

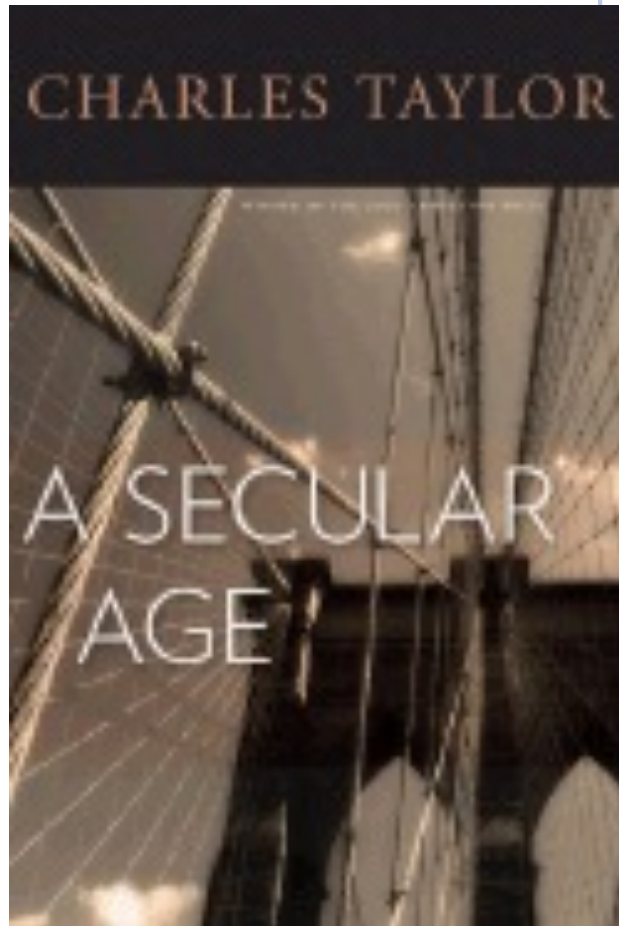
An abstract graphic on the left side of the slide consists of several overlapping squares. Some squares have solid blue borders, while others have dashed blue borders. They are arranged in a complex, layered pattern that extends across the left half of the slide.

# How to “Find Yourself” in a Secular Age

Rev. Dr. Chad Lakies  
Regional Director, North America  
Lutheran Hour Ministries



## A Secular Age – what it is



How did we go from a time, say 1500, when Christianity was the default identity of nearly everyone born in the North Atlantic world, to a time when Christianity (or any religion) is merely an option?

~the animating question of *A Secular Age*



A Secular Age – what it is

Faith is private.

Public sphere is emptied  
of religion.

Secular 1



## A Secular Age – what it is

Religion and religious participation is declining.

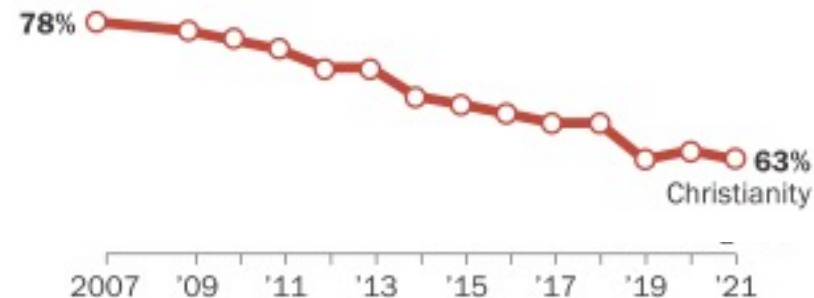
People are disaffiliating from religion.

Secular 2

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## In U.S., roughly three-in-ten adults now religiously unaffiliated

*% of U.S. adults who identify with ...*



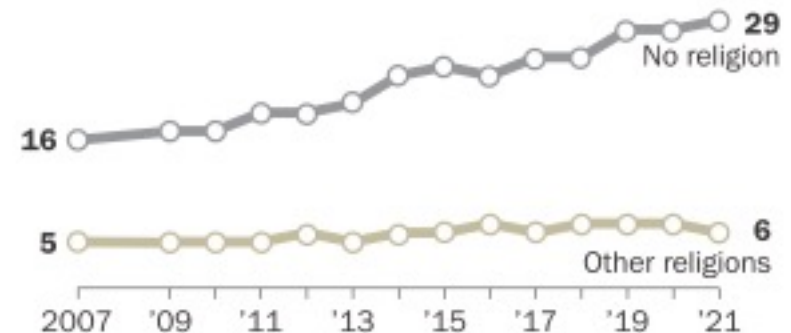
Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

Source: Data from 2020-21 based on Pew Research Center's National Public Opinion Reference Surveys (NPORS), conducted online and by mail among a nationally representative group of respondents recruited using address-based sampling. All data from 2019 and earlier from the Center's random-digit-dial telephone surveys, including the 2007 and 2014 Religious Landscape Studies. See Methodology for details.

"About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated"

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

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"About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated"

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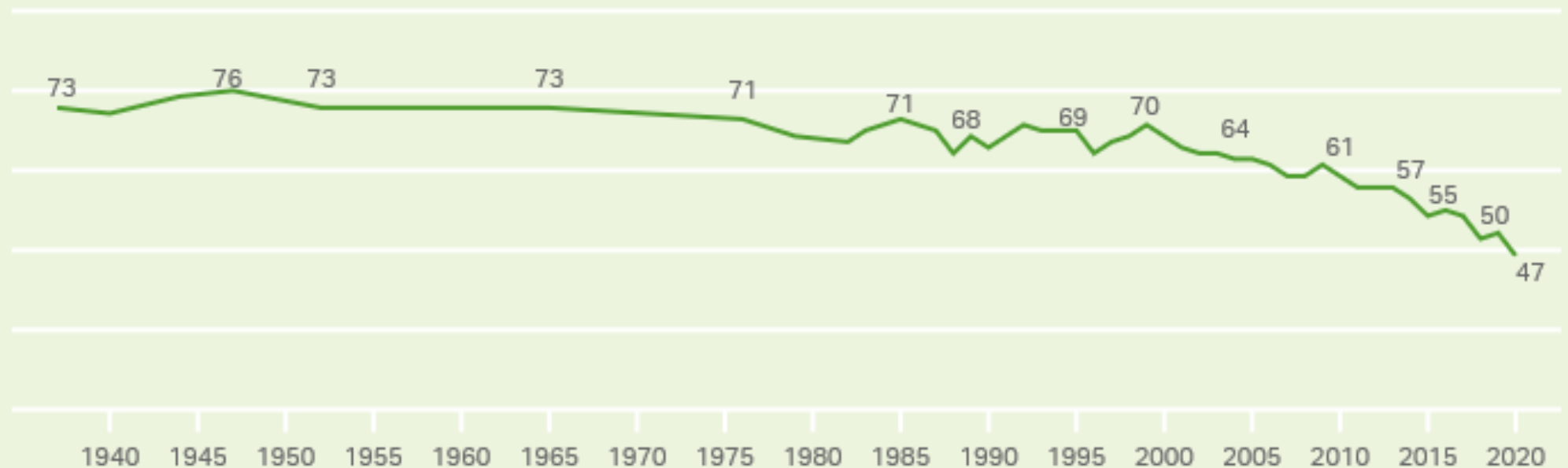
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<https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>

## Church Membership Among U.S. Adults Now Below 50%

Do you happen to be a member of a church, synagogue or mosque?

— % Yes, member



Based on annual aggregated data, usually based on two surveys

GALLUP

Source: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

 **CONTEXT - Naming our fears**

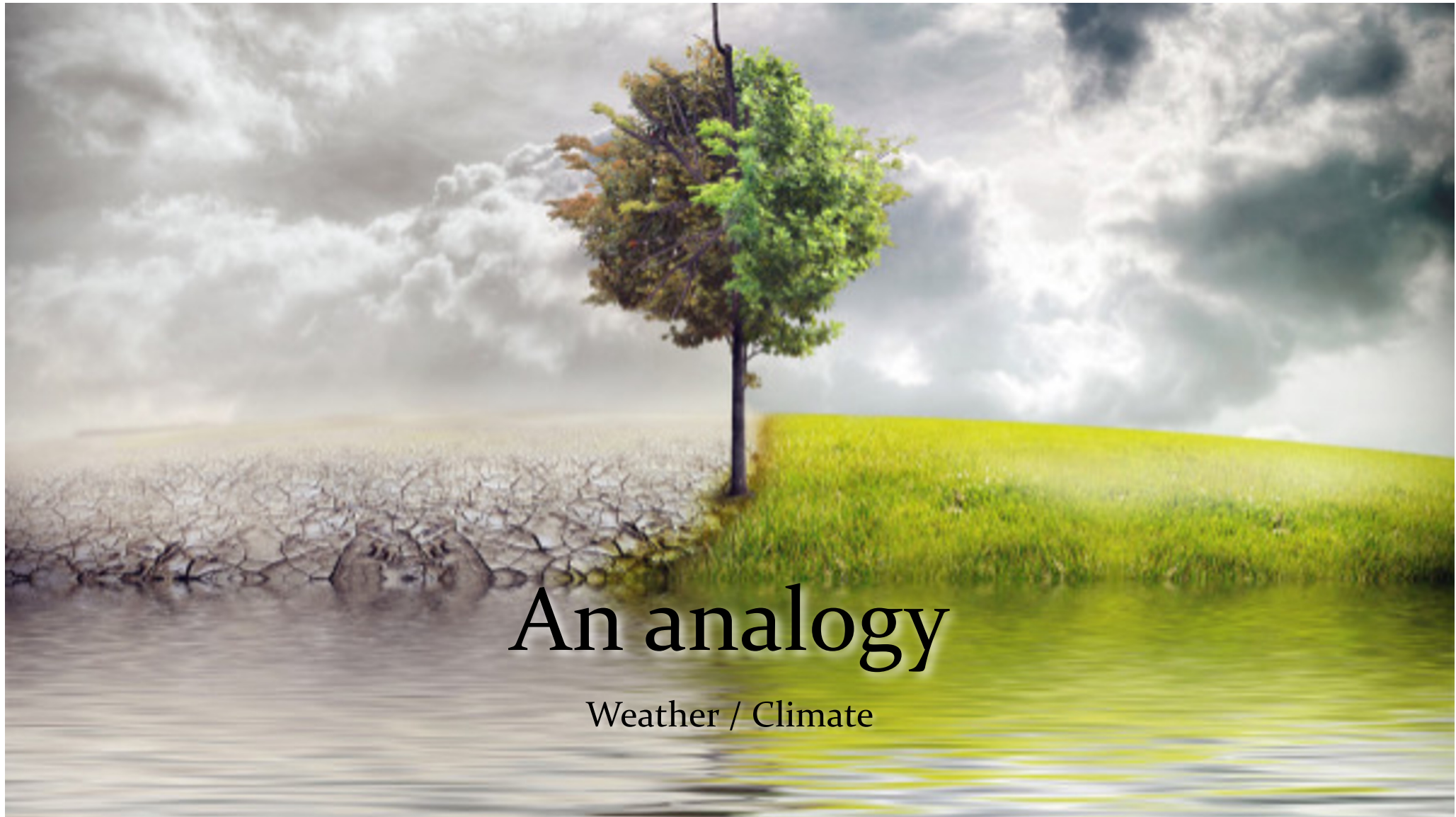
**Where are they?**

**Why did they go?**

**What can we do?**

Problems to address: church decline,  
disaffiliation – how do we stave off the  
bleeding, the loss?





# An analogy

Weather / Climate





A Secular Age – what it is

# Implausibility

belief is contestable and therefore, contested

Secular 3

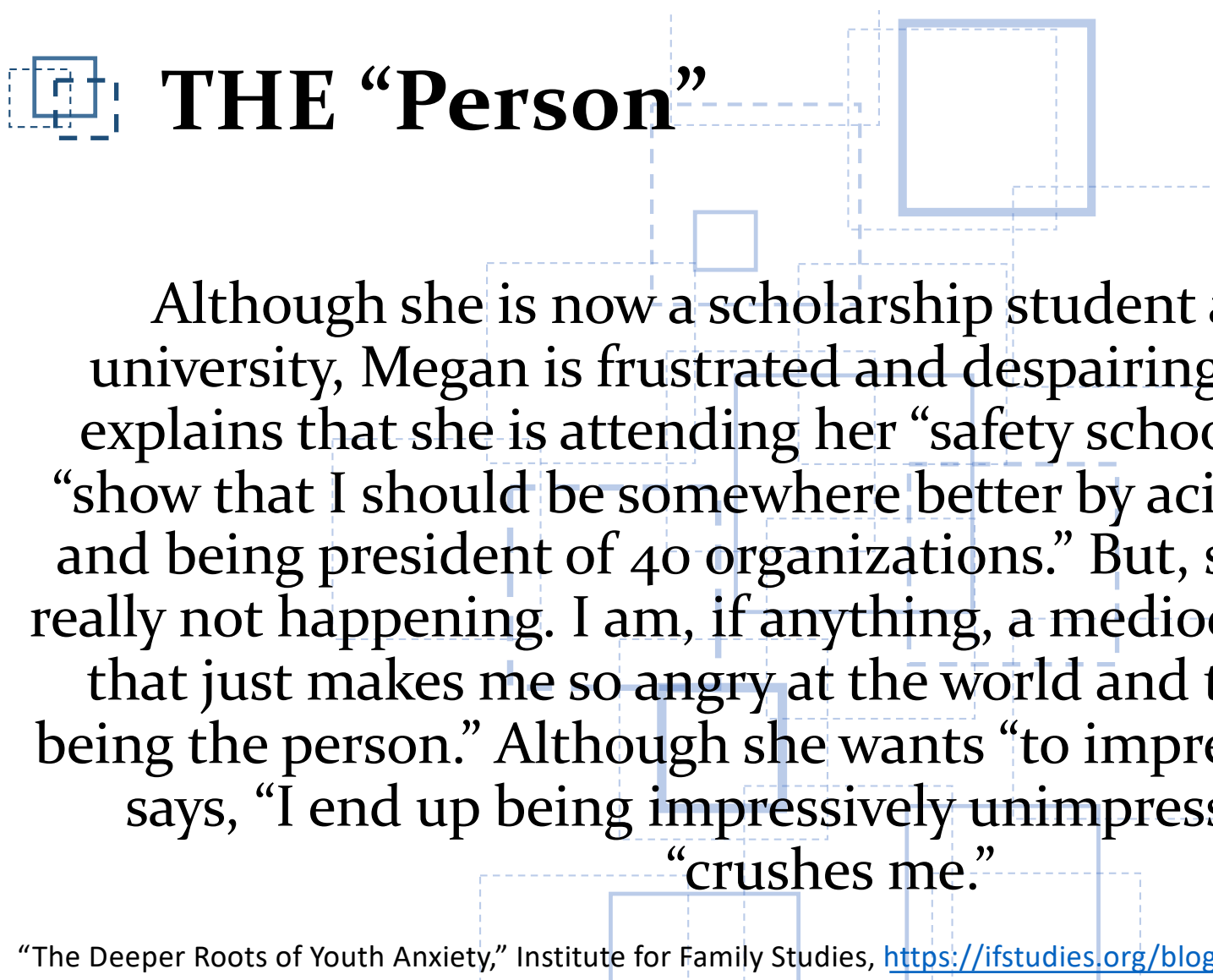


# **“Finding Yourself” in a Secular Age**



## THE “Person”

Megan, 19, wants to stand out and be “the person,” but she perceives herself to be falling short. The problem began in high school. She attended an elite academy, where she began “to feel like I was mediocre or below average.” Earlier, at a regular school, she “was the smartest person in the class” and had been on the gifted and talented track since the fifth grade. This heady recognition made her feel special. But then came the academy, where she was surrounded by very bright, high-achieving kids. She began to “feel marginalized” and yearned to “feel special again.” These feelings carried over into college.



## THE “Person”

Although she is now a scholarship student at a first-rate university, Megan is frustrated and despairing of herself. She explains that she is attending her “safety school” and wants to “show that I should be somewhere better by acing all my classes and being president of 40 organizations.” But, she adds, “that is really not happening. I am, if anything, a mediocre student ... and that just makes me so angry at the world and then me for not being the person.” Although she wants “to impress someone,” she says, “I end up being impressively unimpressive,” and that “crushes me.”

“The Deeper Roots of Youth Anxiety,” Institute for Family Studies, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-deeper-roots-of-youth-anxiety>

The background features a complex arrangement of overlapping squares. Some squares have solid blue borders, while others have dashed blue borders. These squares are of various sizes and are positioned in a way that they overlap each other, creating a layered, architectural effect. The overall composition is centered around the main text.

**What do we want when we  
want to “find” ourselves?**



# Enoughness

Am I enough?

How do I know?

# Affirmation

Do I belong?

Am I wanted here?

# Who Am I?

What makes me unique?

Am I loveable?

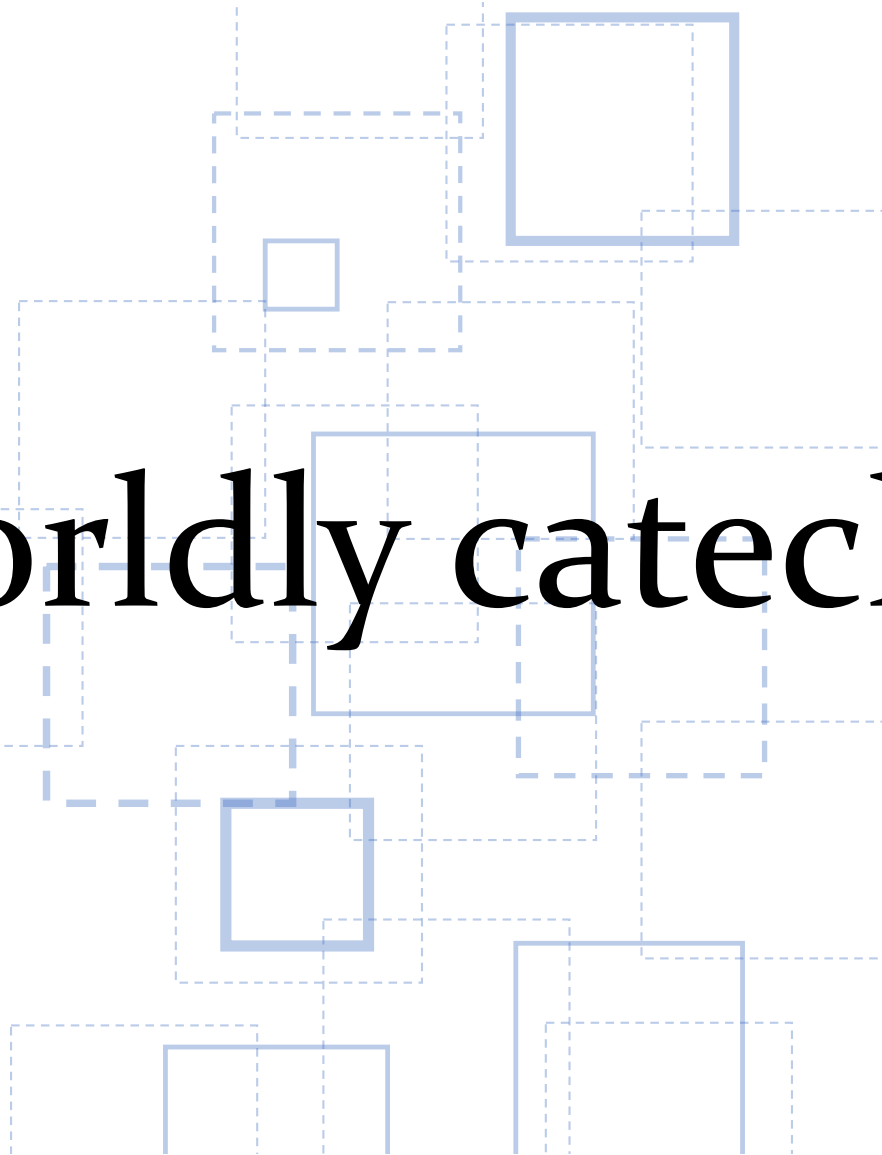
# Meaningfulness

Does my life matter?

How can I be part of something bigger than myself?



# A worldly catechesis







**Train up a child in the  
way he should go;  
even when he is old he  
will not depart from it.**

Proverbs 22.6



# HAVE IT YOUR WAY.®

You have the right to have what you want,  
exactly when you want it. Because on the menu of  
life, you are "Today's Special". And tomorrow's.  
And the day after that. And... well, you get the  
drift. Yes, that's right. We may be the King,  
but you my friend, are the almighty ruler.

**EST. 1954**



©2010 PRIVATE LABEL MEXICAN WHISKY, INC.



## Well-Trained

Follow your heart.  
March to the beat of your own drummer.  
Be true to yourself.  
You do you.  
Be interesting; watchable.  
Have it your way.



We have trained them well.

Unintended consequences  
of good intentions.





# The Age of Authenticity (beginning 1960s)

- Defined by basic assumption –
  - “that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from the outside” (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486)
- Consider formative context – 1960s onward
  - Mantras of society
  - Passed down generationally
  - To what extent are WE complicit?
  - BUT is authenticity all bad?



# Authenticity

**What are we seeking when we're seeking authenticity?**

- “realizing *some* possibility [of/for myself] on my own terms” (Smith)
- Authenticity is/requires total freedom to pursue these ends
- Freedom is “leaving” – cf. The Prodigal Son; young St. Augustine
  - This is *negative* freedom – freedom “from;” the removal of external constraints
  - Consider all the “on the road” or “journey” metaphors in pop culture
- Freedom here is really referring to a lack of constraints, boundaries, or guardrails which might offer wisdom for “what” to choose, “what” to desire and why

# Authenticity

- Ironically, we're looking for things that "captivate"
  - (AND...we also want to *be* captivating...)
- The pursuit of what "captivates" is exhausting – tossed by the winds and ways, running here and there after this and that
- Making choices, chasing freedom, can often become a new kind of bondage
  - cf. *Bondage of the Will*; Forde: "we do what we want, and that's just the problem"
  - Consider how addiction is framed: making choices is its own bondage, the thing chosen now a necessity – cf. "Desire. Use. Repeat" – Leslie Jamison, *The Recovering*

# Authenticity

- an “ethic” – it is a prescribed (authoritative) way of living
- Authenticity = no one has a right to define for others how life should be lived (it is forbidden to forbid)
- The Authority is internal: the self – you should follow what speaks to you
- We fight for this in our time
  - “rights” talk is often oriented around “wants”, such that rights often only reflect wants
- Despite the challenges, ethic of authenticity has a coherence that deserves respect; we should be open to it

# Authenticity: Affirmation & Critique

- Critique:

- The self is the source of all authority; feelings are sacrosanct
- BUT, there is no solo-self (genetics, education, class, culture, geography)
- We never “think for ourselves” but always WITH others
- What’s good for ME is easily pitted against another’s GOOD (competition)

- Affirmation

- Experience is central – let the stories be told (testimony?)
- Stories open a space for resonance between people – shared experiences
- Shared negation (death) experiences – some kind of trauma or suffering – opens a space for divine encounter
- Recognition and reciprocation

# Authenticity, Identity, and Religion

- Are feelings enough to determine who is truly Authentic?
  - Authenticity is an evaluative term: we judge something authentic (or not). It requires a background/standard against which to measure.
  - Consider it like bas relief: only against the background does the image stand out
  - Religion's "background" calls a person "out-of" rather than aiming them to look inward
  - Religion aims people outward, *for* others rather than themselves
  - This indicates what people might really be looking for – WE NEED A STORY!!



# What stories are we telling?

- Discover your callings
  - Not esoteric, not a journey – you are “called” now
  - Vocation ≠ Job
  - Various roles of responsibility (callings)
    - Family, Church, Citizen, Neighbor

# Identity: A Task or Given?

Identity matters most for our place(s) in community (recognition):

- Who am I?
- Am I ENOUGH? (cf. Scripture – righteous)
- Do I belong? Am I wanted
- Does my life matter

## Identity as TASK in the Age of Authenticity

“one now *needs to construct* her own community so that the self has a point of contact against which to be distinguished as an individual and by means of which he or she is able to name the group or network to which she has elected to be bound (for now).”

Zygmunt Baumann



# Identity: A Task or Given?

Identity matters most for our place(s) in community (recognition):

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## Identity as GIVEN – the Biblical Story

- “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.”  
1 Peter 2.10
- “Each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them.”  
1 Corinthians 7.17

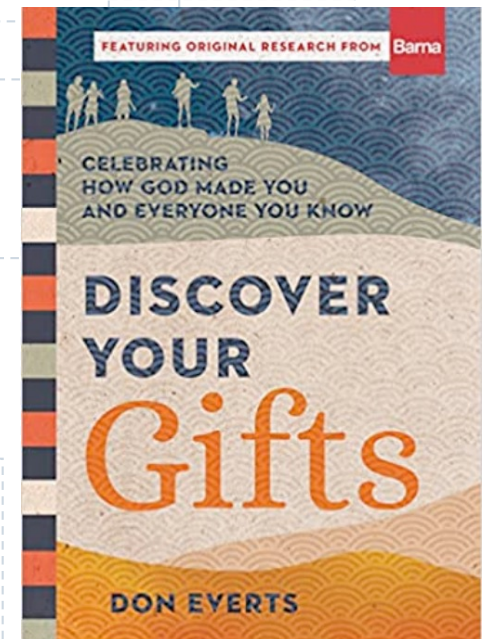
# What stories are we telling?

- Unwinding the anxiety of identity
  - Authentic identity is NOT a task
  - In our vocations, identity is GIVEN
    - (boundaries, guardrails, true freedom)
  - This is WHO you are – live into this
  - What is my life for? For the life of the world – *others*.
    - (Bonhoeffer, Gal. 2.20)
  - Created with Purpose (affirmation, enoughness)
  - Part of something bigger than yourself (meaningfulness)

# Not a silver bullet

- Competing allegiances
- Contestability & Implausibility
- The best witness for plausibility is a community that faithfully exhibits the Christian life (plausibility – is it really believable?)

What Can Help? Here's one tool...



Everyone is a gift with gifts to share!

Everyone is a  
gift with gifts to  
share!

**THESE GIFTINGS ARE:**



**TECHNICAL**

Performing specific tasks that require a special and refined set of skills



**INTERPERSONAL**

Interacting with, caring for and building relationships with others



**ENTREPRENEURIAL**

Identifying new opportunities, setting goals and designing strategies to achieve them



**FINANCIAL**

Planning, organizing, directing and controlling financial activities



**CRITICAL THINKING**

Processing data to problem-solve or make informed decisions



**ARTISTIC**

Expressing oneself in creative and artistic ways



**INTERCULTURAL**

Relating to people from other cultures and social groups



**COMMUNICATION**

Communicating with individuals or groups in a clear and engaging way



**LEADERSHIP**

Organizing people to reach a shared goal and effectively leading them toward that goal



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