parable did not prompt them to offer meanings which pointed explicitly to spiritual truths about God, his relationship with us, nor his specific directives for how we should relate to those around us. Instead, they saw in the dynamics of the parable’s characters the general workings of the human condition. As one Dutch group put it:

On the whole the story is about comfort and warmth of feeling.\textsuperscript{532}

Nestled within this psychological interpretive framework were certain related themes which showed up again and again. The adolescent readers were quick to identify the fundamentals of the family conflict upon which the parable turns and see emotional undercurrents in each of the characters. First, they saw the role of the younger son illustrating selfishness and pride:

I think the younger son kind of betrayed his father; he made his father believe he was dead while he was still alive and wasting his money.\textsuperscript{533}

Oh. Um, he must be pretty prideful and just even for him to ask and be so selfish to ask before, like before it was his time to get his money now so he could like prove that he could like do it on his own.\textsuperscript{534}

The younger son sees his faults and tries to apologize to his father or goes to apologize to his father and that stands out because a lot of time people in these circumstances are too stubborn to see their own faults they see they, they’re just so selfish that they see everybody else with the problem not themselves.\textsuperscript{535}

I think it was probably hard for the younger brother because he... No one likes to admit their mistakes and he went out and made a huge mistake and he’s like ‘Oh. I just spent all my

\textsuperscript{532} Wijmenga, "Wijmenga Group Reading 1 Transcript,” (Oldemarkt, Netherlands: 2012).
\textsuperscript{533} Crossroads, “Crossroads Group Background Report.”
\textsuperscript{534} GatewayGirls, "Gateway Girls Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
\textsuperscript{535} Greene, "Greene Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
money and now I’m working this terrible job and I don’t get fed and I’m here crawling back to my father who’s money I took and tell him that I made a mistake and that I messed up.’ So he’s probably having a problem with that, with just admitting the fact that he messed up.  

The character of the older brother was seen as an illustration of jealousy, but the groups also noted that his displeasure at the celebration for his younger brother was not necessarily without reason. The adolescents were very understanding of his struggle with the father’s treatment of the younger son after he returns, and in fact the participants in these groups most often reported that they saw themselves represented in the story as the older brother even as they recognized his role as the antagonist in the story. The character of the older brother, more so than the others in the parable, struck a chord of understanding in the readers.

[The older brother feels resentment, but maybe there was a reason for why the father never recognized him maybe he was always doing it out of greed since he was the older son so that’s why he never got any gratitude for staying because it was for the wrong reasons. So maybe that’s why he never got anything at the end.  

So it could be that the elder son took the easy route after all. Or the older son thinks to himself: I wish I had gone traveling. For he has to manage the farm after his father dies. He cannot go to places, do the things he likes to do. The younger son will not inherit the farm. It will not be split. So he is more free.

I think I feel some injustice too, when the father celebrates the younger brother, but seemingly... he never appreciates the work and deeds of the older one.

As the last quotation above hints, the role of the father for several of the groups was a bit ambiguous. Many saw the character as representing the need for forgiveness and reconciliation, yet there were also several who interpreted him in a less than positive light.

He was almost like wanting to come back, like missing him in a way, like he must’ve been like really upset that his son left and took that path in life, so whenever he came back he was really happy that he chose to come back and kind of humbled himself.

As a parent I can’t understand the father that lets his son go in the beginning. They have a blood band and according to my experience that is very strong.

Parents try hard to raise up their children well. And when they are of a certain age, they assume that they have spent a lot of time and energy and that their children should know what is correct and what is not... they should know what could ... what could stain, yes, stain

536 Brookwood, “Brookwood Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
537 LaBelle, “Labelle Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
538 Wijmenga, “Wijmenga Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
539 Artimova, “Yamato Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
540 GatewayBoys, “Gateway Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
the family reputation. So in such a case, when a child is still misbehaving, they must feel that they have failed.\textsuperscript{542}

The point here is to recognize that while it is of course legitimate for the participants to offer these observations of characteristics of the parable as simply a story, by and large these observations did not result in the participants applying any type of theological understanding to the passage. The simple truths of the parable were as far as the majority of adolescents went in their discussions, and by doing so they kept their interpretations at the level of a story about a family who has a rebellious son and the repercussions his rebellion and return cause in the family, not as parable which Jesus was delivering for the purpose of illustrating facets of God’s relationship with humanity.

\textit{Pietistic}

The next most common interpretive scheme for the participants which came to the fore was to read the passage in pietistic terms. This code refers to the way participants saw primarily individualistic and devotional applications as the text’s lessons. In other words, the adolescents took the passage’s primary themes as being meant for their own personal understanding of God’s relationship with them. Here again, this code should be understood as standing against a more explicitly theological interpretation which would apply these themes as general and far-reaching descriptions of God’s work of redemption at large in the world.

But I think that that story just focuses a lot on what life is like before you know God and then what life is like once you know God.\textsuperscript{543}

[M]aybe you sometimes think God forgets you, but he is always thinking about you.\textsuperscript{544}

That kinda reminded me how sometimes we mess up and we sin big time but then God’s always there with his arms open ready to take us right back in even after we mess up.\textsuperscript{545}

J: Well it’s kinda confusing cuz you think the father would be, you think the father would be angry at the son for leaving, that he would say, you know kinda like you blew it there’s no second chance go away.

P: That’s how Jesus is with us.

J: Right.

P: Yeah, He celebrates us.\textsuperscript{546}

For the participants in this study, the scope of application of this parable overwhelmingly remained centered in the realm themselves and their own personal and devotional experiences.

\textit{Moralistic}

\textsuperscript{542} Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 1 Transcript."

\textsuperscript{543} Brookwood, "Brookwood Group Reading 1 Transcript."

\textsuperscript{544} Tromp, "Tromp Group Reading 1 Transcript."

\textsuperscript{545} LaBelle, "Labelle Group Reading 1 Transcript."

\textsuperscript{546} GatewayBoys, "Gateway Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript."
Finally, the last interpretive theme to be noted here (and the third most common) was that of “moralism.” That term, as used here, describes the way several of the groups did not see any explicitly spiritual underpinnings for the story, and so offered morals or “life lessons” which they believed captured the central message of the text or of the events in the story.

Life can be unfair but you just have to deal with it.\(^{547}\)

Love people equally.\(^{548}\)

Reacting negatively to a situation isn’t much use, because the situation itself doesn’t change. Just get over it and go on.\(^{549}\)

Kinda don’t be expecting reward for doing the right thing.\(^{550}\)

Here again, while these themes can certainly be argued as being present in the passage, what’s noted is that this moralistic understanding of the passage was more numerous than any overtly theological offerings.

### 4.6.2 A New Christianity?

When taking the data as a whole in view, it becomes apparent that explicitly Christian theology which would reference the work of Jesus, God the Father, the fallen nature of humanity, redemption, etc. was not forefront in the minds of the participants in this project even though all but three of the groups claimed to be a part of a local Christian faith community (the other three were atheist and culturally (rather than practicing) Buddhist). The question then becomes why was there not more evidence of explicit Christian theological perspectives in the reading reports on what is a classically illustrative Christian text? The parable comes straight from the teachings of Jesus in the gospels, the passage is unambiguously Christian, yet the adolescents overwhelmingly did not frame it in light of a specifically Christian context.

In 2005, sociologist Christian Smith published the results of a massive study of American youth called the National Study of Youth and Religion which was conducted from 2001 to 2005. The goal was to discover the characteristics of teens’ religious beliefs, determine how religion affects teen behaviors (especially risky ones), and the overall religious tenor of youth in a “big-picture, in-depth study.”\(^{551}\) By the end of the study, the project had completed 3,370 surveys of English and Spanish-speaking teenagers between 13 and 17 years of age to assemble a nationally representative sample.\(^{552}\)

Among other findings of the study, Smith describes the appearance of a “colonizing” religious belief system which Smith terms “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” As the teenagers in the study voiced it, the main tenets of this faith were:

- A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.

\(^{547}\) BenLippenBoys, "Ben Lippen Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript."
\(^{548}\) BenLippenGirls, "Ben Lippen Girls Group Reading 1 Transcript."
\(^{549}\) Wijmenga, "Wijmenga Group Reading 1 Transcript."
\(^{550}\) GatewayBoys, "Gateway Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript."
God wants people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.

- The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about yourself.
- God is not involved in my life except when I need God to solve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.\(^553\)

The reason Smith describes this belief system as a colonizing force is that the majority of the adolescents called themselves Christians and talked about how they were inheriting the faith system of their parents. They had little ability to talk through or express the tenets of historic traditional Christianity, so for Smith the appearance of such a shift presents a major restructuring of Christianity:

“For, it appears to us, another popular religious faith, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, is colonizing many historical religious traditions and, almost without anyone noticing, converting believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious vision of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness... [W]e can say here that we have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition...\(^554\)

It is important to note that there has been criticism of Smith directed at both his theoretical foundation and his conclusions. Bachand in particular notes that theories of faith and faith development account for a certain amount of shift and change in an individual’s understanding of his or her relationship with God over time, and that such differences should not be seen as implying a lack of authenticity or adequacy. Faith is more than cognitively held beliefs, and as an “activity” of meaning-making there will necessarily be disparities from one life stage to another such that teenagers should not be understood as able to present as articulate a faith as adults. Also, as adolescents walk the difficult road of constructing a sense of independent self, their view of God can be expected to become a subordinate reinforcement which is seen as primarily offering protection and safety in the midst of intrapersonal uncertainty. Thus Smith’s surfacing of the image of God as “therapeutic deity” in a survey of teenagers is important, yet it should be cause more for measured adjustments in religious educational practices rather than sounding an alarm about a “new and insidious faith, one slowly eating away at America’s religious traditions from the inside out.”\(^555\) For Bachand, Smith’s results should be viewed as less of an uncovering of a “new faith” and more appropriately seen as “an in-depth portrait of 21st-century adolescent faith.”\(^556\)

With Bachand’s cautions in mind, however, it still must be noted that ultimately Smith and this study have both noted a lack of ability for adolescents to articulate tenets of Christianity, even when, in the case of this study, they are engaged in an explicitly Christian experience of reading the Bible.


\(^{556}\) Bachand, ibid., p.146-7
Smith puts it, “impressively articulate teens were few and far between. The vast majority simply could not express themselves on matters of God, faith, religion, or spiritual life.”

4.6.3 Adolescents Reading the Bible

Due to the extremely limited scope of this study it would be arrogant at worst and short-sighted at best to offer any definitive conclusions about how adolescents at large are interpreting the Bible as they read, and yet a word or two of observation are certainly justified.

The first observation is to note the similarity between Smith’s discovery of the content of adolescent spirituality as moralistic, therapeutic, and deistic and this study’s tangentially comparable findings. While it is true that in this project none of the adolescent participants explicitly brought up deism as an interpretive viewpoint, one could argue that the participants’ general inability to connect the passage to a larger theological picture of God’s redemptive activity in the world at least leaves the question open as to their own conviction of whether or not there is in fact such a component. Several of the participants expressed that God was personal to them at their point of need (for forgiveness, repentance, and welcoming), but they did not offer any larger global understanding of his workings in or relationship to the world. God, it would appear from the reports, has a very minimal scope of activity that seems to be centered for many of the participants in the study on them and their immediate concerns.

With this similarity duly noted, then the question becomes how can these results be parallel? Five of the 14 groups which submitted interpretations of the parable were American and so could be expected to follow in line with Smith’s conclusions, but it seems statistically unlikely that this fact alone could account for the resemblance in findings. Yet buried in Smith’s analysis lies a potential clue (which even Bachand recognizes) as to why adolescent intercultural Bible readers may reflect a demonstrably American bent in their analysis: “[T]he God of teen faith today is not the God of Matthew Tindal and Thomas Paine, but rather their God who has gotten a serious ‘makeover’ by Leo Buscaglia, Oprah Winfrey, and Self magazine. Times change. So must God, it seems.” By invoking the names of American cultural influences, Smith cracks open the door to a foundational reality that while teens in the world today may not be connected geographically, there is a cultural connection through the globalizing power of media and the internet which allows for cross cultural flows of influence. For better or worse, in the same way that generations past saw Christian missionaries leave their home countries in the western world to spread the news about Christ far and wide, it appears that western culture may be spreading this new vision of spirituality to those same far corners of the globe. When Twitter and Facebook updates become ubiquitous “coins of the realm” which contribute to cultural and political change (as recent history has shown most notably during the Arab Spring of 2011), surely those who study Christianity cannot be surprised that spiritual understandings will spread throughout the connected world as well.

The second observation is more cautionary. While Bachand’s answers to Smith may point out valid adjustments to his theoretical underpinnings, there can be no doubt that the practice of historic

558 Smith and Denton, ibid., p.65
559 See this report from the George Washington University Elliott School of International Affairs, 2011. http://www.gwu.edu/~ieresgwu/assets/docs/ponars/pepm_159.pdf
Christianity among teenagers is in decline. A 2010 study by The Barna Group in the United States showed that small group attendance, prayer, Sunday school participation, donations to churches, and evangelism by Christian teens are at their lowest levels since 1997. A follow-up study published in 2011 by Barna showed that 18-29 year olds who were regular churchgoers in their teens disconnected from Christianity at the rate of 59%. The news is similar in Europe where each generation in every country is less religious than the last when measured by the best available index of religiosity. Even though the rate of decline varies between countries, the fall in religiosity is remarkably constant.

In light of this trend, it is worth noting when the members of the next generation of Christians are unable to coherently voice or interpret broad traditional theological themes as they read the Bible, even in such an admittedly small sample as this project which included self-identifying Christian adolescents from the western, southern, and northern areas of the world. As Smith writes about his American participants, “The net result, in any case, is that most religious teenagers’ opinions and views – one can hardly call them worldviews – are vague, limited, and often quite at variance with the actual teachings of their own religion... This suggests that a strong, visible, salient, or intentional faith is not operating in the foreground of most teenagers’ lives.” While this project cannot and should not make such a definitive claim to the vitality of the faith (or lack thereof) of its Christian participants, there can be no doubt that the results of this research when combined with the larger picture of Christianity in several areas of the world point to the need for more and deeper explorations.

4.6.4 Adolescent Interpretive Themes: Summary and Conclusion

In this section, the majority of interpretive themes which the participants offered for the message of the parable were discovered to be psychological, pietistic, and moralistic rather than theological in nature. These interpretations were then compared to the results of the National Study of Youth and Religion in the United States and seen to be in agreement with the description of their faith which Christian adolescents offered in that much broader research, and the suggestion was made that the globalization of Christianity (or spirituality) from America may be influencing the spiritual understanding of adolescents in other places of the world as well. The overall decline of the practice of Christianity in the West by teens was also noted as a recognized dynamic, and a suggestion was made that further study is needed to determine if the inability of self-identifying Christian adolescents to voice historically Christian theological concepts might be related to its decline. To conclude, this project suggests that even self-described Christian adolescents may not primarily interpret the Bible in the light of any type of traditional or denominational theological understandings. In a global youth culture which has become in so many areas focused on creating a “user-generated” experience, it appears that the Biblical text itself has also been placed in the hands of its users – who are quite content to generate their own meanings.

5. Willing and Able: Adolescent Theology

5.1 Introduction

One of the sub-questions for this research has been to determine how adolescents function in the role of interpreting the text of the Bible, and the last section of the previous chapter presented the primary themes which were offered by the adolescent participants in this project. These themes, it was noted, were not primarily theological in nature, yet it cannot be denied that the reading reports also contained numerous examples of the adolescents offering interpretations that were theological in nature. The goal for this chapter, then, is to discover how their theological interpretations compare to more standard understandings of the text, and to that end the first part of this chapter will present traditional understandings of the Prodigal Son parable to stand in relief against the more clearly theological adolescent interpretations which surfaced in the different groups (including those which were unable to complete the process). The limitation should be noted that necessarily only a few examples of traditional interpretation can be referenced due to space constraints as the scope of this research is not intended to encompass all customary understandings of Luke 15:11-31. The next section of the chapter will present the adolescent interpretations in a similar order and manner to the conventional ones before noting implications from the results.

5.2 Traditional Interpretations of the Parable

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons...” Luke 15:11 (NLT)

So begins one of the most widely recognized of Jesus’ parables, and one which has been the subject of numerous interpretations. A small sampling of approaches includes literary studies (Selles, Kozar, Ramsay, Tannehill, Talbert, Crossan), legal studies (Derrett, Pohlmann), structuralist studies (Patte, Scott, Grelot, Giblin), psychological studies (Tolbert, Via, Hein, King), studies of ancient parallels (Fisher, Foster, Aus, Ernst), and studies which draw out Old Testament motifs (Hofius) to name but a few.564 There is something about this parable of the lost son, and the way in which Jesus presents it in the passage, which appears to almost compel a search for the story’s meaning. Even most modern translations of the Bible insert the heading “The Parable of the Lost Son,” which by its very presence moves the reader toward a particular hermeneutical understanding of the verses.

Some explanations lean heavily toward interpreting the passage as a systematic understanding of the workings and nature of God. Barth, for example, sees tremendous opportunity in the parable for a fresh understanding of Christ’s salvific incarnation. For Barth, the imagery of the younger son going away from his home parallels the journey of the Son of God who goes off into “the far country” of human existence, and when the prodigal in the story returns Barth sees the imagery morphing to reflect the homecoming of the Son of Man.565 Using the parable as a lens, Barth faithfully maintains a close connection with Chalcedon’s “one Person in two natures” concept, while at the same time he

ends up substituting “modern, dynamic, and time-affirming categories for the tradition’s metaphysical inertia” in such a way that humiliation is attributed not to human nature but to God, and glorification not to Christ’s divinity but to his humanity.566

An example of an interpretation which uses literary criticism can be found in the work of Jeremias. His approach is to discover the passage’s meaning by keeping an ever-present awareness that as Jesus told this story he was participating in a wider tradition of “parable-telling” and was thus being influenced by then-contemporary Jewish literary sources. From Jeremias’ perspective, this parable should be primarily understood an illustration intended to show God’s mercy toward sinners while at the same time serving as Jesus’ defense of God’s gracious kingdom.567 The case for this view is further undergirded in Jeremias’ opinion by the story’s close proximity to the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin which in his view serve as complementary didactic tools for the “defense and vindication of the gospel” against the legalistic Pharisees.568

Also important to Jeremias is that the parable rings true with first-century inheritance legalities which would have been very familiar to the legal-minded Pharisees. At this time in first-century Judaism, the younger son does indeed have the right to dispose of his portion of the inheritance early, and for Jeremias this reality serves to heighten the power of the father’s gracious reception such that his gifts and hospitality to the younger son “manifest tokens of forgiveness and reinstatement.”569 Finally, Jeremias is convinced that Jesus leaves the parable open-ended because “He still has hope of moving [the Pharisees] to abandon their resistance to the gospel, he still hopes that they will recognize how their self-righteousness and lovelessness [sic] separate them from God.”570

In general, however, most interpretations of the prodigal son story tend to stay in a somewhat clustered set of themes that will be familiar to any student of the Bible who has read a commentary on the passage, participated in some type of Bible study that was dealing with the story, or heard the text preached on a Sunday morning. So now it is to those more widely disseminated interpretations (as represented by Leifeld and Bock) that this chapter will turn to set a benchmark against which the adolescents’ interpretations may be compared.

One of the first things Leifeld addresses is the identity of Jesus’ audience, who are specifically named in verses 1-2; “Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (NIV) For Leifeld, this is an important referent for the lost son story since the Pharisees’ reaction would be similarly “sour” like the older brother who could not “comprehend the meaning of forgiveness.”571 Jesus is taking direct aim at the proud religiosity of those who would claim heritage and status as the basis for their reception into God’s arms, and so he positions the two sons in the

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568 Jeremias, ibid., p.124
569 Jeremias, ibid., p.131
570 Jeremias, ibid., p.132
story at opposite poles in the same way the Jews would see their positioning in reference to Gentiles. Leifeld also sees Jesus as identifying Himself with God as the father in the story who maintains a loving attitude toward the lost son and receives him with open arms as a repentant sinner, thereby setting an example that all who want to reflect God’s heart must rejoice when a sinner comes home.  

Bock also is sure to reinforce that the parable of the lost son must be interpreted in the light of its positioning with the two preceding parables, and sees the linkage specifically reinforced not only by the fact that they share the same audience, but also by Jesus’ use of the words “lost” and “found” coupled with “rejoice” and “celebrate” in all three texts. Bock also notes that the parable of the prodigal son should be seen as a more developed story than the previous two since it functions as an example story akin to the Good Samaritan passage in Luke 10:25-37 and shares that story’s reversal of cultural expectation of who should function as the hero.

As to the details of the story itself, Leifeld notes the cultural correctness of the possibility for the younger son to indeed request and receive one-third of the estate, leaving two-thirds (or the “double portion”) to be held for the older/oldest, although the inheritance could be transferred while the father still lived. Bock see the singleness of the younger son as an indication that he is still in his late teens, and notes that the Greek term used for the inheritance which the younger son requests is “the life” (ton bion), reinforcing the inappropriateness of the younger son’s request to his still-living father. Still, the father grants his son’s unwise request and in Bock’s view serves as a picture of “God letting a sinner go his own way.”

Both interpreters note that the younger son’s actions after he leaves home would be scandalous, with Leifeld seeing the New International Version’s “wild living” as a vividly appropriate English rendering. Bock remarks that the text’s use of diaskorpizo further emphasizes that the son has squandered his inheritance as surely as if he had taken it and literally just scattered the money out for anyone to take. After a famine strikes, the son takes a job feeding pigs, which for Leifeld indicates that the location of the “distant country” was apparently outside strictly Jewish territory since pigs are unclean and pig farms would not be allowed in a Jewish settlement. Block also notes the uniquely dishonorable status to which the younger son has now fallen; “[A]s a Jew working for a Gentile and caring for swine, he can sink no lower.”

Though employed, the young son still suffers from hunger since Jesus says, “He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating,” and to Leifeld the inclusion of the phrase, “but no one gave him anything” at the end of the verse indicates that the son is completely and utterly alone.

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572 Leifeld, ibid.
574 Bock, ibid., p.256
577 Bock, ibid., p.259
579 Leifeld, ibid., p.983
580 Leifeld, ibid., p.259
in his state of suffering neglect. For Bock, the fact that the unclean animals are better off than the son brings a powerful focus on the abject lostness of the sinner living apart from a relationship with God.\textsuperscript{581}

When the son realizes his true condition, the Greek phrase is \textit{eis heauton de elthon} (lit., “came to himself”). While a common idiom, this phrase in Leifeld’s view may be meant to carry with it in this story a distinctly Semitic idea of repentance since, for him, there can be no doubt that “certainly repentance lies at the heart of the words the son prepared to tell his father. The motivation for his return was hunger, but it was specifically to his ‘father’ (v.18) that he wanted to return.\textsuperscript{582} Bock sees in the son’s plan of action the expression of “the humility of one who turns to the Father. Sinners have nothing to rely on except the Father’s mercy. They recognize that they have failed and can claim no blessing.\textsuperscript{583} But Leifeld cautions against seeing the parable as solely allegorical since the son’s rehearsed apology includes telling his father that his sins have also been against “heaven.” This separation means that the father and God have distinct roles in the story, and although the father in the story does portray the characteristics of a loving, heavenly Father the Bible is clear that God is not a heavenly Father to all.\textsuperscript{584}

For Bock, the return of the son shows an extremely significant break from “all Middle Eastern protocol; no father would greet a rebellious son this way...Literally, the father drapes himself on his son’s neck (v. Luke 15:20 \textit{epepesen epi ton trachelon}).\textsuperscript{585} The son is ready to give up all familial claims and work like any other hired hand for his room and board, yet the father is not willing to accept him as anything other than his son. Leifeld mentions that because his father saw him “while he was still a long way off” many interpreters assume an implication that the father had been waiting for him, perhaps searching for his appearance with hopeful scans of the distant road. Even the fact that the father had “compassion” on him assumes some knowledge of the son’s pitiful condition.\textsuperscript{586}

In any case, before the son can finish his confession, his father cuts him off and begins the process of restoration. Bock sees in the father’s gifts and planned celebration a complete reinstatement of the boy from destitution back to sonship as a picture of “what God’s grace does for a penitent sinner.\textsuperscript{587} Leifeld examines each of the gifts separately to posit that the son actually was given more status by the father than he had before he left. The robe was a ceremonial robe that would have been given to an honored guest, the ring signified a renewed authority, and the sandals were those that only a free man (as opposed to a hired man or servant) could wear.\textsuperscript{588} The decision to slaughter and eat the fattened calf, which would typically be saved for a special occasion like the Day of Atonement, heightens the listener’s understanding that the celebration will be a large and boisterous one.\textsuperscript{589}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{582} Leifeld, “Luke.” p.984
\bibitem{584} Leifeld, “Luke.” p.984
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When it comes to understanding the older son’s response to the younger brother’s homecoming, Leifeld sees in his initial absence (v.25) perhaps a hint of the difficult relationship that is to be revealed with his father, or perhaps it is meant to infer a complete and total lack of attention to his younger brother’s situation (in the same way that the Pharisees would be unconcerned with the spiritual standing of Gentiles). Bock points out that Jesus is using physical locality in the story to emphasize the conflict that will become the turning point of the parable; “The brother who had been on the outside is now on the inside, while the brother who had been on the inside is now on the outside. Again Jesus’ words echo, The last has become first, and the first has become last.”

Leifeld notes that the father responds the same way to the older brother as he had to the younger as he “went out” and “pleaded” with the older son rather than scolding him, yet now he is met with a far different response. The older son’s “Look!” (v.29) is an extremely disrespectful way to address an elder, much less one’s own father. His use of the word “slaving” is a demeaning reference to his duties as the elder son, and “you never gave me” reveals a simmering resentment about the way his father has treated him. “This son of yours” avoids acknowledging that the prodigal is his own brother (which his father corrects by saying “this brother of yours” in v.32), and the older son insultingly says the younger squandered his money on prostitutes although there has been no mention of that in the description of the younger sons’ activities.

For Bock, the scene shows the older son’s self-righteousness and self-absorption, and “recalls the synagogue leader’s complaint that someone had been healed on the Sabbath.”

Both interpreters see tenderness in the way the father speaks to the older son after such an angry and inappropriate outburst. Leifeld notes that the father offers “words of affirmation, not weakness,” and by using the phrase “we had to celebrate” (euphranthenai...edei lit. “it was necessary”) Jesus speaks through the character to reinforce the necessity and urgency of welcoming sinners who repent. Bock makes mention of the fact that the story leaves the listener hanging with no resolution as to what the older son will do when faced with the choice to go in and celebrate or remain out in the fields, implying that “Jesus’ listeners are to contemplate their own response as well.”

For Bock, the parable is “almost allegorical,” where the father pictures God, the prodigal symbolizes those who are lost, and the elder brother symbolizes the Pharisees and scribes (here he specifically refers to Jesus’ listening audience in v.1). The major issue is repentance before God and God’s willingness to forgive, and the parable becomes “Jesus’ final defense of the offer of good news in the face of official criticism of his association with sinners.” Repentance means a complete and absolute reversal of status for those willing to come to God, and it is God’s grace that leads him to pursue sinners. Also for Bock, it’s important to note that reconciliation is not only between God and the individual but also between the individual and the community.

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596 Bock, ibid., p.258
597 Bock, ibid., p.261
In Leifeld’s estimation, the parable is an eloquent response to those who would question Jesus’ mission, and by positioning the two sons in an oppositional relationship where the lost son rises and the elder brother falls, Jesus keeps the focus on the central character of the father (with whom he identifies). Jesus has come to seek and to save those who are lost, and the accomplishing of his mission should create joy in those who share in the Father’s compassion. Yet Leifeld cautions against pushing the allegorical understanding of the passage past the point of propriety: “The parable is one of the world’s supreme masterpieces of storytelling. Its details are vivid; they reflect actual customs and legal procedures and build up the story’s emotional and spiritual impact. But the expositor must resist the tendency to allegorize the wealth of details that gives the story its remarkable verisimilitude. The main point of the parable – that God gladly receives repentant sinners – must not be obscured.”

5.3 Adolescent Interpretations of the Parable

The following section will present the theological findings of the groups en masse, with no attempt made to distinguish at which point in the process they arrived at their conclusions or whether the intercultural Bible reading process itself had an impact upon their discoveries. The reason for this singular focus is first of all due to the fact that the question of how the adolescents arrived at their conclusions is asked of the material in a previous section which went into great detail about the actual mechanics of adolescent groups in the intercultural Bible reading process. Secondly, the goal for the following discussion is to surface theological interpretations which were voiced by the adolescent groups in order for those interpretations to stand in comparison to the traditional theological observations referenced earlier in this chapter. In order to facilitate this comparison, the material generated by the adolescents will therefore be presented in roughly the same thematic order as the discussion of the previous section. It must also be kept in mind that this section is bringing to light what has already been noted as the slight amount of theological reflection which the adolescent participants engaged in during the course of the exchanges. Yet while there may not have been as many theological offerings generated by the groups as there were psychological, for example, the data provides a valuable insight into the way adolescents understand what can be taken as specifically Christian content.

To begin, the question should be asked if any of the adolescents in the groups understood the setting and context of the parable. Were they aware that the text of the prodigal son was in fact linked by placement in Luke’s gospel to the preceding stories of the lost coin and the lost sheep? Were they mindful of the fact that the audience to whom Jesus was speaking could have implications for interpreting the parable? Several of the groups were quick to acknowledge the importance of setting the parable in its context by recognizing Jesus’ first audience, and others even took into account how the passage itself is placed beside the other stories of lost things in Luke’s gospel. An interesting note is that the groups had not been given specific direction to look for these characteristics in any of the provided protocol materials.

In the Netherlands, a participant summed up his understanding of the parable’s context in the report by saying, “I get the feeling that it’s more about the people that listen/bystanders than about the

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story itself.”

In Malta, the group was quick to recognize that Jesus was telling the story to the Pharisees to try to convict them of their behaviour:

G: Like from the outside they’re good but from the inside they’re doing very bad things. Although the people didn’t know, the other people about the Pharisees. God knew what they were, Jesus knew what they were doing inside. So he was preaching to them.

Another Dutch group also recognized that Jesus was pointing the parable toward the “tax collectors and Pharisees” to let them know to “come back to God or Jesus, then be forgiven...everyone gets fair treatment.” A group in the U.S. saw it as a kind of “inside joke” where Jesus was “talking to the Pharisees” and “kind of aiming it” at them. A participant in the Crossroads group brought up an even larger context by telling the group that, “There are lots of parables that connect to this, though. Like the one with the sheep, the lost lamb. He will try to find the one that is lost despite the rest that are not lost.

In a U.S. group, a youth voiced a wider understanding that the parable should be seen as an application of Jesus’ message to the Pharisees about the coming Kingdom’s acceptance of the Gentiles.

Z: I think that... pretty much the whole passage is... allegorical, or not meant to be taken literally. A parable was like a Jewish form of teaching - it’s not like this actually happened or anything. It’s putting it in terms for us to understand, and I think what Jesus was saying was not ‘the lost will be found’ but it’s more like him saying that the Jews were God’s firstborn and they were his first children. The Gentiles are all the people that weren’t God’s chosen people [who] were just off doing their own thing and ignoring God. And they realized like, “We’re sinners!” and they’re coming back and, “We want to be your children now.” The Jews are getting angry because they’re [saying], “No, we’re your chosen people, we’re your firstborn!” God’s [saying], “No, they’re the church. You had your chance and now they’re coming to me.”

T: Okay, so do you see like that as a conflict in the text?

Z: I think it’s more of just... calling the church into being. Saying the Jews have had their chance and they ignored the Messiah and now the Gentiles have accepted it and it’s their turn.

Many of the groups commented on the unusual nature of the younger son’s request for his share of the inheritance before his father’s death, and recognized that it reveals a problem in the relationship between the son and the father. One Dutch group participant noted, “It’s kind of rude to ask for your heritage/share while your father is still alive. Doesn’t it mean here that the youngest son wishes his

599 Tromp, “Tromp Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
600 Malta, “Malta Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
601 Crossroads, “Crossroads Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
602 LaBelle, “Labelle Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
603 Crossroads, “Crossroads Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
604 Greene, “Greene Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
father to die?" while another Netherlands participant said, “It is very rude of the young son to ask his part of the inheritance even before his father died. We couldn’t imagine doing it ourselves. It is too disrespectful.” One of the Chinese participants noted that the younger son asking for his inheritance amounted to a conflict between the father and son, and a Japanese participant said, “I also think the way younger son asks for money is weird. I think it could not happen in Japan, such a thing.”

Some groups even made mention of the fact that the elder son would have inherited more due to his status as the first born. This was from a participant in a U.S. group:

BR: Like when the younger son left, he left with what he would have gotten once the father died plus according to Jewish background, history wise, the first born son would’ve gotten a majority anyways, so...

Interestingly, when it came to discussing the younger son’s actions after he left home, not many of the groups attempted to provide a detailed discussions about his loss of status or how he wasted his money, nor did they seem to apply a spiritual or allegorical lens to his low situation. One group did notice, however, the irony of a Jewish boy having to spend his days taking care of pigs.

Malta

G: And about the uh, because Jewish can’t eat pigs and he was going to eat from the bowl of the pigs. That’s a conflict, sort of.

C: That’s a conflict, explain that.

G: Because in Jewish culture they think that pigs are dirty, in the Old Testament. So they can’t eat them. But he was, the younger son, to how do I say it?

S: To survive?

G: He was in a bad situation so he had to eat out of the pig’s bowl.

C: It just highlights the fact that he, how bad it had gotten for him.

There was much discussion in the groups when the story says the younger son decided to go back to his father, and although many of the groups equated his realization with spiritual repentance, many were questioning whether or not his motivation was actually a change of heart. As one participant in

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605 Tromp, “Tromp Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
606 Wijmenga, "Wijmenga Group Reading 1 Transcript."
607 BenLippenBoys, "Ben Lippen Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript."
608 Pepina Artimova Group, “Yamato Reading 1 Transcript,” (Sapporo, Japan: 2010).
609 Greene, "Greene Group Reading 1 Transcript."
610 Malta, "Malta Group Reading 1 Transcript."
the U.S. said, “When the younger brother came back home I was wondering if he really knows what he did or he just wants to be home.”\(^\text{611}\) This sentiment was echoed in a Dutch group as well.

T: I have a question. The son decides to go home again when he sees like the servants get more food than he gets, and then he thinks like, okay I’m going back. And then he says take me as one of your servants, right? I’m wondering why does he come back, is it for, because he understands that he needs food or something?\(^\text{612}\)

As has already been noted, a few groups even wondered if his motivation for returning was necessarily central to the story’s message since, “God can use physical [problems], like if you’re really sick or something, that can get you to turn back to God...it’s however God decides to do it.”\(^\text{613}\)

One U.S. participant, when asked if the father cared about the younger son’s motivation, said, “He just wanted his son back.”\(^\text{614}\)

Many of the groups noted the significance of the father running to the younger son when he sees him in the distance as a sign of his love for the boy, and a few also read the father’s ongoing concern into the way the parable says he saw the son returning while he was still a long way off.

China

E: A father’s supposed to have unconditional love for his son, so if you’ve never seen him for a couple of years I think he would run out...\(^\text{615}\)

India

The father running to his son symbolizes the welcome home.\(^\text{616}\)

Netherlands

T: The waiting can also mean that this father is always open and inviting.\(^\text{617}\)

When it came to interpreting the father’s welcome of the younger son, his brief conversation, and then the request for the gifts of reinstatement, some of the groups were quick to notice both the extravagance of the reception and the way in which the father did not need to hear the younger son’s apology. A Maltese participant noted, “That’s a good picture. He even throws the robe on him, gives him the ring. Right, I mean, he’s not holding back. Think about that with God and you, anytime you turn to him, he’s not holding back...”\(^\text{618}\) A Dutch adolescent said, “Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son and embraced him and kissed him. That’s already there, that already
shows that he really welcomed him back even though he didn’t even know the repent. He wasn’t
even told, the son didn’t even tell him that he was sorry about it.”  

The groups also noticed the way the parable intimates a difficult relationship in the exchange
between the father and the older son after he hears the party and comes to the house from working
out in the fields. Many expressed that a root of the older son’s disrespectful attitude was jealousy.
As one group in the Netherlands wrote, “The eldest brother talks about his brother as ‘that son of
yours’, instead of as ‘my brother’, which is remarkable. The youngest brother does all the bad things
and in the end the oldest one is in trouble.”  

Here, too, an adolescent from China regarded the
relationship between the older son and the father as a “conflict,” and a participant in the U.S.
categorized the older brother’s problem as, “Human greed - cuz I think the brother wants all the
attention and when his other brother comes back the father just wants to shower him with feast and
all the nice clothes and robes and jewelry.” and others had general questions about the purity of
his motivation for staying with his father. Other participants even wondered about the motivation of
the older son to stay with his father:

United States

B8: The older brother and the father because how the older brother feels resentment but
maybe there was a reason for why the father never recognized him maybe he was always
doing it out of greed since he was the older son so that’s why he never got any gratitude for
staying because it was for the wrong reasons. So maybe that’s why he never got anything at
the end.  

Netherlands

A: But who is in the end the lost son - the youngest or the oldest?

When it came to summarizing the major themes of the parable, the groups offered several variations
on the idea that the story highlights God’s acceptance of us even though we, too, have turned our
backs on him and deserted our relationship with him. A Dutch participant sums it up this way:

B: It could also be, the whole story just to say that if you, if there are sins, or you do
something that goes contrary to God’s will he can still forgive you if you come back if you’re
really, really repenting he can always still just forgive you.  

Others variations included seeing the father’s party for the younger son as a picture of how Jesus
“celebrates us,” or a “real-life example for people to understand how God’s grace works.”  

619 Crossroads, “Crossroads Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
620 Wijmenga, “Wijmenga Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
621 BenLippenBoys, “Ben Lippen Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
622 Greene, “Greene Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
623 LaBelle, “Labelle Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
624 Tromp, “Tromp Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
625 Crossroads, “Crossroads Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
Bolivia

A: The return of the child to the father, is an example, God forgives us when we repent, even going on in our daily lives with our parents. 628

United States

GIR: I think one thing that stands out to me is the unconditional love in here. And I think what Jesus was talking about in here is God’s unconditional love for his children. I mean, the lost, the lost people are still loved just as much as the people who have never made a big mistake in their life. 629

Malta

C: Ok, why does the father bring you comfort?

R: Because you can sin but still God will accept you. Because the son when he went and he realized he knew that he sinned in a way. So when he went back he told his father to forgive him and so that shows how when we get saved. You know that you are a sinner and you tell God to forgive you and you accept Jesus Christ.

M: In a way it’s showing salvation. It’s encouraging because you know that God is always there, that’s what’s encouraging about it. So, if something bad happens you can always turn to God.

C: Mm hmm. Think God would throw you a feast?

M: Maybe. He would be happy that you went to him not to other things to evil things. So, I think that he would be very happy. He would make his own feast. 630

Many of the groups also went beyond a general understanding of the spiritual themes of the passage and suggested somewhat allegorical interpretations for the parable. The group in Malta had a unique perspective by wondering if “the two sons represent humanity sort of. Some people accept and some people just . . . because the younger son accepted and he was forgiven by the father… But like for the older son it can also like represent a follower of Christ but like he never made a commitment cause like he’s just there. It’s like someone goes to church there but does nothing...” 631 A participant in the U.S. saw the story as representing the need for her to act as the father (“and so I need to accept the people that’ve been lost and to accept them whether they’ve been bad or not”), the younger brother (“whereas if I’ve done anything bad I need to come home to God”), and the older brother as well (“I need to humble myself and I need to ask forgiveness and know I’ll be

626 GatewayBoys, “Gateway Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
627 GatewayGirls, “Gateway Girls Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
628 Quispe, “Quispe Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
629 Brookwood, “Brookwood Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
630 Malta, “Malta Group Reading 1 Transcript.”
631 Malta, ibid.
accepted...so it’s kinda like you can be three people in the story.”). 632 Others saw the father in the story as representing Jesus. 633

It must be remembered, too, that the adolescent groups also offered other explanations, interpretations, and applications of the passage that did not fit so neatly into the traditional understandings of the parable. Some of these insights were already discussed in the section which dealt with the general interpretive themes, yet for the purposes of this discussion it’s interesting to note how in some instances the vocabulary of Christian theology is adapted for what are predominantly moralistic interpretations. One Asian/International group saw the main lessons of the story as “love people equally,” “people have sin,” and “everybody needs forgiveness.” 634 The Japanese group listed endurance, kindness, and “it is important to come back to your senses” as main themes. 635

5.4 Implications

It appears that asking for adolescent interpretations of the Bible could place theology at a bit of a crossroads. If the discovery is that adolescent interpretations share similarities with more traditional, formal, and/or academic interpretations, does that mean adolescents should be seen more as willing recipients and reflectors of a grand faith tradition than as an interpretive group in their own right? Is it merely that they are parroting back what they’ve been taught in their own faith communities? Could it be that they have “caught” their interpretive understandings from their religious environment without much conscious processing, that they are trapped in their own community’s reading tradition? One would be remiss not to at least consider the possibility of such a process at work after seeing (as this project has) how adolescent interpreters in this project followed so closely to the traditional understandings of the passage.

Yet there are subtle and significant factors which suggest that understanding adolescent interpretations as only recitations of what they’ve heard elsewhere as too reductionist. In this project, while it’s true that the groups’ explicitly theological interpretations did match up quite closely to traditional understandings of the passage’s themes, it can also be argued that they displayed more interpretive honesty than the traditional approaches with their observation that the younger son’s motivation for returning is not at all addressed by Jesus in the parable, and thus cannot be legitimately assumed as heartfelt repentance. It should also be noted that, to them, this understanding actually heightened their awareness of the father’s (thus God’s) love for the lost boy. In their words, “He just wanted his son back.” 636 These adolescents also noted several moralistic lessons which, although not explicitly theological, are still significant themes which tend to be overlooked in contemporary discussions of the passage. Is it any less Christian to notice that the parable speaks to the need for brothers to work through their jealousy or the importance of fathers making sure their children know they are loved and valued? While these adolescents may not be able to offer interpretations which are as multi-dimensional and nuanced in their understanding as

632 GatewayBoys, "Gateway Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript."
633 BenLippenBoys, "Ben Lippen Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript."
634 BenLippenBoys, ibid.
635 Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 1 Transcript."
636 Greene, "Greene Group Reading 1 Transcript."
Barth’s, the fact that the participant groups asked such imaginative, creative, and honest questions of the text speaks well of their ability to wrestle intuitively with the Biblical text, and when one considers that the different groups in the project were representational of the four hemispheres of the globe (north, south, east, and west) and came from different religious backgrounds (two of the groups identified themselves as non-Christian, and one identified itself as Buddhist), the implications become even more intriguing.

The reality is that ordinary readers of the Biblical text have an ability to create a significant impact both on the established religious institutions and society at large, and the age of the readers does not need to be seen as a deterrent. In fact, one needs only look at the story of Josiah in the Old Testament to discover how a youthful interpretation of the Bible can have a tremendous impact on the theology and praxis of a community. Josiah began at 16 years of age “to seek the God of his father David,” and when he was 20 years old he began ridding Judah and Jerusalem of all of the pagan high places of worship, Asherah poles, carved idols and cast images (2 Chronicles 34:3). When he was 26 years old his encounter with the Book of the Law resulted in a complete and total transformation of Judah, resulting in such a complete restoration of the worship of God that “not since the days of the judges who led Israel, nor throughout the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah, had any such Passover been observed.” (2 Kings 22:22)

One of the goals of this research has been to discover how adolescents function in the role of ordinary readers, and based on the preceding sections of this chapter it must be admitted that the participants in this project appear to be quite ready for the task. The same naïve, interpretive power which Josiah displayed can indeed be found in this generation of adolescents, who as of today are the largest identifiable population grouping on the planet. Adolescents, therefore, as an identifiable set of ordinary readers should perhaps not be seen so much by traditional theological institutions as the “church of tomorrow,” but rather an interpretive presence of the Kingdom of God for today which, with a gentle yet consistent pressure, might be able to provide a wedge to open up formal understandings and keep the pursuit of theological reflection from stagnation. This, then, is the promise of “reading with,” where Biblical scholars can be involved with adolescent readers such that both have their realities changed because of their time spent together in the Bible.

5.5 Adolescent Theology: Summary and Conclusion

This chapter examined the way the parable of the Prodigal Son has traditionally been interpreted and noted that in general the adolescent participants in this project functioned well as “ordinary readers” who could simultaneously reflect the traditions of their faith communities while at the same time voice significant and helpful moments of departure from traditional understandings of the passage. This ability to serve as both mirror and window provides a glimpse into the way in which adolescent interpreters can bring valuable insight into their faith community’s understanding of the Bible with renewing power. The next chapter, then, turns to address whether the participants in this study were also able to benefit from a confrontation with the “Other” upon which intercultural Bible reading is based.
6. Adolescents in Intercultural Bible Reading and the “Other”

6.1 Introduction

From the beginning, this project was initiated with a suspicion that adolescence, as a developmental life stage, has inherent characteristics which would allow adolescent participants to benefit from the clash of perspectives which sits at the core of the process of intercultural Bible reading. As was examined in the earlier chapter on adolescent development, youth in this life stage are changing from primarily concrete cognitive processing to a more adult development which utilizes abstract reasoning. This shift in cognition is significant in that it opens the opportunity for adolescents to develop meaningful self-understanding through experiences with people, things, and ideas that are new and unknown: novel outside influences which the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas refers to as the “Other.” Due to its very nature, the process of intercultural Bible reading provides several opportunities for this type of contact with that which is outside of the participant’s own experience whether it is through the communal nature of each group’s own meetings, their communication and exchanges with the partner group, their interaction with the Biblical text itself, the different devotional elements which make up their meetings, and so on. As the TEA project discovered, many participants in intercultural Bible reading interact in a manner which involves yet transcends a solely intellectual pursuit of the text’s meaning, and several report their experience to be a deeply spiritual interaction which has as its catalyst this contact with the Other which manifests itself in the groups’ exchanges. This section, then, will briefly present the concept of the Other as Levinas and Lacan develop the term, posit in a few words how the idea has a tangential yet significant connection with adolescent development, examine this project’s data for an example where contact between the adolescent participants and the Other appears to have occurred, and then finish by offering recommendations on ways to increase these types of significant confrontations for adolescent participants in the intercultural Bible reading process.

6.2 The Concept of the “Other”

Any effort at a full examination of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas’ development of his idea of the Other would obviously be too large an undertaking for the purposes of this discussion, yet nevertheless a word here is helpful to assist in providing a perspective for recognizing one of the powerful dynamics of the intercultural Bible reading process: the way it identifies, centralizes, and intensifies the participants’ contact with catalytic differences which exist between the groups’ perspectives. Levinas’ work connects with ICB at this point precisely because it is his work which attempts to explain why the belief that all truths and values can be “known” with finality and surety acts as a presumptive falsehood which unnecessarily reduces the human experience of Being. Although there may always be a temptation to believe that all of reality can fit into one’s own experience (a construct which Levinas calls the Same), there are undeniable and recognizable moments for every living person where the truthfulness of that which is outside the force, control, or experience of the individual has to be recognized and accepted. Levinas’ experiences in World War II and his personal history convinced him of this fact, and for him those types of confrontations

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637 de Wit, “Objectives and Backgrounds.” p.7-8
served as examples of contact with the Other which he later understood as critical junctures which provide the opportunity for personal change.638

Levinas illustrates one example of this type of contact through the simple fact of interacting with another person: "To begin with the face as a source from which all meaning appears, the face in its absolute nudity...is to affirm that being is enacted in the relation between men."639 One can have a relationship with another person which is based on an individual’s own wants or desires, or perhaps there may be a certain functional role for the other person to perform so that in this way he or she can become “useful.” When one interacts with another person in this way, Levinas see this as a destructive appropriation and alteration of that other person into spiritual or material “property” because the connection is ultimately egocentric and narcissistic. But when that other person “breaks, pierces, destroys the horizon of [...] egocentric monism, that is, when the other’s invasion of my world destroys the empire in which all phenomena are, from the outset, a priori, condemned to function as moments of my universe,” then the relationship has moved out of the sphere of one’s own personal control to leave one standing face-to-face with the Other.640 No matter what happens after, even if there is no further physical or relational contact (Levinas even speaks of a forcible removal of the Other), nothing can revert one’s understanding to what it was before; an enduring mark has been left by this stranger from the “outside.”

The other transcends the limits of (self-)consciousness and its horizon; the look and the voice that surprise me are “too much” for my capacity of assimilation. In this sense, the other comes toward me as a total stranger and from a dimension that surpasses me. The otherness of the other reveals a dimension of “height”: he/she comes “from on high.”641

For Levinas, it is only the “absolutely foreign alone [which] can instruct us. And it is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me—refractory to every typology, to every genus, to every characterology, to every classification—and consequently the term of a ‘knowledge’ finally penetrating beyond the object.”642 Through the power of interpersonal interaction, the Other breaks through and brings the realization that there is more to the experience of reality than can be individually held or possessed, and existence can never truly be the sole property of self alone.

When attempting to discern how the presence of the Other makes itself known in the experience of reading a text (such as is the case in ICB), it is Levinas’ understanding of the persistence of alterity which here becomes immensely helpful. In the reading process, it is the text that becomes (to borrow Levinas’ terms) an entity or “face” which is able to provide polyphonic dimensions and sustain a reserve of interpretive meaning as was discussed in the chapter highlighting the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur. The reader in the process of reading, then, becomes necessarily confronted within an occasion for unyielding contact with that which is Other when interacting with the text. For Levinas, goodness is always to be found in a pluralism which is “proceeding from me to the other, in which first the other, as absolutely other, can be produced, without an alleged lateral view upon this movement having any right to grasp of it a truth superior to that which is produced in

638 Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, Purdue University Series in the History of Philosophy (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue Research Foundation, 1993). p.19
640 Peperzak, To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.20
641 Peperzak, ibid., p.20
642 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, p.75
Anything that closes down the open nature of a text or restricts a reader’s input, therefore, should be avoided as both actions become movements toward Levinas’ concept of Totality which, as an act of reduction, carries inherently negative ethical implications. When viewed in this way, textual interpretation reveals itself to be an intensely ethical process which must be evaluated in accord with how many voices, old and new, are allowed to interact freely in confrontation with the text. Because no reader is replaceable, a diversity of both readers and their readings becomes a necessary component for unlocking the ethically transformational power resident in sacred texts such as the Bible, a text which Levinas saw specifically as a potential well-spring of encounter with the Other.

Jacques Lacan, in his work as a psychoanalyst, provides another yet similar perspective to Levinas in his affirmation of the need for the Other as a necessarily oppositional force for the development of successful identity. While, as Fryer states, Levinas sees that contact with the Other promotes a desire to substitute oneself for the other, in Lacan’s understanding the construct of self comes from the Other by means of an instinct of internal aggression and competition. In a corollary fashion to Freud’s understanding of narcissism as a formative function, Lacan sees a primary instinct of “aggressivity” which “determines the formal structure of man’s ego and of the register of entities characteristic of his world.” This aggression comes due to the necessity for the self to maintain independence, and after contact where there has been identity with and desire for the Other it is then that the struggle for self emerges from which “develops the triad of others, the ego and the object.” It is through the tension inherent in this intrusion and response dynamic to the Other, then, that Lacan sees identity emerge. Without the influence of that which is outside the realm of internally controlled appropriation, the non-self, there can no boundary formed which gives shape to the self. Thus it is that the subject must ask someone else to serve as the Other in order to know him or herself. Although he utilizes a different methodology from Levinas’ ethical constructions, Lacan’s psychoanalytic approach both affirms and expands on Levinas’ conclusion that contact with the Other has an intrinsic and necessitated value in the development of identity.

6.3 Adolescence and the “Other”

The focus now turns to address whether adolescents are capable of negotiating and benefitting from experiences with the Other in the epiphanic sense which Levinas both describes and encourages. Is it even possible for someone in this life-stage to have the level of self-awareness which would allow him or her to recognize (and change from) the cognitively disruptive contact which intercultural Bible reading promises?

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643 Levinas, ibid., p.306
647 ibid., p.19
As the chapter on theoretical frameworks has already made clear, one of the transitions from childhood to adulthood is the path of psychological development where a child moves from seeing him or herself as an extension of parental figures to a place where, as an adolescent, there is a more cohesive and independent sense of identity. A psychologically healthy maturation toward adulthood will mean increasing clarity about personal beliefs and perspectives to the extent that an adolescent will ultimately be able to take responsibility for the person he or she is becoming while at the same time learning how to effectively engage in relationships with other people. In short, developmental growth brings with it an increasing ability to see oneself as an individual and then to function as that individual in relationship with others. In Levinas’ view, the value of an encounter with the Other is that it causes disruption to the natural process of taking one’s own experiences as ultimate reality and forming an egocentric, reductionist view of the world. Adolescents, then, seem to be well-primed for experiences which will help shape their burgeoning sense of self into a more broadly reflective self-awareness.

In fact, recent studies have discovered that the drive for individualization in adolescence occurs at the same time that the adolescent brain heightens the payoff from thrill-seeking and new experiences such as Levinas describes. Researchers are now positing that a teenager’s brain has greater executive function than was first thought, and risk-taking behavior by adolescents may be more the result of a calculated developmental push for experiential learning than a lack of self-control.

“Attraction to risky activities is promoted by a combination of executive function and interest in novel and exciting stimuli of all kinds. Such a tendency would have clear adaptive benefits to adolescents who are expected to leave home, find mates, and start on a path toward self-sufficiency. It would also encourage engaging in new experiences that could permit the adolescent to identify unique strengths and abilities as an independent actor.”

To put it simply, it would appear that adolescents are more wired to desire and benefit from unique and surprising experiences than even adults, and at the same time are more able to understand the implications of those experiences for than they would be in the latter stages of childhood.

Physical development alone, of course, cannot and should not be the basis for understanding the sum total of adolescent development. As Kelly puts it, “we can argue, then, that the brain provides the architecture for consciousness, but it doesn’t determine consciousness, reason, irrationality. These elements and determinants of experience emerge from the functioning, operation, activity of an embodied brain, but the character and nature and potential of consciousness are open, mutable.” Adolescents, it must be remembered, are not simply and solely a brain. Yet it also must be admitted that, as researchers provide more and more clues about the underlying structures and psychological processes of adolescence, there is an emerging picture which seems to indicate that

649 Andersen, “Adolescent Development.”
651 Romer and others, ibid., p.1129
adolescents are extremely capable (perhaps even uniquely capable) of benefitting from processes which put them in contact with the Other.

6.4 Contact with the “Other”

What becomes apparent when the data from this project is examined is that the adolescent participants did in fact display a remarkable ability to recognize, express, and then welcome the opportunity to discover the differences between themselves and their partner group. Rather than finding such confrontations to be threatening (as was the case with some of the adult participants in the TEA project), the adolescents appeared quite willing to attempt to embrace the differences in perspective that surfaced. This is an encouraging sign, yet the question remains if there were any examples where the group’s interaction specifically displays Levinas’ “invasion” of one world into another accompanied by a conscious expansion of self-awareness.

The group which best represents clues to the applicability of Levinas’ perspective is the Yamato group from Sapporo, Japan. This group was able to communicate with a high level of self-awareness in its materials, and in the initial background information sheet presented itself clearly to its American partner group.

All of us are students of the Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan. The majority of us entered university in April 2010 only. The group members are three girls – A., E. and Er. & two boys – N. with T. JA who is a foreign researcher at our university accompanies us in the process of reading.

None of the readers is affiliated with any Church or religious group. For us the Bible is much more a piece of Western literature than a religious book.

First of all, our group is bound together by the interest in other cultures. On the other hand, we are also eager to experience what the ancient stories of the Bible may be like and learn more about people and culture of the Bible. We are also prepared to share our opinions, feelings and emotions with the members of other cultures that are participating in the project Through the Eyes of Another.

The name of our group is Yamato. In the past, this name was used for the area around today’s Sakurai City in Nara Prefecture. Later, the term was used as the name of the province and its meaning extended to mean Japan or Japanese in general. When translated literally the two kanji of yamato would mean “great harmony”, which is what we hope to accomplish within our group, but also in contact with other readers.

What is evident from this report is that the Yamato group has a clear sense of identity. The report plainly describes the group’s non-affiliation with any church or Christian community (even though they have been told this is a research project based in and from Christian theology), and then goes on to clarify that the participants view the Bible as historic literature rather than a text with any divine or sacred value (which also requires a high level of clarity when participating in an openly Christian study). The group states that its participation is motivated by the chance for interaction.

653 See de Wit and Kool, "Tableaux Vivants." p.81-85
654Artimova, "Yamato Group Background."
with other cultures, and that its participants are willing to become personally invested in the
dynamics of the exchange. Even the name is significant in that it was chosen to convey the
participants’ desire for the results of their involvement in the project to have relational significance.
Every aspect of this background report, then, communicates that this is a group of adolescents who
possess a clear sense of identity.

For these participants, a demonstrable contact with the Other occurred when they read their
partner group’s interpretation and realized that they were thinking through their interpretation of
the parable on a completely different level from their exchange partner. As was noted earlier, one of
the group members (Er.) is “completely amazed” to discover that the partner group interpreted the
father in the story as representing God, and states afterward that, “It is a completely different story
now. If the father represents God, you know we said that father is very kind. I think what we should
understand from the story is the kindness of God and not the forgiveness! ...And how can the father
be God when he runs to meet his son?”

When the group meets again later, after the facilitator has let them take home copies of the
American group’s report to read on their own, this same response is restated by one of the Yamato
group members.

A: Was there anything during your reading that you found to be shocking? Or...
extraordinarily interesting... or something you really liked?

Er: To find out that father represents God was certainly the most shocking thing for me.

Here, then, is the clash which Levinas highlights. The Yamato group, which initially saw the passage
as dealing primarily with issues such as joy, happiness, kindness, foolishness, anger, envy, and
injustice, has just come into contact with the Other through the invasion of their partner group’s
interpretation. What is remarkable about this particular example is how well it fits one of Levinas’
points about the subtlety of the Other when it breaks through the boundary of the Same.

"The Other precisely reveals himself in his alterity not in a shock negating the I, but as the
primordial phenomenon of gentleness."

The process is so quick, so immediate, and so undeniable that Er. surrenders to the truthfulness of
what the Other has brought without questioning it. This is truly a remarkable moment for the group
members.

The Yamato group also demonstrates Levinas’ point that a change in self-awareness will remain even
after the presence of the Other is gone since there is no way to return to the previous perspective.
As one of the group participants remarks when asked to reflect on what their partner group saw as
most important in the text;

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655 Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript."
656 Artimova, ibid.
657 Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 1 Transcript."
658 Levinas, _Totality and Infinity._ p.150
T: It was definitely the forgiveness, when we read it together I did not think about it at the beginning. Now I can agree with them, but there are definitely more things besides that in that story.

One can see that there is still a sense of individuality in this participants’ interpretation of the text, but the perspective has changed. After this meeting, the Yamato group had questions for their partner group which centered primarily on the American’s expression of their spirituality.

Er: I would like to know whether they think about God in their daily life, whether they have a particular lifestyle as a consequence they are Christians and also whether, in case they do something wrong, they stop doing it because of God.

N: I would like to know what is Bible for them... do they think that Bible stories are just stories? Do they obey everything that is in the Bible - and as a future lawyer, I would like to know to what extent they observe the biblical law...

E: What is the meaning of the prayer at the beginning, why are they doing this?

As: What is the main reason, why are they interested in the Bible? And what is the reason they believe in it?  

For a group which entered the process to understand the Bible as historical text and engage with people in other cultures, the process brought a shift to the Yamato participants which awakened their curiosity to know more about the spirituality of their partners. This, Levinas would say, is an example of the significant power of individual change which contact with the Other can produce.

6.5 Encouraging the “Other” in Intercultural Bible Reading with Adolescents

Having now seen an example that not only are adolescents capable of participating in intercultural Bible reading from a procedural standpoint but also that they are able to benefit from the process as a means of increasing their self-awareness, the question remains if there are ways to arrange the exchange in order to maximize the opportunity for these participants to encounter the Other. For this, Levinas’ own illustration of the most powerful example of encounter with the Other, face-to-face interaction between human beings, can provide significant insight.

To begin with, a face-to-face encounter is unquestionably personal. One cannot objectify or deny the personhood of another when looking directly into his or her eyes. In the same way, the more the adolescent participants were able to personalize the members of their partner groups, the more effort they poured into their interaction. Even if there were things in the reading reports or meeting transcripts they didn’t or couldn’t understand, just the fact that a partner group was invested in telling personal details was noted and appreciated. In the Yamato group exchange, for example, both groups’ participants were willing to share personal information even when those details could have been perceived as painting the participant who was sharing in a less than flattering light:

Yeah. In our house we have something called the good child and whenever the other two are in trouble the other one is the good child. So it kinda rotates around. Sometimes I’m the...
one messing up and like breaking rules and like doing stuff that I shouldn’t be doing, like, at least according to my parents. But then other times, other times it’s like S. is the one doing something wrong and then they’ll forgive her and I’m like “I didn’t do that in the first place. Why didn’t I get anything…”

T: A typical Japanese father would probably become incredibly angry with his son. Only when his son proves that he wants to change and after he has worked hard ...after showing such attitude, only then a Japanese father would pardon him.

A: N., what would your father do in such a situation?

N: He would say: “You are dead!”

ALL: (laugh)

N: He would have never forgiven me... and I think... I would never... probably...I would never return home.

In both groups, then, a personal connection with empathy began to grow:

A: Did they get on well? Did you like their discussion?

E: They seem to know each other, they probably meet also on other occasions, they are not shy to speak about their families and how it works at home... I liked the discussion.

A: Here we are... they are not shy... (all laugh)... B: I’m surprised they didn’t see, like, any forgiveness. I was waiting for that when we read the last part. Not any kind of forgiveness... they just concentrated on...

HHF: Remember guys that Buddhism is a lifestyle of works, working and working and working so there’s so much pride, there’s so much honor, you know, these are the things that you hear about when you hear about Japanese lifestyle. You don’t hear about forgiveness, you don’t hear about second chances or those kinds of things. We...view the world from our viewpoint, from the viewpoint that there is a God in heaven who loves us and cares about us, and so that’s why it would be so difficult for them because they don’t. Their god is not a god of second chances.

M: I think J., though, that you’re right. That they’re starting to understand that the God that’s in this Bible that you read is a forgiving God. And that’s why you got forgiveness out of the story and that’s just not something that they had ever heard before.

HHM: Well, actually they said that they had talked about the kindness of God and not forgiveness. Maybe they hadn’t gotten to that point yet.

B: So I think they know what forgiveness is but they don’t see it ever in everyday life.

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660 LaBelle, "Labelle Group Reading 1 Transcript."
661 Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 1 Transcript."
662 Artimova, "Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript."
Encouraging adolescent participants to make the exchange process personal, then, is the first step in opening the door for a significant connection with their partner group and the Other.

Another facet of face-to-face contact is that it provides those in the conversation the opportunity to observe each other in rich detail. In the same way, the groups which provided more detailed transcripts of their interpretations and meetings were more likely to experience significant moments of realization and change than those who provided summary documents. This held true for all of the groups in the project and stays in keeping with Levinas’ assertion that the appearance of the Other, while undeniable, is more often than not a subtle arrival through nuance and hint. Word-for-word transcripts, video, and audio recordings, then, will provide the best means to transform the groups’ exchanges into contact with the Other.

While the clarity and detail of the Yamato group’s materials have already been asserted, another example of a group which demonstrated the benefit of providing detailed descriptions was the Dutch Crossroads group. They, too, experienced the transformative power of an encounter with the Other when their Bolivian partner group mentioned in their background report that they lived in poverty, and the transcript of the Crossroads group’s following lengthy discussion then became a catalyst for the Bolivian group to wonder why that had been such a focus. The Bolivian group was then able to ask the Dutch group to clarify their own social class and standing. In this way the details of the process became fuel for further conversation which led the two groups into a deeper encounter with each other based on the specific phrases and comments contained in the transcripts. Both the original TEA project and this one explicitly recommended in the protocol materials that audio or video recordings be made of all the groups’ meetings to capture such details, yet understandably in some cases recordings may simply not possible. It should be expected, however, that exchanging richly detailed reports will be more likely to set the stage for an encounter with the Other in the same way that participants in a face-to-face meeting are more likely to have better communication due to their ability to perceive subtle non-verbal cues.

Yet another dimension of face-to-face interaction that can be illustrative for encouraging adolescents toward transformative moments in intercultural Bible reading is to recognize the need to protect and preserve the implied communicative space which lies between the two groups as they exchange ideas. In a personal conversation, there is both a physical and communicative span which sits between the two participants that serves as a type of receiving area where statements can be clarified, concepts can be fleshed out, and the give-and-take of a gracious conversation preserves the neutrality of this area. No offense can be intimated without the receiving party giving a chance for clarification, and differences have room to be both heard and said. For Levinas, this interpretive space is the opportunity for the Other to invade, and by intentionally keeping it open one is creating the opportunity for transformative experiences.

Here again the Yamato group’s exchange serves as a helpful example. Although both they and their partner group said things that could have potentially been interpreted as insulting, neither group responded by shutting down the shared communicative space.

663 LaBelle, "Labelle Group Reading 2 Transcript."
664 Quispe, "Quispe Group Reading 2 Transcript."
G: But I think that in Japan they don’t even have weekends so they kind of do the same thing and they don’t even get a break during the week.

HHM: They do? I didn’t even think of that.

Group: They have to have weekends!

G: They don’t. They don’t even have summer and they graduate when they’re like 16.

B1: They have to have weekends…

B2: Yeah, I think that’s true because I have a friend I used to go to middle school with and he moved back to Japan and he graduated like a year before me.

B1: Well I can see like not having summer but like no weekend? That’s kinda like…that’s just stupid…

B2: That’s just because you’ve grown up used to it so it’s different to you.

HHF: Exactly. It’s your culture.

B1: If they’ve grown up used to that it would seem normal to them. 665

A: They all know the Bible, so… I do not expect them to change their opinion, because their reading is probably based on some knowledge, but I think they will be definitely surprised when they read our report.

Ar: Will they change their opinion just because of us?

Er: Umm, … their opinion is very …firm… they immediately knew what is the story about… I don’t think they will change it because of reading the Bible with us… they have the access to the Bible for a very long time… and… they have somebody else to tell them what is this story about… I mean authorities from Church, their families… so I do not think they want to be challenged. 666

The characteristic of graciousness was previously mentioned as a sign of successful intercultural communication, but here, too, it should be recognized as a significant factor in encouraging adolescents toward significant and transformational contact with Levinas’ Other. Mention must be made to the participants at the outset of the process about the need to protect the communicative space, and facilitators would be well-advised to understand the steps they can take to encourage the group members toward retaining an attitude of willing openness. As de Wit states, many of the groups tend to follow along similar paths in the reading and exchange process as they 1) get to know each other’s context, 2) discover similarities, 3) adjust prejudices, 4) move toward unity, 5) discuss differences, 6) discover structure and origin in the differences, 7) put them into perspective while looking for commonalities, 8) turn a critical eye on their own interpretation, 9) move away from

665 LaBelle, "Labelle Group Reading 2 Transcript."
666 Artimova, “Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript.”
mechanisms of exclusion.\textsuperscript{667} By wisely informing the adolescents of the need to remain open, even when they or the group as a whole may feel under threat, a helpful facilitator can preserve the opportunity for the participants to experience the alterity which the exchange can bring.

\textbf{6.6 The Other: Summary and Conclusion}

This chapter began by briefly presenting the concept of the Other as developed by Levinas and Lacan before noting the idea’s natural connection to the life stage of adolescence. The Yamato group’s experience in the project was noted for its ability to highlight what contact with the Other looks like with adolescent participants in intercultural Bible reading before the chapter went on to offer three specific ways to encourage this type of confrontation.

The process of intercultural Bible reading is predicated on the understanding that a change in perspective on the Biblical text comes through contact with that which is Other, and that contact can be amplified by carefully and seriously managing factors in both the reading and exchange.

“Diversity, confrontation, and distance are conditions for productive and creative reading...Diversity can be given shape, and confrontation can be organized by designating the hermeneutic function of distance, chronological but also cultural, and making it operative...Cultural diversity is introduced as a hermeneutic factor; confrontation is organized. The basic assumption of the project is that it can have added value when diversity is taken seriously in this manner.”\textsuperscript{668}

It would appear that adolescents are no less able beneficiaries of this approach than adults, and in this project have shown that they, too, can come away changed after their encounter with the Other as Levinas describes it. Indeed, their physiological and social development processes make this age group a prime recipient, and in moving forward one can only hope that there will be more research to determine the lasting effects of this type of contact.

\textsuperscript{667} de Wit, “Objectives and Backgrounds.” p.33
\textsuperscript{668} de Wit, ibid., p.32
7. Toward a New Approach in Youth Ministry

7.1 Introduction

Recent studies on the effectiveness of ministry to adolescents which attempt to measure the likelihood of adolescents maintaining a continuing involvement in church once they enter adulthood in the West are showing a pattern of gradual yet continuous decline. In the U.S., for example, the most recent research seems to indicate that somewhere between one-half to two-thirds of teenagers who are active in their church congregations during their high school years will no longer attend church when they achieve young adulthood. As Dean writes, “The way we’re doing things is already not working. [Youth ministers] are failing at our calling. And deep down, most of us know it.” This falling church attendance is not an American trend which is limited only to adolescents, however. A recent Pew Research study noted that the most rapidly growing religious identification across all age groups in America is “None.” The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion has increased in the last five years from just over 15% to almost 20%, and interestingly enough this number includes only about 6% who claim to be either agnostic or atheists; the other 14% of the “None” group simply claim to have no particular religious affiliation whatsoever. Europe has also seen a significant decline in Christianity over the last several decades, with theologians as far back as the mid-1990’s wrestling to develop paradigms which could help recapture the participation of young people while being practical enough for local communities of faith to implement.

The following chapter, then, will first briefly present a summary critique of the current state of youth ministry before demonstrating how intercultural Bible reading effectively lines up with a recent study of best practices in ministry to adolescents. Next, the difficulties and opportunities of the intercultural Bible reading process with adolescents will be noted before the chapter concludes by offering a look ahead toward utilizing ICB as a youth ministry tool.

7.2 A Current Critique of Youth Ministry

The number of critiques of youth ministry as it is typically adopted and practiced in local communities of faith (especially in the West) are legion. Some groups quote Deuteronomic principles of parental responsibility for the faith development of children and see focused youth ministry as an usurping and destructive force, while others take it to task as a poorly executed and unequivocally juvenile approach to faith development which has resulted in today’s adult churchgoers being as theologically and spiritually stunted now as they were when they were teenagers. In the 2008 book *Youth Ministry 3.0*, Oestreicher provides an overview of what he sees as the root cause of youth ministry’s lack of demonstrable results which also serves as a helpful distillation of many of

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670 In the foreword to Mark Oestreicher, "Youth Ministry 3.0: A Manifesto of Where We’ve Been, Where We Are, and Where We Need to Go," (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008). p.11


the current criticisms. In Oestreicher’s view, the foundational reason for youth ministry’s current
difficulties in being a transformative and supportive agent for the spiritual development of
adolescents in local communities of faith is that the “world of teenagers has changed, and we’ve
been slow in our response.” 674

As the theory of adolescence by G. Stanley Hall gained traction in both cultural and sociological
understandings in the early 1900’s, Oestreicher notes that local church ministries began to apply
that same understanding of human development to the organization and focus of their own
catechism programs in order to accommodate what they saw as a shift in society. Hall’s original
definition of adolescence, however, posited that the life stage only lasted for 18 months as a small
gap between childhood and the demands of adulthood. 675 By the 1950’s, however, young people
were given even more time between childhood and adulthood to exercise freedom from
responsibilities as youth culture rose to the surface on the catalysts of postwar disillusionment and
financial stability. In the 1960’s, youth culture was an established fact in most Western societies, and
by the 1970’s it was generally accepted that adolescence lasted from 13 years old (the average onset
of puberty) until 18 years old (when high school was finished) to cover a much longer time period of
six years. The increase in the span of years also meant that this youthful demographic represented a
bigger population which could hold more influence over the culture at large, and teenagers became
an identifiable group that attracted the attention of advertisers who then helped to elevate the
visibility of youth culture over the course of these decades. 676 At the turn of the millennium the
biological marker for the beginning of adolescence had dropped to between 10.5 to 11 years old,
and young people today aren’t expected to become fully engaged adult members of society until
they finish secondary schooling in their mid- to upper-20’s – which keeps the span of today’s
understanding of adolescence close to 15 years. 677 In Oestreicher’s estimation, much of the failure of
today’s youth ministry to keep youthful participants active in church once they enter young
adulthood is tied to the fact that churches still predominantly practice youth ministry with an
understanding of youth culture from the 1960’s and 1970’s, the years when mainline churches first
began to put age-specific pastoral staff in place.

As Oestreicher notes, however, the youth culture of today is very different:

There’s no one-size-fits-all youth culture anymore. That did exist in the first two waves of
youth culture. But it’s likely that it will never exist again. There was a day in the not-too-
distant past when the average high school completely revolved around the football players
and cheerleaders. Even kids who were part of the math club knew that football players and
cheerleaders were the driving force—youth perfected—in their school.

Today’s high schools (and middle schools to a lesser degree, as students are less
individuated and still trying on various identities) are a goulash of subcultures. The goth
group has no aspirations of emulating or cozying up to the jocks and cheer-nymphs. They’re
broodily content in their own subculture, working hard to define their shared values, tastes,
rules, priorities, language, acceptable and unacceptable behavior patterns, style, and more. The “party hard, study hard” gang will tolerate the froofy cheerbabes at parties, but they don’t have much in common with them. Even the geeks are more content than ever in their geekitude, having created an entire subculture of their own as well (and not just a fantasy subculture staged in role playing games).\textsuperscript{678}

In Oestreicher’s view, youth ministry in most communities of faith is primarily designed for meeting the needs of earlier youth cultures through a focus on proclamation and evangelism (which was effective in the 1950’s style youth ministry rallies of Youth For Christ, Young Life and other parachurch organizations) or programming and relational discipleship (which was effective from the 1970’s through the 1990’s) such that it is missing a connection with today’s young people who are searching to develop affinity through a shared valuing of communion and mission.\textsuperscript{679} What’s interesting about Oestreicher’s recommendation is how closely it matches Roebben’s decades-old encouragement in the European context for youth ministry to “rid itself of old instrumentalizing strategies for reaching young people...and engage in the ongoing dialogue of a new mental/spiritual playground for young and old. [N]ot as a warning to convert them from a dark presence into the light of an eternal future, but as a new mode of being human, which is liberated and challenged to rebuild a new world of solidarity and inter-subjectivity, and to undertake a communal search for reliable and life-giving truth.”\textsuperscript{680} It would appear, then, that the contextual challenge of developing and adopting an effective strategy for focused ministry to youth is one which mandates an ever-evolving awareness of both cultural and missional understandings.

7.3 Characteristics of Congregations with Effective Youth Ministries and Implications for ICB with Adolescents

In an attempt to discover ways to improve the effectiveness of local youth ministry in nurturing the faith of adolescents, a six-year study called “The Study of Effective Youth Ministry” (EYM) began in 2004 to research local churches in seven different U.S. denominations with the hopes of identifying congregations which were able to consistently establish faith as an ongoing and vital factor in the lives of their young people.\textsuperscript{681} Over the course of the study it soon became apparent that some long-held assumptions about the keys to effective youth ministry (like the need to continually adopt new techniques or to structure the program around a singularly dynamic youth leader), were not necessarily the most important factors for nurturing the faith of young people. Instead, the congregations of churches with effective youth ministries displayed four general characteristics which served as catalysts for increasing the effectiveness of their youth ministry. In the section that follows, then, these characteristics will be presented and connected to the process of intercultural Bible reading with adolescents as it was experienced in this study to demonstrate how ICB with adolescents is a complimentary approach which can undergird these helpful congregational factors.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{678} Oestreicher, ibid., pp.69-70
\item \textsuperscript{679} Oestreicher, ibid., pp.72-73
\item \textsuperscript{680} Bert Roebben, “Shaping a Playground for Transcendence : Postmodern Youth Ministry as a Radical Challenge,” \textit{Religious Education} 92, no. 3 (1997). p.345
\end{itemize}
The first characteristic the study noted is that churches with effective youth ministries were thoroughly intergenerational.\footnote{Martinson, Black, and Roberto, ibid., p.53} What the researchers were able to identify was that these congregations welcomed and expected youth to participate in church-wide ministries of worship, fellowship, service, and decision-making that affected areas across the entire span of the church’s ministries. Specifically, the study discovered that the church was seen as a “safe place” where youth felt at home and knew that their questions would be sought out and taken seriously.\footnote{Martinson, Black, and Roberto, ibid., p.91}

Interestingly enough, even though it was not specifically requested in this project’s ICB protocol materials, every group which participated through at least two exchanges with their partner group was led by an adult who functioned as the facilitator and guide. Whether it was managing the scheduling process, receiving and sending materials, or following up with phone calls or Skype sessions, adults were involved at every step of the way and in turn helped the exchanges move forward as smoothly possible. While it is theoretically possible that adults would not be needed to help guide the reading groups, the intercultural Bible reading process in this project provided an extremely natural opportunity for adult involvement and created a space for intergenerational and spiritual interaction between adults and young people in the church in a way that lines up with the intergenerational dynamic which the EYM found to be helpful for youth ministry. In addition, the cross-cultural reading and exchange process itself raises tremendous questions of inequality and asymmetry in power structures, and it is in answer to these questions that adults can serve as wise voices to help adolescents find responsible (and yes, Christian) responses.

The second characteristic the EYM study noted was that these congregations had developed intentional, age-specific youth ministries with custom-designed ministry practices and activities which were marked by trusted relationships to “create an atmosphere of respect, growth, and belonging.”\footnote{Martinson, Black, and Roberto, ibid., p.54} The presence of this trait showed itself in the study specifically through responses on written surveys where young people in these churches reported feeling that the congregation was “a close community” or “a family.”\footnote{Martinson, Black, and Roberto, ibid., p.129} Researchers also noted the prevalence of small group Bible studies for both adults and youth in these congregations, and saw them as tools which encouraged the participants to connect their faith with the issues and concerns of their daily lives.

Of the 10 groups which completed exchanges for this project, only the Ben Lippen Boys, Ben Lippen Girls, and Yamato groups were formed specifically for the purposes of taking part in the study. The other seven groups were ones which were already formed in the youth ministry of their local churches, and four of those were ongoing small group Bible studies which met together regularly as part of the discipleship program of their church. Intercultural Bible reading, then, either as a means to initiate small groups or as a focus for the groups which are already meeting, demonstrated itself as a ready-made space for encouraging the type of atmosphere which the EYM study endorses. Also, an examination of the meeting transcripts and summaries as well as the positive comments which the participants expressed about the exchange process are encouraging signs that ICB groups can be effective at generating an affirming and respectful environment for the youth who participate. The exchange became a catalyst which allowed the group members to engage in significant and respectful conversations about personal insights and values, and nowhere in the transcripts is there
any evidence of anything other than positive interactions, even if disagreements about interpretations or cultural characteristics arose. In terms of creating small group interactions and helping adolescents feel connected with each other through opportunities for respectful exchanges of ideas, then, here, too, it would appear that ICB is beneficial for adolescents (in much the same was as de Wit has noted with adults).686

The third factor which the study identified was that the effective congregations involved and educated parents for their role as the primary spiritual leaders by equipping them for at-home spiritual conversations, Bible reading, service, and prayers so that they could involve the whole family in faith practices together.687 The youth ministries in these congregations included the parents of youth in regular activities and events, and normalized the expectation that parents and teens should be involved in their spiritual journeys together rather than relegating spiritual instruction as the sole domain of the church’s youth ministry. The researchers also found that youth whose families intentionally expressed their faith together in these ways were twice as likely to read the Bible and pray when they were alone, read or study other extra-Biblical materials about Christianity, and say that they felt God’s presence regularly in their lives.688

In this study, four of the 14 groups which took part and contributed materials were groups which had parents of participants either present during one or all of the meetings or even functioning as facilitators of the meetings (two of these were led by the author). An examination of the transcripts show that in all four groups with parents present, the children of the participants offered insights, commented on other group members’ remarks, and actively participated in the group discussions.689 While this fact can in no way be taken as incontrovertible evidence that the intercultural Bible reading process is guaranteed to provide a space which will lead to a family dynamic such as the EYM suggests, it must also be noted that at the very least the groups did provide the opportunity for parents and their children to share in a faith experience together and thus served as a welcoming arena for parents and children to talk through their spiritual insights in a way that the EYM study proposes as positive. The caution must be raised, of course, that the presence of a parent could stifle an adolescent from pursuing an oppositional or what they felt to be a “deviant” interpretation (and vice versa), but placing them in separate groups would still allow them to talk through their experience of the reading process without creating unnecessary restraints on their involvement. It follows, then, that in ICB projects could be arranged to help facilitate significant parent/child interaction concerning each one’s faith.

The fourth and final congregational characteristic the EYM researchers noted was that the exemplary churches had competent and mature leadership including the pastor, the youth minister, youth leaders, and youth themselves who were committed to nurturing the faith lives of young people as they exercised intentional leadership.690 In fact, the EYM researchers go so far as to say that “committed and competent leadership is at the heart of the exemplary congregations’ faithful

686 de Wit, “Objectives and Backgrounds.” p.32
687 Martinson, Black, and Roberto, The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations toward Exemplary Youth Ministry. p.54
688 Martinson, Black, and Roberto, ibid., p.175
689 See the Gateway Boys, Gateway Girls, Greene, and LaBelle groups
690 Martinson, Black, and Roberto, The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations toward Exemplary Youth Ministry. p.54
and effective ministries with youth.° The EYM congregations demonstrated a deliberate and focused pursuit of spiritual formation in their young people, and were able to provide positive models of interpersonal and communicative competence.°

Here, too, one finds a direct link to the intercultural Bible reading process as the method provides a straightforward means for church leadership to offer a tangible opportunity for the church’s congregants and ministry leaders to provide guidance to their youth. With the intercultural Bible reading protocol having been developed and tested through projects such as this one, TEA’s original and second projects, and other studies around the world,° it is apparent that ICB can provide a platform for a growth experience which members of local communities of faith (even adolescent ones) find attractive, challenging, rewarding, and transformational. For church leaders who are intentionally seeking ways to encourage the growth of their members, ICB can provide a welcome blend of characteristics that fits well with a vision for encouraging faith and broadening participants’ understanding of other believers, the Bible, and themselves while the laity are encouraged to utilize their organizational, teaching, hospitality, and facilitative leadership skills. In fact, without involving several people in leadership (especially with adolescent participants) it is very likely that the ICB exchanges will fail.

7.4 The Challenges and Opportunities of ICB with Adolescents

Having now seen that cross-cultural reading can be a helpful process for local communities of faith which desire their youth to mature in how they read and interpret the Bible, recognize and process global challenges and inequalities, and develop a wider sense of God’s kingdom, the fact remains that it is a growth opportunity which, like any other, has inherent in it many difficulties as well as encouragements. This section, then, will offer practical guidance in implementing ICB by examining different challenges and opportunities which the process afforded during the project.

7.4.1 Challenges

7.4.1.1 Cultural Stressors

As is to be expected with a project hoping to link up groups in different cultures, the processes inherent in the exchanges themselves are also subject to those same cultural forces as those upon which ICB is attempting to capitalize. The researchers and the facilitators are both products of their own cultures, and this fact can at times result in the appearance of stressors due to these differences.

One readily apparent uncertainty has been around the issue of timeliness. In the initial pilot phase of this project, for example, groups received materials in March with a revised protocol going out in April. All scheduled participants were given a timeline for completion which asked that the first readings be received back in mid-May (after four weeks) so that exchanges could happen and the process finished by the end of June to stay in keeping with the academic calendar. It was a very optimistic schedule to be sure, but one to which the facilitators agreed when they accepted their roles. As it turned out, of those initial 14 groups which received the protocol two dropped out

° Martinson, Black, and Roberto, ibid., p.205
° Martinson, Black, and Roberto, ibid., p.207
° For more information on participating scholars and countries, go to www.Bible4All.org
completely and only two backgrounds and reading reports made it back. Since the initial TEA project found that the process could take upwards of two years, the groups had been made aware of the difficulties of the timing yet one of the groups still expressed disappointment at the length of time which had elapsed (after only eight weeks) and stopped its involvement. One of the challenges for ICB reading with adolescents, then, is to continue to encourage groups who are able to complete their readings quickly while they wait for others to reach the same stage. As one of the TEA groups reported:

The interim periods were too long, leading to a drop in motivation. This needn’t have happened if this had been known in advance.694

This issue of timeliness highlights the way in which any cultural uncertainties can bring such pressure to bear on the exchange process that it breaks down completely. For example, when a pilot group read a different passage and was reminded to use the Luke text instead, their reply made it very clear that the mistake was not their fault. Was their reaction a response to an underlying perception of an imbalanced power dynamic? Hofstede’s individual/collective dynamic also seemed to appear through overflowing apologies from groups in both India and Kenya (collectivistic cultures) when they had to bow out. West says that socially engaged biblical scholars are probably more aware than most that the Bible is no innocent text,695 and the ICB process with adolescents is a good reminder that there are no innocent intercultural communications either. Facilitating these exchanges requires an abundance of humility and graciousness to minimize the negative impact of cultural differences. Acquiring a new orientation to how the Bible may be read in a different culture can be a jarring experience which may be softened by intentional adjustments and initiating clear communication to help all involved, but in truth this project demonstrates how difficult it is to sustain even the most intentional, organized, maintained, and attended intercultural relationships.

7.4.1.2 Loss of Groups/Group Members

While it is to be expected that there will be a rate of attrition in the number of groups, it is still difficult to adequately prepare a group for the disruption that this can cause to their experience of the process. When a Kenyan group left the project due to the facilitator’s scheduling conflicts, the Dutch group scheduled to be their partner was noticeably deflated. When the American group was unable to finish their exchange all the way through to the final letter, their Japanese partners were very understanding (especially since it was related to an unexpected death in one of the facilitator’s families) yet also disappointed. The loss or addition of participants over the course of the exchanges was also a factor for several of the groups, and while this reality can be nuanced because new members typically come from the same interpretive community as the original group members, it is definitely an obstacle to ensuring a consistent interpretive process for the adolescent participants.

7.4.1.3 Language Difficulties

Another unfortunate limitation of the process is that the reading reports and other materials all need to eventually be translated into a common language. The communication with the group in Bolivia and Japan was made more difficult for their facilitators because of language differences with

694 Moolenaar, Listening with the Heart : The Reading Experience of the Dutch Groups." p.105
695 West, The Academy of the Poor : Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible. p.77
their partner groups (although the facilitators did a thorough job of translating their materials), and it is apparent that this limitation in particular would be one of the most difficult to overcome for local communities of faith as they engage in ICB. While online translation tools can be of some help, facilitators will need language assistance to overcome this hurdle if they exchange with cultures where the language is different from their own. TEA ended up translating the protocol and other written materials into more than twenty languages, and although this ability provided researchers with rich opportunities for data, such a scope has to admittedly be recognized as beyond the capabilities of most groups.696

7.4.1.4 Technological Issues

Technology as a tool for ICB can be both at once a blessing and a curse. In order to encourage insightful exchanges, a word-for-word transcript of the group meetings provides the best material. Capturing a meeting through either an audio or video recording (which then allows for a word-for-word transcript to be made), however, proved to be a tedious and technology-dependent task which was off-putting to several of the groups. The group in Malta, for example, endured a four-week delay in returning their transcript because as they ended their session they realized that the recording was unusable due to a computer glitch – and this difficulty happened twice to that group.

I should [have] had the Bible study already to you but the last two weeks when we have tried to record. At the end it somehow becomes ruined. We have been trying to do it in a friends [sic] studio and they have never had this happen, so hopefully this week it will work.697

In other instances, emails never made their way to another person’s inbox which added confusion to that group’s process. Technology is a double-edged sword, and local youth ministries who want to engage in ICB will need to carefully gauge both the availability of technological resources and their ability to manage those resources.

7.4.2 Opportunities

7.4.2.1 Enthusiasm

One of the more encouraging parts of the intercultural Bible reading process with adolescents is the enthusiasm with which it has been greeted. In conversations with youth workers in many different contexts and cultures around the world, it is not difficult to generate enough interest to warrant a longer conversation or email to explain what ICB is and how the exchanges proceed. While this enthusiasm could be seen as a direct result of the strength of personal connection between those studying the process and those who volunteer to become group facilitators, it’s important to note that of the 14 groups which submitted materials there were only three had a personal connection to the author. All of the other groups came to the project due to their interest in becoming involved with an international reading project and initially had very little (if any) personal knowledge of the project’s leadership. This fact is significant as it may be a sign that intercultural Bible reading with youth is an idea which is immediately understandable and motivating to youth workers and youth no matter the cultural context within which they find themselves. As one facilitator wrote:

696 de Wit, "Epilogue." p.504
697 Malta, "Malta Group Background and First Surveys."
I would be definitely interested in being part of this teens [sic] in intercultural Bible reading groups. Please send me more details as I can be involved in this new project. I attend an Anglican Church here and recently introduced an idea to the youth group asking them if we could have a "reading the bible togeather[sic]" group. They are exited [sic] and your input and the texts and tools you provide or suggest would be very helpful.\textsuperscript{698}

While enthusiasm is of course no guarantee that the groups will finish their exchange process, it is a positive sign that ICB is an attractive enough process for prospective participants to quickly see the value and promise of the interaction.

\textbf{7.4.2.2 Engagement in Online Relational Connections}

The growth of social media and the way adolescents are quick to adopt different emerging platforms for internet-based relational connection (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) are amazing opportunities which pave the way for the type of interaction which ICB provides. For the vast majority of students who were engaged in this study, a relationship which is mediated by and existent primarily through the internet was not a novel phenomenon. As the Arab Spring demonstrations showed in February of 2011, communication at a world-wide level is now possible and quite normalized by this generation of adolescents regardless of the geographical location they may happen to inhabit (as one report put it, the "drivers of the Arab Spring events have first and foremost been the mobilized masses enabled by technology and youth...[w]hat has happened is that technology has enabled citizens to challenge repressive security forces: no longer does it take established leaders to organize the masses but only savvy techies who have organizational skills..."\textsuperscript{699}).

The opportunity for ICB with adolescents is that, where older generations may have perceived the lack of face-to-face connection as a de-personalization of the interaction, adolescent participants have thus far offered no such reservations. No objections have been made to the use of technology to allow them to connect with their partner groups, and as was discussed in the earlier summary of the groups’ experiences many actually felt comfortable enough with their interactions that they welcomed the idea of a personal meeting (which in the case of the Gateway and Ben Lippen group participants turned out to be as positive an experience as could be hoped).

\textbf{7.4.2.3 Access to Technology}

A factor which is related yet still distinct from the one above is that the access to technology-based communication tools continues to grow across the world. All the communications for this project took place electronically and reached into every region of the globe including South America, North America, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia with a speed and efficiency that would not have been possible even a decade earlier. While the continuing normalization of technology-based access does bring its own set of challenges (some of which were addressed in the preceding section), it is also apparent that intercultural exchanges of this kind would be much more difficult and costly without the continued rise of access to the internet even if that access necessitates a trip to the local internet café. While one cannot always count on an email or document to be successfully delivered

\textsuperscript{698}David Dorapalli Group, "Dorapalli Reading 1 Transcript," (India: 2009).
\textsuperscript{699}Allen E. Keiswetter, "The Arab Spring: Implications for Us Policy and Interests", Middle East Institute http://www.mei.edu/content/arab-spring-implications-us-policy-and-interests (accessed December 19 2012).
to the intended recipient, the ability to communicate freely and easily is a tremendous opportunity for the ICB process.

7.4.2.4 Scholarly Focus

At this point, there has been a scholarly focus on intercultural Bible reading since the first TEA project was begun in 1999 with the results first published in 2004. Professor Dr. Hans de Wit, as the holder of the Dom Helder Camara Chair at the VU University, Amsterdam, began a second ICB project in 2011 that as of January 2013 has included participants from over 25 countries. The second project also resulted in the conference “Bible and Transformation: The Promise of Intercultural Bible Reading” which was attended by scholars from across the globe who came to discuss how ICB can serve “as a catalyst for more mutual understanding, change of perspective and social transformation,” and papers from the conference are slated to be published in academic journals. This continuing scholarly focus on ICB provides an academic impetus which can inspire and motivate researchers to persist in studying the process, and the dearth of studies which examine exchanges with adolescent participants also serves as an encouraging opportunity for theologians who desire to understand how the next generation reads the Bible in the context of an increasingly globalized world.

7.4.2.5 The Response of the Participants

Finally, it must be stated that the greatest positive encouragement for adolescents in local communities of faith to participate in an ICB process can be seen in the self-reported sense of satisfaction and value which the participants in this project expressed. As has been stated, the ten groups who were able to complete at least two exchanges reported a positive experience, with several of them even going so far as to say how much they would like to be able to get to know their partner group through direct face-to-face personal contact. It is clear, then, that the participants themselves saw the value and power of these exchanges, and it is this positive regard which indicates a realistic expectation that ICB could become a tool for local churches who want to involve their young people in faith-building activities; not as conscripted and unwilling subjects of a research experiment, but as fully vested participants who are eager for the insights which ICB provides.

7.5 Looking Ahead

So now to the question of implementation: what might be helpful guidelines for developing ICB as a useful tool for local communities of faith that are seeking to involve and mature their youth? This section offers four brief suggestions as churches take steps to begin realizing the promise which intercultural Bible reading with adolescents offers.

First, faith communities would be wise to give careful consideration to the format for their exchanges. The TEA project and this one have shown that maintaining multiple phases of reading and exchange is critical to assist the adolescent participants in their growing awareness not only of what cultural attitudes they themselves bring to the Biblical text but also to those of their partner group. An initial group reading and discussion, therefore, is critical to the process as it sets the

foundations for all that is to follow, and careful leadership by a self-aware facilitator who is able to
draw out and tease implications from the group’s interaction will greatly assist in the exchange’s
ability to open the adolescent’s understanding of their partners, themselves, and the Biblical text.
Care must be taken, too, to ensure that the reports of these meetings have enough information to
spark conversations with the partner groups, and this, too, requires deliberate forethought.
Whether an audio or video recording must be made can be left up to each group, but in any case all
significant conversations and observations must be captured. While there may not be as strong a
need to codify and delineate all of the cultural factors such as was done in this project, the fact
remains that details are an ally in the reading and exchange process.

Second, groups, especially in their first exchanges, should look to utilize Biblical texts which supply
ready-made connection points for adolescents. While the specific ages, expectations, and
responsibilities of adolescents around the world may differ, certain psychological and social
developmental characteristics are uniform enough to warrant an intentional choice of passages
which can surface issues like family dynamics, peer relationships, individual choice, societal
obligations, and the like. Although subsequent exchanges could provide an opportunity to broaden
the range of issues which the groups may want the Biblical text to surface, initially it would be
helpful to provide as many clear points of connection to the text as possible.

Third, and as was stated previously, group facilitators need to spend time preparing group members
for the potential clash of cultures which will likely ensue upon receiving their partner group’s
materials. Adolescent participants would do well to be led through practical learning exercises which
focus on developing foundational proficiencies of maintaining mindfulness, focusing on positive
motivations, growing in knowledge about their partner group’s culture, and practicing helpful
communication skills.

Fourth, youth ministries that desire to maximize the power of ICB to bring epiphanic insight to their
participants should look specifically to embrace ICB partnerships with groups that are very different
from themselves. These differences can include any and everything from denominational affiliations
to the makeup and degree of cultural characteristics, and as was seen in this project whether or not
the group considers itself to be comprised of Christians can become a helpful point of difference for
an exchange. Since the experience of the groups in this research would seem to point to the fact that
the greater the differences between partner groups the greater the opportunity for a growth-
causing impact, leaders should not shy away from exchange partnerships which may at first appear
to present too wide a chasm. It may take more facilitative skill to manage the exchange with two
highly dissimilar groups, but the results of this project show that an exchange between such groups
may bring the potential for highly significant interaction. Even a youth group’s annual cross cultural
mission trip can serve as the starting point of an ongoing relationship which utilizes ICB as a catalytic
tool for spiritual growth across cultural divides.

Fifth, and finally, much thought should be given to actualizing the role of socially engaged Biblical
scholars in order to more intentionally focus on asking the participants how they can now act after
their involvement in ICB. As de Wit notes and as was seen in this project, ordinary readers have
their own tendencies toward interpretive pathologies (the inclination to develop solely personal
appropriations of the text seems to have been a primary theme for many of the adolescents in this
study) which careful and astute exegetes are able to expose for the benefit of all. By intentionally increasing the interplay between socially conscious, action-minded theologians and adolescents, then, one can hope that ICB will be more able to reach its potential to move participants into an ongoing cycle of thoughtful reflection and Kingdom-minded praxis than was seen in this project. As adolescents see a vision of God that goes beyond personal appropriation due to their exposure to the experiences, viewpoints, and yes, even sufferings of the Other, and as theologians/ministers willingly relinquish their historic role as arbiter of truth, both can be freed and encouraged to move forward as participants in God’s redeeming and active love. In this way the process of reading and exchange with the Other (whether local or far afield) can continue until it becomes a natural and continuing way of life.

7.6 Toward a New Approach: Summary and Conclusion

In this chapter, a current critique of youth ministry (especially as practiced in Western settings) was presented in order to highlight how youth ministry praxis is undergoing a reexamination of its effectiveness at encouraging and maintaining adolescent involvement in local communities of faith. Next, the Study of Effective Youth Ministry was examined for the ways in which its recommended best practices clearly line up with characteristics evident in the process of intercultural Bible reading with adolescents. Then the challenges and opportunities of using ICB as a tool for ministry with adolescents were detailed before the chapter finished with four brief recommendations on how local communities of faith could facilitate ICB as a part of their own youth ministries.

To conclude, it must be recognized that this project can in no way deign to serve as a fully-faceted determination of the ultimate value (or lack thereof) of engaging adolescents as participants in an intercultural Bible reading exchange process. Yet even with the limitations of this research, the project shows encouraging signs that intercultural Bible reading has the ability to open up an awareness in young people of their own and others’ cultural biases when they approach the Biblical text and in so doing encourage them toward spiritual growth. The participants in this project, meaning all the facilitators, reporters, group members, and church leaders who arranged for their groups to take part, have, through their heartfelt investment (which in some cases lasted years) painted a portrait that captures and highlights the Biblical text’s ability to move, inspire, and yes, even frustrate and confuse. Culture cannot contain the Word of God, and yet it is culture which serves as the primary device with which we so comfortably and quickly take hold of that which we can never fully grasp. May we always encourage this next generation to be ready to lay aside their own perspectives, their own cultures, to try on another’s and in this way move them toward the intimate revelation which true community can bring.

“Great and marvelous are Your works,
O Lord God, the Almighty;
Righteous and true are Your ways,
King of the nations!” Revelation 15:3

Samenvatting

“Een Intieme Onthulling: Intercultureel Bijbellezen met Adolescenten”

In deze studie staat de volgende onderzoeks vraag centraal: welk effect, indien dat er al zou zijn, heeft het proces van intercultureel bijbellezen op de spirituele groei van adolescenten?

Intercultureel bijbellezen is een methode waarbij een leesgroep in een bepaalde cultuur dezelfde bijbeltekst leest als een leesgroep in een andere cultuur en over de betekenis van deze tekst met de partnergroep nadenkt. In een eerste fase ontwikkelen leesgroepen als interpretive communities een eigen begrip van de passage. Daarna worden groepen gekoppeld om hun interpretaties uit te wisselen. In deze tweede fase – de fase waarin groep A het leesverslag van groep B ontvangt, en andersom – komen onderling verschillende visies op de betekenis van de bijbeltekst aan het licht. Groepen staan daar bij stil en kijken opnieuw naar de tekst, nu door de ogen van de deelnemers van de andere groep. Hierna volgt een derde en laatste fase waarin de groepen met elkaar in gesprek treden en bij voorbeeld brieven aan elkaar zenden. Daarin kan waardering worden uitgesproken, kunnen nog resterende vragen besproken worden en kunnen groepen besluiten het proces voort te zetten, nu met een andere partner of tekst.


De evaluatie van leesverslagen en transcripties leverde bewijzen op van spirituele groei zoals in deze studie gedefinieerd. Terwijl het project geen oorzakelijk verband claimt, lijkt er toch een verandering of verdieping van inzicht op te treden bij de adolescenten die betrokken waren bij het intercultureel bijbellezen.

De eerste taak, die in hoofdstuk 1 wordt ondernomen, is reflectie op het werk van Gadamer en Ricoeur. Samen met dat van andere hermeneuten heeft hun werk een diepgaande verandering te weeg gebracht en de aandacht gevestigd op de cruciale rol die de lezer zelf speelt bij het proces van betekenisgeving aan teksten. Mede gebaseerd op het werk van Gadamer en Ricoeur begint men te spreken over de ‘gewone lezer’ – een concept dat een zo centrale rol speelt in deze studie. In een volgende sectie van dit hoofdstuk wordt getoond hoe hermeneuten als Carlos Mesters (in de jaren ’70 en ’80 van de vorige eeuw) en Gerald West (in de jaren ’90) deze ‘wending tot de gewone bijbellezer’ in hun eigen, niet-Westere contexten toepassen. Vervolgens biedt het hoofdstuk een analyse van het internationale onderzoeksproject Door het Oog van een Ander, het eerste grootschalige onderzoek van dit type, dat de rol van de Bijbel in interculturele ontmoetingen wil onderzoeken en daarmee “gewone lezers” kansen wil bieden dat hun stem gehoord wordt ook door andere “gewone lezers” in andere contexten en in de brede theologische gemeenschap.
Hoofdstuk 2 biedt het theoretisch kader van de studie. De eerste sectie biedt een gedetailleerde blik op de fysieke, cognitieve en psychosociale kenmerken van adolescentie, waarna de specifieke culturele kenmerken van adolescentie in acht regio's van de wereld worden beschreven. Zij tonen aan dat deze levensfase als wereldwijd voorkomend is te beschouwen. In de volgende sectie wordt het concept “cultuur” onderzocht en worden empirisch bruikbare definities van zowel “cultuur” als “intercultureel” geboden waarbij gebruik gemaakt wordt van Hofstede’s theorie van gemeenschappelijke culturele dimensies. De dynamiek van interculturele communicatie wordt besproken, mede vanwege de prominente rol ervan in het proces van het interculturele Bijbellezen. Er wordt geargumenteerd dat globalisering een steeds belangrijker motief is voor het uitvoeren van dergelijke interculturele godsdienstige studies. Voordat in het volgende deel van het hoofdstuk ingepunten worden aangeboden gebaseerd op het werk van Glock en Stark, Moberg en twee nieuwtestamentische metaforen, wordt eerst stilgestaan bij de bekende complexiteit van pogingen spirituele groei te meten. Tenslotte wordt als een adequaat en open concept voor de beoordeling van het effect van intercultureel bijbellezen op adolescenten een definitie gegeven van spirituele groei: *verandering of verdieping van perspectief*.

Hoofdstuk 3 erkent en bespreekt de complexiteit van het uitvoeren van empirisch onderzoek binnen de theologie en laat vervolgens zien hoe de *Grounded Theory* benadering de beste mogelijkheid biedt voor het onderzoeken van de reactie van adolescenten in het proces van intercultureel bijbellezen. Het specifieke protocol voor de studie wordt uitgelegd, vergezeld van een gedetailleerde lijst van codes.

Hoofdstuk 4 begint met het samenvatten van de ervaringen van tien uitwisselingsgroepen (vier andere groepen leverden leesverslagen, maar waren niet in de gelegenheid deel te nemen aan uitwisselingen) en beschrijft van elke groep de specifieke culturele en adolescentie karakteristieken, de dynamiek van interculturele communicatie en de gevoelens over het interculturele bijbelleesproces bij deze groepen, waarna het resultaat van een eerste onderzoek voor spirituele groei wordt gegeven gebaseerd op de *Dimensions of Religiosity* van Glock en Stark. In de volgende sectie wordt dieper ingegaan op de verslagen van alle groepen. Door te kijken naar subtiele signalen van verandering zoals een ander verstaan van de bijbeltekst, een andere visie op zichzelf, het anders leren kijken naar de partnergroep, wordt getracht spirituele groei in de ervaringen van de deelnemers op het spoor te komen. Het derde gedeelte van het hoofdstuk laat zien hoe interculturele openheid is verbonden met groepen die spirituele groei lieten zien. Het laatste deel biedt een bespreking van de interpretaties van de groepen en welke drie thema's in de leesverslagen als belangrijkste naar voren kwamen en vergelijkt deze met de *National Study of Youth and Religion* van Smith.

Hoofdstuk 5 onderzoekt op welke manier de adolescenten hun theologische inzichten in de passage over de verloren zoon hebben aangeboden. Materiaal van de deelnemende groepen wordt vergeleken met meer traditionele opvattingen over de betekenis van de gelijkenis. Terwijl er overeenkomsten met klassieke theologische inzichten werden geconstateerd, waren er ook andere, subtiele maar significante verschillen die suggereerden dat adolescenten inderdaad heel goed kunnen functioneren als vertolkers die zinvolle inzichten in bijbelteksten kunnen bieden.

Hoofdstuk 6 bespreekt kort het concept “de Ander” zoals door Levinas en Lacan ontwikkeld en onderzoekt voorts de verbinding tussen dit concept en de ontwikkeling van de adolescent. Bewijs uit
de leesverslagen wordt vervolgens aangevoerd dat adolescenten ingerdaad in contact kunnen komen met de “Ander” tijdens het proces van het intercultureel bijbellezen. Het hoofdstuk biedt tot slot aanbevelingen die een ontmoeting tussen deelnemende adolescenten en de “Ander” kunnen bevorderen.

*Hoofdstuk 7*, het laatste hoofdstuk, biedt een kritische blik op de huidige praktijk van kerkelijke jeugdorganisaties. Daarna wordt stilgestaan bij een studie over effectieve *Youth Ministries* die onderstreept dat er hier sprake is van belangwekkende en positieve raakpunten met het proces van intercultureel bijbellezen met adolescenten. Vervolgens wordt ingegaan op de uitdagingen van het intercultureel bijbellezen met adolescenten en wordt gewezen op de wenselijkheid deze praktijk op te nemen als onderdeel van *Youth Ministries*. Ten slotte worden aanbevelingen gedaan voor het verbeteren van de logistieke details van uitwisselingen, voor het kiezen van teksten met thema’s die bij adolescenten aanslaan, het voorbereiden van de deelnemers op de interculturele uitwisseling en communicatie, het kiezen van partner groepen, en hoe sociaal geëngageerde bijbelwetenschappers bij het proces betrokken kunnen worden.
Appendix A: Codes

[*READING REPORTS] *.1 Reading Reports - Background Report, *.2 Reading Reports - Reading 1, *.3 Reading Reports - Reading 2, *.4 Reading Reports - Reading 3, *.5 Reading Reports - Letter to Partner Group,

[A. RESPONDENT GENDER] A.1 Gender – Female, A.2 Gender – Male,

[B. GROUP GENDER] B.1 Group Gender - Both genders B.2 Group Gender – Female, B.3 Group Gender – Male


[D. GROUP PROCESSES] D.01 Group Processes - Someone in group has faced persecution for their faith, D.1 Group Processes - Artwork/symbolic objects during group meeting, D.2 Group Processes - Little discussion, D.3 Group Processes - Much discussion, D.4 Group Processes - Noticed a difference in partner group’s interpretation, D.5 Group Processes - Prayer during group meeting, D.6 Group Processes - Reading the passage - every person reads, D.7 Group Processes - Reading the passage - one person reads for all, D.71 Group Process - Reading the passage - a few people read, D.8 Group Processes - Singing during group meeting, D.9 Group Processes - Group mentions that the session is being recorded

[E. INTERCULTURAL RECEPTIVITY] E.1 Intercultural Receptivity - Closed/Threatened, E.2 Intercultural Receptivity - Looking to discover other culture, E.3 Intercultural Receptivity - Looking to discover how another culture reads the Bible, E.4 Intercultural Receptivity - Recognizing cultural differences from partner group, E.5 Intercultural Receptivity - Recognizing characteristics of culture in the passage, E.6 Intercultural Receptivity - Recognizing cultural similarities in passage, E.6 Intercultural Receptivity - Recognizing own culture's characteristics


- Power Distance – Low, G.8 Cultural Characteristics - Short-term time orientation, G.9 Cultural Characteristics - Uncertainty avoidance – high, G.91 Cultural Characteristics - Uncertainty avoidance – low,

[H. INTERPRETATION HERMENEUTIC] H.01 Interpretation Hermeneutic – Contemplative, H.02 Interpretation Hermeneutic – Dogmatic, H.03 Interpretation Hermeneutic - Focused on surviving tragedy, H.04 Interpretation Hermeneutic - Reference to historical background/setting of passage, H.05 Interpretation Hermeneutic - Identification with the father, H.06 Interpretation Hermeneutic - Identification with the older son, H.07 Interpretation Hermeneutic - Identification with the servant, H.08 Interpretation Hermeneutic - Identification with the younger son, H.09 Interpretation Hermeneutic - Interpreting as a non-Christian, H.1 Interpretation Hermeneutic – Liberative, H.11 Interpretation Hermeneutic - Identification with all in the story, H.12 Interpretation Hermeneutic - Identification with both sons, H.2 Interpretation Hermeneutic – Literal, H.3 Interpretation Hermeneutic - Pietistic/Spiritual, H.4 Interpretation Hermeneutic – Psychological, H.5 Interpretation Hermeneutic – Transformational, H.6 Interpretation Hermeneutic – Moralistic


[J. ENCOUNTER EXPERIENCE] J.1 Encounter Experience - Heard from someone else, J.2 Encounter Experience – Personal


M. PERSONAL DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES

N. THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS
N.01 Theological Insights - Be satisfied with what you have, N.02 Theological Insights - God never forgets you/always thinking of you, N.03 Theological Insights - God will always forgive us, N.04 Theological Insights - God will always love us, N.05 Theological Insights - Life can be unfair but you have to deal with it, N.06 Theological Insights - The son represents us, N.07 Theological Insights - Our motivation for repentance does not matter to God, N.08 Theological Insights - Parable expresses relationship between Jesus and humanity, N.09 Theological Insights - Parable to describe Jews and Gentiles, N.1 Theological Insights - We need to forgive/accept others, N.11 Theological Insights - The sons represent humanity, N.12 Theological Insights - The older son represents a church-going non-Christian, N.13 Theological Insights - God would make you a celebration feast, N.14 Theological Insights - The story is a pattern for evangelism, N.15 Theological Insights - The older son gained a reward that was much bigger and longer than the son's reward, N.16 Theological Insights - Focus on the positive side of life, N.17 Theological Insights - Don't stay angry, N.18 Theological Insights - Think about how you spend your money, N.19 Theological Insights - Think first then act, N.2 Theological Insights - We should not be jealous, N.21 Theological Insights - Don't chose the easy way out, N.22 Theological Insights - The sons reversed roles (bad/good), N.23 Theological Insights - Older son represents a non-Christian, N.24 Theological Insights - The older brother only is used to represent contrast between the two sons, N.25 Theological Insights - The older brother represents a resentful Christian, N.26 Theological Insights - 'Lost and found' Did the younger son lose his Christianity?, N.27 Theological Insights - We still need God, not just the things He gives us, N.28 Theological Insights - We're always going to be God's children and we have to choose him, N.29 Theological Insights - You should open your arms and accept people even if their motivation in coming to you is selfish, N.3 Theological Insights - You're always able to come back to the Lord, N.31 Theological Insights - The older son was storing up treasures in heaven, N.32 Theological Insights - The story is unresolved at the end, N.33 Theological Insights - It's like when we leave God to go find something better, N.34 Theological insights - God allows us to learn and come back to him, N.35 Theological Insights - The younger son never had to say his speech of repentance, N.36 Theological Insights - It is about kindness, N.37 Theological Insights - People like the younger brother should change and learn from their experiences, N.38 Theological Insights - Love our family even if they behave badly, N.39 Theological Insights - Jesus wants to teach people about endurance, N.4 Theological Insights - Why does the younger son come home? Repentance or hunger?, N.41 Theological Insights - The story is not just, N.42 Theological Insights - It's never too late to repent, N.5 Theological Insights - God is the Father, N.6 Theological Insights - God loves all his children equally, N.7 Theological Insights - I can have a wonderful life even though people persecute me, N.8 Theological Insights - God is always there for us, N.9 Theological Insights - The story is the message of salvation
[O. EXPRESSED ICB AS INFLUENCE FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH] O.1 ICB as influence for spiritual growth - Expressed negative, O.2 ICB as influence for spiritual growth - Expressed neutral, O.3 ICB as influence for spiritual growth - Expressed positive

[P. FEELINGS ABOUT ICB PROCESS ITSELF] P.1 Feelings about ICB process itself – Negative, P.2 Feelings about ICB process itself – Other, P.3 Feelings about ICB process itself – Positive

[Q. REACTIONS TO PARTNER GROUP] Q.01 Reactions to partner group - Recognized partner group interpretation as personal, Q.02 Reactions to partner group - Recognized partner group interpretation as grounded in story, Q.03 Reactions to partner group - Recognized partner group wanting to change based on story, Q.04 Reactions to partner group - Recognized partner group has similar interpretation, Q.05 Reactions to partner group - Offer for further contact, Q.06 Reactions to partner group - Recognized partner group’s own interaction as friendly, Q.07 Reactions to partner group - Recognized partner group not changing due to story, Q.08 Reactions to partner group - Had spiritual question for partner group, Q.09 Reactions to partner group - Non-spiritual question for partner group, Q.10 Reactions to partner group - Answered partner group’s questions, Q.11 Reactions to partner group - Noticed difficulties in partner group’s family relationships, Q.12 Reactions to partner group - Noticed spiritual focus of partner group’s interpretation, Q.13 Reactions to partner group - Noticed culture differences from partner group, Q.14 Reactions to partner group - Noticed partner group's interpretation as socially conscious, Q.15 Reactions to partner group - Noticed partner group has spiritual focus for meeting, Q.16 Reactions to partner group - Noticed differences in partner group’s interpretation, Q.17 Reactions to partner group - Disagreement with partner group’s interpretation, Q.18 Reactions to partner group - Discussion to resolve differences from partner group’s interpretation, Q.19 Reactions to partner group - A change in perspective due to interaction with partner group, Q.20 Reactions to partner group - Noticed no personal details in partner group’s report, Q.21 Reactions to partner group - Realized that partner group is not Christian, Q.22 Reactions to partner group - Noticed cultural similarities to partner group, Q.23 Reactions to partner group - Noticed group procedural difference in partner group, Q.24 Reactions to partner group - Difficulty understanding the language, Q.25 Reactions to partner group - Noticed gender differences in partner group, Q.26 Reactions to partner group - Partner group seemed more similar than different

[R. TRANSFORMATIONAL MOMENTS] R.01 Transformational moments-Change in perspective about text, R.02 Transformational moments-Change in perspective about self, R.03 Transformational moments-Change in perspective about partner group
Appendix B: Group Materials List


_______, "Yamato Group Background." Sapporo, Japan, 2011.

_______, "Yamato Group Reading 2 Transcript." Sapporo, Japan, 2011.


_______, "Brookwood Group Reading 1 Transcript." South Carolina, United States, 2009.

_______, "Brookwood Group Reading 2 Transcript." South Carolina, United States, 2009.

_______, "Brookwood Group Reading Final Letter." South Carolina, United States, 2009.


_______, "Crossroads Group Reading 1 Transcript." Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2009.

_______, "Crossroads Group Reading 2 Transcript." Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2009.

_______, "Crossroads Group Reading 3 Transcript." Amsterdam, Netherlands, 2010.


GatewayBoys. "Gateway Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript." South Carolina, United States, 2011.

_______, "Gateway Boys Group Survey 1." South Carolina, United States, 2011.
GatewayBoys. "Gateway Boys Group Reading 1 Transcript." South Carolina, United States, 2011.


LaBelle. "Labelle Group Reading 1 Transcript." South Carolina, United States, 2010.

LaBelle. "Labelle Group Reading 2 Transcript." South Carolina, United States, 2011.


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