

STACKED AGAINST THE ODDS: PREPARING TEENS TO STAND FIRM IN THE FAITH

BY

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to make a promise? Every year, there are many young Christians around the world who make their promise to remain faithful to God and to His Word. It would be easy to keep that promise in a perfect world, but Satan, the world, and our sinful flesh work very hard to distract and lure believers away from their loving God. Young adults have stated various reasons as to why they have fallen away from the church. Many of these reasons have been amplified by cultural changes that have done a great deal of harm to teens' emotional life and faith life. A responsibility and privilege of the church is to consider ways in which they can continue to share the means of grace with teens no matter the cultural changes that exist in each time period. This thesis will focus on the blessings of having a relationship with young adults as the church asks itself: How do we treat teens? What do we teach teens? How can we best incorporate teens? Answering these questions is the best way for the church to equip its young adults to remain steadfast in their promise to God and to His Word, even when the odds are stacked against them.

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Introduction

John D. Rockefeller Jr. once said, "I believe in the sacredness of a promise, that a man's word should be as good as his bond."¹ It should not be surprising to learn that the author of those words was the son of a renowned billionaire oil tycoon. Maybe the content of those words themselves are not all that surprising either, because many feel that you should be able to trust a man's promise, a man's word. You should be able to, but you cannot, because we do not live in a perfect world. Promises, although often well intentioned, are not always kept.

For example, a father may promise to take his four-year-old daughter to the park and have every intention of keeping it, but his work emails took priority. A company executive may promise job security to one of his factory workers and have every intention of keeping it, but company layoffs were inevitable. Promises like these may have good intentions behind them, but when someone fails to deliver on their word, consequences can ensue.

In contrast to the promise of a father or a company executive, a thirteen year old boy or girl's promise may seem insignificant. But just because the person making the promise may not have the same life experiences or age of another does not make their promise any less important. Place yourself in one of the pews at a confirmation service as young Christians make their promise to God. That is what separates this promise from other promises. An unkept promise to a friend, family member, employer, or employee may have earthly consequences. An unkept promise to God may have eternal consequences.

For that thirteen year old boy or girl, confirmation Sunday is one of the most exciting days of the year. And if the church's tradition is to have an examination in the service as well, it could also be one of the most nerve-wracking days of the year. But focusing on the positive,

¹ "John D. Rockefeller, Jr.," Accessed February 22 2019, <https://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1781.html>.

confirmation day marks the culmination of countless hours spent learning and studying the truth of God's Word. Standing up in front of family, friends, and fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, the confirmands will join the pastor in certain parts of the confirmation rite:

M: Do you intend to continue steadfast in this teaching and to endure all things, even death, rather than fall away from it?

R: I do, and I ask God to help me.²

This is their confirmation promise. We dare not assume that they will be "good to go." Just because they have professed their intent to stand firm in faith does not mean that they will. Having spent countless hours studying and learning the truth of God's Word does not make one a spiritual superstar. That assumption underestimates the power of sin and temptation in the world of a 21st century teenager. Satan continues to modify and adjust the temptations that he uses to distract and lure believers away from their loving God. From social media and cyberbullying to peer pressure and drugs or alcohol to shifting cultural influences and differing worldviews, the odds are stacked against teens.

Take a moment to look back and reread the question that is asked of the confirmands. It almost seems extreme to speak of enduring "even death" rather than fall away from the teaching found in God's Word. It is strong language. But then again, so were Jesus' warnings about how the world will treat those who bear his name.³

To warn and to protect against the possibility of spiritual death, the following question in the confirmation rite says this, and rightfully so:

M: Do you intend faithfully to conform all your life to the teachings of God's Word, to be faithful in the use of the Word and sacrament, and in faith and action remain true to God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as long as you live?

² *Christian Worship: Occasional Services*, (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 18.

³ Matt 10:22.

R: I do, and I ask God to help me.⁴

There is the way, the means by which God gives us his grace: the use of the Word and sacraments. This is not to be understood as an act which mankind does for God or to earn his favor. The means of grace are entirely the working of God as a free gift. The Word and sacraments are the only things through which he has promised to create and strengthen saving faith.

This entire thesis could very well focus on the promise that the confirmand makes to the Lord. But understanding that Satan will sometimes succeed at his work of ripping many of God's sheep away from the fold, where should the church focus? Take a look at the very next question that the minister addresses to the congregation in the confirmation rite.

M: Since it is God alone who enables us both to will and to do his good pleasure, it is right for us, dear friends in Christ, to call on him for *these confirmands*, that he would graciously complete the good work which he has begun in *them*.⁵

So what can the church do to best prepare the confirmands? What can the church do to best equip them to enter the 21st century world with a firm conviction that they would rather endure death than fall away from God? Proposing a solution is a difficult task, because teen ministry is different and unique in every place. That being said, there are a number of different things that a church and its pastor can do to help teens keep their promise to remain faithful to God. Perhaps the best way to think about potential solutions is by thinking about a relationship. First and foremost is the relationship that teens share with their God. This gift, given through the means of grace, can help enable teens to find their identity not in the material things of this world, their accomplishments, or what others think about them, but in Christ. Knowing their identity in Christ can help give teens the kind of focus that the confirmation rite encourages.

⁴ *Christian Worship: Occasional Services*, 18.

⁵ *Ibid*, 18.

Understanding this aspect of identity will also help pastors and youth workers to value the relationship opportunities that God has given them the privilege of having. Because their relationship is valued, pastors and youth workers will strive to educate and train teens with the best material possible and in the best manner possible. Finally, just as any relationship seeks to grow stronger over time, so relationships with teens will need to be nurtured. As the church seeks to nurture these relationships, it can do so by incorporating teen's gifts for ministry and by giving them opportunities to put their faith into practice as they seek to serve God. This type of depth and meaning in relationships will best encourage teens to remain strong in their promise to God, even when the times are changing and the odds are continually stacked against them.

Literature Review

Because the topic of teen ministry lies in the discipline of practical theology, there is a very wide range of opinions and suggestions, all with the goal of keeping teens connected to Christ as they move to the adult stage of life. First and foremost will be the consideration of the spiritual life of teens. The segment of written books, essays, and surveys will be covered first.

The Barna resource and research company in California has proven to be a capable aid in giving spiritual leaders data concerning various groups of believers within church bodies across North America. “Barna Group provides spiritual influencers with credible knowledge and clear thinking, enabling them to navigate a complex and changing culture.”⁶ Because their materials and publications cover the broader scope of Christianity in North America, their findings are helpful to paint a broad picture of spiritual life among teens in Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Protestant, and Reformed churches.

One picture on the spiritual life among teens can be found in *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church... And Rethinking Faith*. The author, David Kinnaman, is the president of the Barna group. One thing that was very appreciated in his writing was his ability to diagnose some of the problems in teen ministry. His objective writing does not seek to take sides or give blame, which could be quite easy to do. His goal, however, is to be realistic. He wants spiritual leaders in the church to understand that the dropout problem amongst young Christians is a very real issue. The key to finding a solution is to first understand the problem as best as possible. Only then can a church propose a realistic plan to help young adults continue to follow Christ amidst times of profound cultural and social change. Some of his greatest qualities as a writer are his evangelical approach to issues and his zeal to share the gospel with all. Although

⁶ "About," *Barna Group*, Accessed December of 2018, <https://www.barna.com/about/>.

he utilizes data that has been collected from surveys and interviews, he understands that every case is different, and most importantly, that every case matters.

Other resources echo that same sentiment. Professor Mark Cannister, who served as the chairman for the board of the Association for Youth Ministry and senior editor of the *Journal of Youth Ministry* authored the book *Teenagers Matter: Making Student Ministry a Priority in the Church*. In it, Cannister challenges youth leaders to rethink, restructure, and refresh the youth ministry that has been given to them. So often, it can be quite easy to become content when the numbers in a teen ministry seem healthy. A youth ministry, in his eyes, needs to be discontent and dissatisfied in order to avoid apathy. He speaks a great deal on the importance of passing on faith to the next generation, noting that it is not something that can simply be given. Each generation must rediscover the gospel for itself. The church's job is to continuing encouraging growth in that gift of faith, assimilating young Christians and their talents into the church. Both of the books listed above include detailed discussions on how spirituality has changed with the times, noting significant cultural changes.

In order to best understand some of these significant cultural changes that young Christians experience, one must "step into their shoes." This allows youth ministry leaders to see and understand the very real influences that can attack the foundation of faith. *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, by Dr. Jean Twenge, was instrumental in that endeavor. Dr. Twenge, for the most part, steps away from the spiritual life of a young Christian. Although she spends a chapter on religion and spirituality, the goal of her book is to describe a normal day in the life of a 21st century teenager. This book especially notes the impact of social media and technology on a teen. Mental health, academic pressure, and behavior are other topics

that should be of considerable interest for those who have a great amount of interaction and impact on teens.

Teen ministries around the world need to take a well rounded approach when putting forth an action plan. Take the time to study the dropout problem. Talk to some young Christians. Realize the different challenges in their lives. Remove any stumbling blocks that could get in the way of the gospel message. Try new things. Providing opportunities for young Christians to encounter the means of grace is an important first step, but it should not be the only step. Knowing of God's promises to them, many young Christians have made a promise to remain faithful to God. The church's task is to continue analyzing the best approach to reach these young Christians, reminding them of their identity in Christ and the importance of having a strong connection with him.

Part One: Young Adult Losses within the Church

One could call it “confirmation syndrome.” After having spent years studying and learning the truth of God's Word, many young people across various Christian denominations seem to disappear after their confirmation day. Some teens remain faithful, but others are rarely seen or heard from. What is happening? That is a great question that has been asked for decades. It is important to note that teens today, in the 21st century, did not begin what has been called "confirmation syndrome." This was already happening in the 1950s and early 1960s. The Lily foundation, a foundation for human development, discovered that 40 percent of those confirmed during that time period no longer belonged to or attended church regularly.⁷ The numbers today, however, are much more alarming.

In researcher David Kinnamon's *You Lost Me*, he states that 59% of young people with a Christian background report that they had or have “dropped out of attending church, after going regularly.”⁸ But it gets worse. Only 1 in 11 teens is considered by Barna to be an “engaged Christian.”⁹ It is not only the fact that the church is losing its young Christians for a variety of reasons. It is also the fact that many of the ones who remained connected to the church are not “engaged” in a way that would be most beneficial to their faith life.

Were any WELS teens surveyed for those findings? It is certainly possible. But if some object to that fact, here are some findings from within our own synod.

WELS College Campus Ministry has 7,000+ students on their database. But a study of WELS campus ministries scattered through the country reveal that only 1,000 of them are

⁷ Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 25.

⁸ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church... And Rethinking Faith*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 23.

⁹ Kate Shellnutt, "Get Ready, Youth Group Leaders: Teens Twice as Likely to Identify as Atheist or LGBT," *Christianity Today*, Published 23 January 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/january/youth-group-leaders-generation-z-atheist-lgbt-teens-barna.html>.

“active” in faith. That means an astonishing 86% of them are sputtering, hit ‘n’ miss, or on the path of drifting away from faith.

The short of it is this: WELS is bleeding youth between the ages of 14-24 years old. Two “off ramps” are becoming increasingly clear: post-confirmation and high school graduation.

When you compare these numbers with the 81,000 students we have in these age groups, you see we are not serving them as well as we could.¹⁰

Whether the statistics are presented by a secular company such as the Barna group or from a study within the WELS, the indication is that no church body is immune to this phenomenon. As was stated before, those are alarming numbers.

Why? That simple question will be instrumental in the proposal of possible solutions. This issue is not one that can be explained by one single cause. Obviously, it would be ideal if that was the case, but this is not a topic with a simple fix. The lives of teens, or any Christian for that matter, are never that simple and clear cut. Research, surveys, and interviews have pinpointed a number of different reasons that could be responsible for the dramatic drop off in attendance that occurs after confirmation or high school graduation.

To give a brief overview of some reasons, two studies will be compared. Before doing so, a distinction must be made. According to the Barna Group, Generation Y, the “millennial” generation are those born from 1984-1998. Generation Z, the “iGen” generation are those born from 1999-2015.¹¹ The first study was one published by the Barna Group in 2011. Although much of this study does apply to the teens from Generation Y, the “millennial” generation, it will give a good indication of what reasons are continuing to be relevant today. The other study was

¹⁰ These numbers were given to me in an email from Pastor Donn Dobberstein, the WELS Director of Discipleship, received February 18, 2019.

¹¹ "Gen Z and Morality: What Teens Believe (So Far)," *Barna Group*, Accessed December of 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-morality/>.

one published by Pew Research in 2018. Much of their results echo findings from a similar study that was issued in 2016. The Pew Research study will help to detail the thoughts of current teens, also known as Generation Z or the iGens. First are the results of the Barna Group study from 2011.

- Reason #1: Churches seem overprotective.
- Reason #2: Teens' and twentysomethings' experience of Christianity is shallow.
- Reason #3: Churches come across as antagonistic to science.
- Reason #4: Young Christians' church experiences related to sexuality are often simplistic, judgmental.
- Reason #5: They wrestle with the exclusive nature of Christianity.
- Reason #6: The church feels unfriendly to those who doubt.¹²

Second are the results of the Pew Research study from 2018 that echo similar findings from a 2016 study. Specific explanations included the following statements:

- Reason #1: Learning about evolution when I went away to college.
- Reason #2: Religion is the opiate of the people.
- Reason #3: Rational thought makes religion go out the window.
- Reason #4: Lack of any sort of scientific evidence of a creator.
- Reason #5: I just realized somewhere along the line that I didn't really believe it.
- Reason #6: I'm doing a lot more learning, studying, and kind of making decisions myself rather than listening to someone else.¹³

It is not exactly a perfect match, but notice many of the similarities between answers given in 2010 and 2018.

Evolution, science, evidence, and reason all appeared in both lists, sometimes more than once. If it appears more than once, it must be a very real concern for young Christians. They hear in church how God created the world, but then they go to science class and are inundated with evolutionistic theory. How do they balance what they have heard in church, in the classroom, and at their jobs? "The research shows that many science-minded young Christians are struggling to

¹² "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," *Barna Group*, Published 27 September 2011, <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>.

¹³ J. Warner Wallace, "Young Christians are leaving the church—Here's why," *Fox News*, Published 9 September 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/young-christians-are-leaving-the-church-heres-why>.

find ways of staying faithful to their beliefs and to their professional calling in science-related industries.”¹⁴

Science is an immense blessing from God. It can be used to show the magnificence of God’s creative ability. It can be used to detail the intricate workings of God’s glorious creation. However, science has limits. It cannot probe the hidden mind of God. It cannot explain all of creation, and it is not meant to. When it comes to science and logic, it must be understood that they are always secondary to the Word and power of God. There is comfort in this fact, that God never asks believers to understand everything. He asks believers to trust.

Sitting through their science classes, many young Christians notice a tension. This tension leads to the false idea that the two things are incompatible, that one must choose religion or science, faith or reason.

Issues of science are one of the significant points of disconnection between the next generation and Christianity. Many times churches are unprepared to help adults navigate an increasingly complex world where scientific breakthroughs seem to happen every day. This lack of preparation is due in part to the perceived long-running culture war between science and religion that has been fought, on various battlegrounds, for centuries. Might it be that the church is so used to being science’s debate opponent that we’ve forgotten how to be anything else? If so, we have a problem.¹⁵

It does not have to be that way. Science and religion are compatible, because they both come from the same gracious Creator! Recognizing that fact, how do pastors and teachers view questions of science that seem to contradict creation, or even faith for that matter? Picture the Lutheran Sunday school class with a student who has never heard the story of creation before. Picture the Bible information class with the prospective member who is an avid evolutionist. Is it not often easier to give a well-rehearsed answer about the validity of the Bible's creation account

¹⁴ "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," *Barna Group*, Published 27 September 2011, <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>.

¹⁵ Kinnaman, 132.

and then move on? Absolutely! And that is the issue. “Science appears to welcome questions and skepticism, while matters of faith seem impenetrable.”¹⁶ Of course, this finding can be a bit overstated. It would be hard to find a pastor or teacher who would not be willing to welcome a question of science if it was a burden on the heart and mind of a believer. The finding does, however, show the very real concerns that Christians have concerning science and religion. Though it may not apply to every church, these are some of the common perceptions:

“Christians are too confident they know all the answers” (35%). Three out of ten young adults with a Christian background feel that “churches are out of step with the scientific world we live in” (29%). Another one-quarter embrace the perception that “Christianity is anti-science” (25%). And nearly the same proportion (23%) said they have “been turned off by the creation-versus-evolution debate.”¹⁷

Young Christians need to know that the church does in fact welcome the opportunity to answer questions that lie in the realm of science. There are certainly limitations when answering these questions, as pastors and teachers are often untrained in advanced fields of science. However, pastors and teachers can strive to say what God says in His Word, being cautious never to say too much, but to speak boldly the words that he has given.

A “shallow” experience of Christianity was also noted in the first study by teens and twentysomethings. The results of a “shallow” experience tend to lead to one of two things: an abandonment of faith or an independence of faith. For this reason, the second commonality among the two studies will be described as faith life experience.

If something is deemed to be “shallow,” it usually does not carry the most positive connotation. It gives the implication that something lacks a certain depth that is very crucial for progress. In the case of a faith life experience, depth is a goal! Churches want their members to

¹⁶ Ibid, 93.

¹⁷ “Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church,” *Barna Group*, Published 27 September 2011, <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>.

have a rich and mature faith. When that does not happen, it can lead to feelings of displeasure, disappointment, or frustration. This type of frustration was noted specifically with young Christians who left church. For them, it is all about meaning, impact, and relevance.

Nearly one-third (31 percent) described the church as boring. One-quarter indicated that faith is not relevant to their career or interests (24 percent), that the church does not prepare them for real life (23 percent), that the church does not help them find their purpose (23 percent), and that the Bible is not taught clearly enough or often enough (23 percent). One out of five young people (20 percent) expressed that God seems missing from their experience of church.”¹⁸

It is shocking to read that in a church, the very place where God is taught and proclaimed, young Christians feel that God appears to be missing. The church should be the place where faith maturation occurs, the place where their faith can find continual depth and relevance. If that is not the case in some churches, what do young Christians do? Where do they turn for spiritual guidance? Many of them turn to any place except the church, looking to drugs or alcohol, friends or celebrities, even to themselves.

The drive of young Christians to find a deeper relevance and meaning of faith is certainly something to be praised. It is the hope of churches that their members never become complacent or apathetic. Independence is a very important stage as teens move to adolescence and adulthood. The time during college gives young Christians a taste of independent living and decision making. With mantras like “be all you can be” or “you can make yourself to be whatever you dream,” it only makes sense that this unfortunate ideology carries over into their spiritual lives as well.

¹⁸ Kinnaman, 116.

Jesus understood the power and persuasiveness of spiritual independence, and also its many pitfalls. This is one of the reasons why Jesus intended that the church gather together regularly, to protect against that.¹⁹ Kinnaman states:

Millions of young adults leave active involvement in church as they exit their teen years. Some never return, while others live indefinitely at the margins of the faith community, attempting to define their own spirituality. Some return to robust engagement with an established church, while some remain faithful through the transition from adolescence to adulthood and beyond.²⁰

Although many teens had been actively involved in their church during their early years, many ended up leaving. This shows that churches struggled to incorporate teens, as they matured, into the church body as a whole. When teens are less involved, they can begin to feel isolated from their church body, turning to the popular thought that it is “just me and J.C. (Jesus Christ).”²¹

The third similarity that occurred between the lists has to do with the “exclusivity” of Christianity. Much of this impact can be traced to the impact of a culture that preaches tolerance and acceptance.

Most young adults want to find areas of common ground with each other, sometimes even if that means glossing over real differences. Three out of ten young Christians (29%) said “churches are afraid of the beliefs of other faiths” and an identical proportion felt they are “forced to choose between my faith and my friends.” One-fifth of young adults with a Christian background said “church is like a country club, only for insiders” (22%).²²

¹⁹ Heb 10:25.

²⁰ Kinnaman, 19.

²¹ Mark Cannister, *Teenagers Matter: Making Student Ministry a Priority in the Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 134.

²² "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," *Barna Group*, Published 27 September 2011, <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>.

Exclusive was never a word that was in God's vocabulary. He never desired to limit his salvation. Rather, he desires that all be saved!²³ He desires that all be led to repentance!²⁴ He desires not that Jesus die for some, but for the whole world!²⁵ In spite of these truths, many teens have come to believe the church to be nothing more than a club or a group. They picture a bouncer at the door, allowing only some in because they have the right name, background, or credentials.

The accusation of "exclusiveness" is often thrown around when it comes to calling out sin and sticking up for the truth of God's Word. Because of the cultural effects of tolerance and acceptance, young Christians who have fallen away from the church want to believe that there are many paths to God. "If we look at the overall picture, eighteen to twenty-nine-year-olds are more likely than the previous generation of Americans to believe in religious pluralism."²⁶

Karl Marx, a German philosopher, would argue that it is even pointless to believe in religious pluralism. He once stated, "religion is the opiate of the people." That statement is eerily similar to another reason which young Christians gave in the Pew Research study, that religion is an opiate of the people. So how does this connect to exclusivity of Christianity? An opiate is a drug that clouds the mind. It dulls the senses, and prevents people from seeing the world as it truly is. That is exactly what Karl Marx believed concerning religion. With the logical mind clouded, believers cannot see the world as it truly is. As a result, they become close minded and

²³ 1 Tim 2:4.

²⁴ 2 Pet 3:9.

²⁵ John 3:16.

²⁶ Kinnaman, 176.

bigoted. This so called “exclusive” mindset denies the truth of Scripture, that there is in fact only one way to heaven.²⁷

Perhaps the last and biggest of the similarities in the list is the issue of doubt. When it comes to the church, how do they handle those who have doubts? “Twentysomethings frequently feel isolated from their parents and other older adults in the realm of faith and spirituality. Many young people feel that older adults don’t understand their doubts and concerns.”²⁸ This issue also plays into the reason given concerning the church and science. Creating an open environment in the church for asking questions is essential. “One-third of young Christians (36 percent) agree that ‘I don’t feel that I can ask my most pressing life questions in church.’ One out of ten (10 percent) put it more bluntly: ‘I am not allowed to talk about my doubts in church.’”²⁹ There is often this stereotype that the church is a place for those who are strong in faith and spiritually healthy. Jesus makes it quite clear that he came to be the physician for the spiritually ill.³⁰ The church is for sinners; for those who have doubts and need the reassurance of God’s promise of forgiveness in His Word and sacraments.

Teens and twentysomethings are in a crucial moment in their spiritual development. Some are heading off to liberal universities, where Satan works hard to stir doubt in the heart of believers. However, the reasons for their doubt can be quite diverse.

Many Christians believe that people who experience doubts simply lack the proper evidence or depth of conviction. But doubt is a far more nuanced and slippery experience that involves personality, lack of fulfillment, notions about certainty, relational alienation, and even mental health.³¹

²⁷ John 14:6.

²⁸ Kinnaman, 28-29.

²⁹ Ibid, 192.

³⁰ Luke 5:31.

³¹ Kinnaman, 187.

When the perception is out there that people doubt because of a lack of proper evidence or depth of conviction, it essentially insults the young adult. The perceived notion that churches do not handle these tensions well adds fuel to the belief that the church is unfriendly towards those who doubt, when that may in fact be the furthest thing from truth.

It is important that churches do all they can to create an open space where any and every question is welcome. Of greater importance would be the proclamation of gospel truths. For those struggling with doubt, they may need to be reminded of some gospel truths. Speak of their baptism, reminding them of how God made them his own by placing his name on them and cleansing them of their sin. Speak of who they are in Christ, of their new identity. Speak of their Savior, who is the cure to their doubts and who gives the certainty to overcome doubts. It is true that God's Word does have some hard things to accept, but once again, God does not ask believers to understand everything. He asks them to trust.

These lists are not meant to shame churches for the work they do or to criticize their approach to ministry. It simply lays out some of the facts. Young Christians today are struggling. Yes, young Christians have always struggled, just as all Christians do. Future Christians will also struggle. Because the results have come from a variety of sources, surveys, and interviews, it can give insights as to why there are young adult losses within the church. The truth is that these people are sitting in your classrooms. They are sitting in your pews. Whether their connection to Christ can be classified as “strong” or “weak,” they have doubts, concerns, fears, and worries. Obviously, the church has some work to do! But before getting into some solutions, it would also be helpful to note some of the changes that influence teens. Teen life has changed dramatically from the 20th century until now. What are some of those changes?

Part Two: Changes in Teen Life Today That Can Cause Church Losses

If this entire thesis focuses on the idea that the church has work to do in regards to the faith formation of their teens, what is the big deal about cultural changes? Why dedicate an entire chapter to cultural changes that have impacted teen lives? The cliché can often be heard that young adults are the “future” of the church, politics, business, etc. Teens and young adults are not the future. They are not the up and coming ones. They are the now. They are the present. It is their thoughts, values, and principles that will shape the world now and for years to come. Their lives will impact future generations just as past generations have had an impact on ours. “Using the birth years 1995 to 2012, iGen (those born from 1995-2012) includes 74 million Americans, about 24% of the population. That means one in four Americans is a member of iGen--all the more reason to understand them.”³² Hypothetically speaking, every fourth person you meet could belong to this group, so let us get to know them.

Academic Pressure

If you ask any parent what their dream is for their child, be prepared to hear them say, “I want my child to be happy.” “I want my child to have a fulfilling life.” “I want my child to be successful.” From early on, parents ask themselves how they can best set their child up for future success. Often times, that begins a discussion in the realm of education. “What preschool will we send them to?” “What type of fine arts education is offered at that preschool?” “Is the preschool across town a Montessori preschool? I hear their preschools equip young children to be independent, respectful, and responsible.” An idea has evolved that a better or a higher education correlates to success. This is one of the reasons why young adults feel an immense amount of academic pressure.

³² Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, (New York City, NY: Atria Books, 2017), 10.

The college decision is one of the most important decisions that a young person can make. In today's culture, nearly all students are encouraged to pursue some type of study beyond secondary education. Author Tina Rosenberg, a Pulitzer Prize winner, wrote a book called *Join The Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform The World*. In it, she reveals a study from the mid-1970s. It "found that many parents had decided before they even had had children that those kids would go to college."³³ It can seem a little premature. Before children even enter the world, their parents already have a dream that they will continue their education at a college or university.

From the time children enter schooling, the pressure is on. And when those children become young adults, they will have to decide where to pursue further education. Students will look for colleges or universities that specialize in their preferred field of study, but that is not all. They look for colleges or universities with solid and reliable job connections, because it is a competitive world out there. Students do not want to be set up for only five or ten years of post graduation success. They look for colleges and universities that set them up for a lifetime of success. There is only one problem. They are not the only students trying to get into that specific college. There are tens of thousands of other students around the world competing for a limited number of spots. It is a competition, and they do not exactly know what they are competing for! "Due to rapid technological advances, it is likely that young people entering the job market today will end up in careers that do not even exist yet."³⁴ Nevertheless, the game is on! In order to get the edge over other students, they need to have the best resume possible. Young adults see high school as a time for building their resumes for college. "Students are challenged to take a

³³ Tina Rosenberg, *Join The Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform The World*, (New York City, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2011), 101.

³⁴ Sarah Sifers, Julene Nolan & Daniel Houlihan, *Real World, Real Challenges: Adolescent Issues in Contemporary Society*, (San Diego, CA: Cognella Academic Publishing, 2016), 186.

demanding course of study, to get a high GPA and gain admission into those schools.”³⁵ There is a “hard-driving focus on academic performance...”³⁶

Admissions workers look for various factors when considering a college applicant. They look at grades, extra-curricular activities, and time spent volunteering in one’s community. Take a look at an involved teen’s schedule sometime, and notice how there are not many free spaces. This is not only brought about by young adults. As was stated before, every parent wants their child to be the best. They want their child to be the next Tara Cross-Battle or Jordan Larson of volleyball. They want their child to be the next Stephen Curry or Michael Jordan of basketball. They want their child to be the next Albert Einstein or Marie Curie of physics. On top of their school's athletic teams, many young adults play on AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) circuits too. There are late night practices, weekend games, and holiday tournaments. Not only are young adults doing the daily work and projects of their college prep courses, some participate in math or science clubs that compete around the country. The jam-packed schedules, lack of free time, and lack of sleep builds stress.

This is not something new. Already back in 2003, a high school yearbook opened with a two-page frontispiece devoted to student stress. Titled “Stressed out Bears,” it read:

We are all overwhelmed with schoolwork, lack of sleep, and sports. Stress is a natural reaction, but at some point, enough is enough. Not only do we have to go home and deal with family and friends, but we also have to worry about our homework, projects, and competitions.³⁷

Another study conducted on adolescents in the Los Angeles area in 2004 revealed this:

³⁵ Lucy Dwyer, "When Anxiety Hits at School," *The Atlantic*, Publishing 3 October 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/10/when-anxiety-hits-at-school/380622/>.

³⁶ Michael Sadowski, *Adolescents At School: Perspectives on Youth, Identity, and Education*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2003), 166.

³⁷ Peter Demerath, *Producing Success: The Culture of Personal Advancement in an American High School*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 129.

On the survey, 70.2 percent of students reported that they were stressed out “frequently” or “all the time.” Study data clearly showed that these achievement-oriented students’ unceasing attempts to control their educational experiences, get good grades, and acquire competitive credentials exacted a high cost in terms of stress and fatigue.³⁸

The stress and fatigue that students are experiencing is also compounded by the cost of a college education.

As the Christmas season rolls around each year, or as the birthday cards come in the mail, aunts and uncles, grandmas and grandpas can be heard saying, “use this money for school.” Because of the high price of college tuition, young adults need all the financial help that they can get. Dr. Twenge had an interview with a student named Jasmine at San Diego State University, and this is what she had to say about the cost of college tuition in the 21st century:

My father’s generation was different. He was born in the 70s and despite never going to college he has a great paying job. That is not a reality for my generation. You are not even guaranteed a job after going to college! And once we graduate we are in debt up to our ears!³⁹

It is no secret that college tuition (room and board included) for students has increased in the last couple decades. “When they graduate, the average student loan borrower has \$37,172 in student loans, a \$20,000 increase from 13 years ago.”⁴⁰ If these are the most current numbers, imagine what they will be 13 years from now!

Students around the country are doing everything they can to cover this uptick in cost. They are applying for every grant and scholarship possible. They are considering the cost of every college they apply for. We no longer live in times where the earnings from a summer job

³⁸ Ibid, 130.

³⁹ Twenge, 185.

⁴⁰ Abigail Hess, "Here's how much the average student loan borrower owes when they graduate," *CNBC*, Published 15 February 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/15/heres-how-much-the-average-student-loan-borrower-owes-when-they-graduate.html>.

are enough to cover schooling costs. Because of this, young adults are getting part time jobs as early as possible. The benefits of adolescents getting a part time job should not be minimized. It is good for them to learn responsibility, working skills, leadership, etc. Those learned things do come at a cost, however.

There are also negative outcomes associated with adolescent employment. These include less time engaged in homework, less sleep on non-work days, and worse school performance. Students who work more than 20 hours per week demonstrate poorer school performance than those who work fewer hours.⁴¹

Hopefully, the dilemma is quite apparent. Young adults are pursuing any means to produce the most well rounded college resume possible. The AP classes, extracurricular activities, sports and clubs may give students a chance at getting into their preferred college. Paying for that college is another issue entirely.

An older adult may speak up about how they dealt with many of the same issues as well. There is no argument to be made there. It could be argued, however, that the generational language used regarding the adolescent years has changed. In the eyes of some, it has become increasingly more antagonistic.

Some theorists claim that the current generation of adolescents are unlike those of previous generations in that they demonstrate less independence and require more concrete supports like direction, structure, and feedback than did previous generations. They also claim that post-secondary educators and post-high school employers must learn to work with young people who are not particularly adept at communication in person and require access to technology to assist in performance and aid learning.⁴²

Teens hear about how they require more attention and structure, that they are not adept in communication, and that they require technology for performance and learning. If those are the words that are used to describe their generation, they come across as antagonistic. If this is what

⁴¹ Sifers, Nolan & Houlihan, 185.

⁴² Ibid, 180.

teens are hearing, what might they not be hearing? They might not be hearing about how they are valued, how they matter, or how they bring other gifts and talents that those of past generations do not have.

All these topics covered have missed out on one other key issue: social life. A triangle graph was created, in jest, to show the struggle in the mind of a teen. In one corner is “good grades.” In another corner is “enough sleep.” In the last corner is “social life.” This is how some teens perceive the use of their time, that they can only choose two of those options. If they choose social life and enough sleep, their grades struggle. If they choose social life and grades, they do not get enough sleep. If they choose sleep and grades, their social life struggles. Not having a “social outlet” for this stress and anxiety can be dangerous for their mental health and well being. In a survey asking teens how they cope with stress, some of the “usuals” were heard. “I talk with friends.” “I listen to music.” “I sleep.” “I take medication such as antidepressants.” The most startling response? “Many said that they couldn’t.”⁴³

The fatigue and stress show a missing balance in the lives of young adults. Having a fulfilling and successful life is a tremendous goal, but have some schools, and churches for that matter, pushed too hard? “Amid the fast-paced, day-to-day world of schools, it is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that adolescents are what middle and high school education is all about.”⁴⁴ Teens are pushed to be the best student or athlete possible, to get into the best college possible, and to get the best job possible. These academic pressures have triggered feelings of stress and fatigue. Instead of focusing on who teens are and how God has uniquely created them, the focus is on their potential. As a result, time is not often taken to communicate with teens, to ask them what they are struggling with, and to propose ways in which to best help them. That is the goal in

⁴³ Demerath, 146.

⁴⁴ Sadowski, 166.

preparing young adults for life in the 21st century. It is not their future potential that drives a relationship with teens, but a love-driven desire for them to be healthy and happy in school, in church, and in the family.

Breakdown of the Family Structure

In the past, most family pictures would contain 3 important aspects: a father, a mother, and children. Those aspects constituted the make up of a family, what is called the basic social unit.⁴⁵ A family picture today may be quite different. This section of the thesis will cover some differences between the family structures of the past and present, specifically noting their various impacts on the life of an average teen today.

When God instituted marriage back in the beginning chapters of Genesis, he issued a very simple command for mankind to “be fruitful and multiply.”⁴⁶ With that command in place, God fostered peace and stability in society as one man and one woman would raise children together. God’s family picture for his children included one with a father and a mother, a “two-parent household.” Kim Dolgin, author of *the adolescent*, notes some of the benefits of having a “two-parent” household.

Studies of family socialization have demonstrated repeatedly that parents have a tremendous impact on the development of their children. Parents play a fundamental role in the development of their children’s basic social, religion, and political values...⁴⁷

The influence and impact of having two parents cannot be understated. Working together, a father and a mother would provide children with their basic needs, physically and spiritually. The family picture today has changed substantially.

⁴⁵ “Stronger Families, Stronger Societies,” *The New York Times*, 24 April 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/04/24/are-family-values-outdated/stronger-families-stronger-societies>.

⁴⁶ Gen 1:28.

⁴⁷ Kim Gale Dolgin, *the adolescent: Development, Relationships, and Culture*, (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc., 2011), 185.

According to a study taken by the Pew Research Center in 2015, the “two-parent household” picture is dwindling quite rapidly. Back in 1960, it was reported that 73% of children lived with two parents in their first marriage. When figuring in a potential second marriage, it was 87%. Moving forward 20 years, the numbers were on the decline. In 1980, only 61% of children lived with two parents in their first marriage; 77% when including a potential second marriage. As of 2014, the study concluded that 46% of children lived with two parents in their first marriage; 61% when including a potential second marriage. Over a span of 55 years, the percentage of children living with two parents dropped a staggering 26%.⁴⁸

Although this downward trend cannot be pinned to an exact point in history, many look to the sexual revolution of the 1960s as a starting point, when “free” love reigned and commitment was sparse. The role of the father, or lack thereof, was especially highlighted.

Father absence is an example of profound social change *introduced* during the 1960s but much more common today. In the 1960s, 5 percent of live births were to unmarried women; currently, the percentage is 42 percent. In other words, today’s kids are *eight times* more likely to have come into this world without married parents than were Boomers.⁴⁹

For nearly half of the family photos today, one crucial piece is missing: the father or the mother. When this happens, one parent is then tasked with all the parental responsibilities: providing for, protecting, and raising the child(ren). When one of the parents cannot do this, that task then can fall to another family member or relative. When there are not two parents contributing to the social unit that is family, what can be missing in the lives of teens?

Teens are influenced all the time. Social media, status, and friends all have a tremendous pull, but there is no influence more important than that of a parent. The following two quotes

⁴⁸ "Parenting In America," *Pew Research Center*, 17 December 2015, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/1-the-american-family-today/>.

⁴⁹ Kinnaman, 46.

highlight the immense importance of parental influence. “In the vast majority of cases parents remain the single most important influence in the development of an adolescent’s personality.”⁵⁰ “If one factor influences the character development and emotional stability of a person, it is the quality of the relationship he experiences as a child with both of his parents.”⁵¹ It is not just about the teens’ personalities, whether or not they are shy or outgoing. It is about the character traits that impact their everyday life. It is about the emotional stability that will be critical in navigating life in the 21st century. It is about their ability to make lasting relationships that add value to their lives. All of those things stem from the time that a teen spends with his or her parents. The average American family only spends 37 minutes of quality time together, and clearly that is not enough.⁵²

School is the place where these effects are most widely encountered, because behavioral patterns that often begin at home culminate at school. It is, after all, the place where they spend almost a third of their day. Students who come from divorced homes often lack much needed support. Because of this lack of support, many “adolescents raised by single parents are less likely to do well in school than adolescents raised in two parent homes.”⁵³ This can show itself in lower reading levels and overall test scores. The effects are not only academic in nature, either. “In general, children whose parents have divorced are two to three times as likely to develop problems as children from intact families.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ DeVries, 79.

⁵¹ Ibid, 82.

⁵² Sam Paul, "American families barely spend quality time together," *New York Post*, Published 20 March 2018, <https://nypost.com/2018/03/20/american-families-barely-spend-quality-time-together/>.

⁵³ Dolgin, 234.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 225.

The breakdown of the family has its greatest and most important impact in regards to spirituality. Dr. Twenge notes that “two forces are working simultaneously to pull iGen’ers away from religion: more iGen’ers are being raised in nonreligious households, and more iGen teens have decided not to belong to a religion anymore.”⁵⁵ This is a strong warning to parents, but it is also a strong encouragement. Young adults are always watching. When they see a parent valuing and prioritizing faith and religion, it can cause them to consider why. It is a tremendous blessing from God that the birth of a newborn can cause parents to reflect on what they are missing out on, spiritually speaking. Throughout her interviews with numerous parents, Dr. Lisa Miller, author of *The Spiritual Child*, found that “many parents, particularly fathers, have told me that they ‘did not believe in anything’ until their child was born.”⁵⁶ The benefits of a well established "religious" routine cannot be understated. Not only will these keep parents grounded in the Word of God, it can also encourage children to begin their own routine.

If these statistics and citations are in fact true, how are they shaping the views of young adults towards marriage? Dr. Twenge has noticed an especially large shift in this outlook.

iGen’ers’ attitudes toward marriage are a little less positive than previous generations’ views, but not for the reasons you might expect. iGen’ers are more likely than their millennial predecessors to question marriage because there are so few good ones and are less likely to say their lives will be happier if they marry.⁵⁷

Young adults who hear about God’s intent for marriage and family often look around and see the complete opposite in society. It is not the successful marriages that are remembered. It is the failed ones that are remembered. When young adults see the lack of success, they question if marriage is even worthwhile. It is not surprising, then, to see that those who are iGen do not

⁵⁵ Twenge, 122.

⁵⁶ Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*, (New York City, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2015), 317.

⁵⁷ Twenge, 218.

believe family to be a major priority.⁵⁸ If the average iGen teen sees that marriages are not likely to succeed, that it is extremely difficult to raise a teen in a God-pleasing way, or that fostering a spiritual routine is not realistic, they may decide that it is not worth attempting.

These perceptions stress the importance of the task at hand. Churches and schools are fighting against the tide of a society that continues to erode the Biblical foundations of family and marriage. With help from parents, teachers, and pastors, our current generations can be good examples for generations to come, emphasizing the physical, emotional, and spiritual blessings that God gives to his children through the basic social unit of family.

Technology & Social Media

“Born in 1995 and later, they grew up with cell phones, had an Instagram page before they started high school, and do not remember a time before the Internet.”⁵⁹ Unlike previous generations, technology and social media are everywhere you look. It is true that the breakdown of the family structure can have the greatest impact on the life of a teen, but it is technology and media that could be said to have a more frequent impact. Why? “The Internet is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It’s a way to meet people; find adventure; share ideas and experiences; look for a job, a date, or a mate; ask questions; or give advice.”⁶⁰ Technology and the internet are used at home, in schools, at the workplace, etc. Its accessibility has greatly impacted the lives of teens in extraordinary ways. This section of the thesis will take a look at some of those changes, especially noting their impact on the emotional well being of a young adult in the 21st century.

Before getting into specific details, it should be said that technology and social media can be positive influences in the lives of teens.

⁵⁸ "Gen Z: Your Questions Answered," *Barna Group*, Published 6 February 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-questions-answered/>.

⁵⁹ Twenge, 2.

⁶⁰ Dolgin, 10.

It (technology) has played a fundamental role in shaping the nature of their friendships, the structure of their social networks, the way they learn, their provisions and acceptance of social support, the way they interact with groups and institutions, their posture toward the wider world, and the way they allocate their time.⁶¹

Teenagers use digital media for several reasons. They love and use their devices for entertainment and diversion from the pressures and boredom of life-- gaming, in particular, is a big part of this. They also want to stay current with popular culture and what is happening in the world--an important part of keeping up with friends and feeling informed.⁶²

Technology and social media are abundant blessings from God. Because of them, people are able to stay connected with friends and family all across the world. They are able to stay up to date on current events and news. They are able to play games, watch movies, read books, etc. Their use and practicality does not end there. Technology and social media can be used to glorify God's name and further the spread of His gospel.

With every blessing, however, comes the opportunity for mankind to misuse them for selfish reasons.

The invention of the ship was also the invention of the shipwreck. One can say the same about social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, which facilitate communication and social connection. The ease of connection afforded by these platforms also opens the door to cyberbullying, sexual predation, distracted driving, and sexting.⁶³

One key thing is needed when considering the use of technology and social media: Christian discernment. That is the key to avoiding shipwreck: using these gifts in a God-pleasing way for their intended purpose. When used properly, technology and social media, like ships, can expose someone to the beauty of the world. It can open doors to new places, thoughts, ideas, or

⁶¹ Paul Taylor, *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown*, (New York City, NY: Publicaffairs Books, 2014), 139-140.

⁶² Dean Borgman, *Foundations for Youth Ministry: Theological Engagement with Teen Life and Culture*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 222.

⁶³ Mike Brooks & Jon Lasser, *Tech Generation: Raising Balanced Kids in a Hyper-Connected World*, (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 6.

information. Unfortunately, it can also expose someone to the horrors and corruption of this world. Some of those open doors do in fact lead to temptation and sin.

The struggles of parenting have always existed. It is not an easy job. Any parent would likely tell you that. In recent years, however, parenting has become harder than ever. The reason? Technology.⁶⁴ Andy Crouch, the author of *6 Tech Habits Changing the American Home*, has this to say about technology:

This change has come about overnight, in the blink of an eye in terms of human history and culture. When previous generations confronted the perplexing challenges of parenting and family life, they could fall back on wisdom, or at least old wives' tales, that had been handed down for generations. But the pace of technological change has surpassed anyone's capacity to develop enough wisdom to handle it.⁶⁵

For thousands of years, mankind never had Internet or smartphones, but then in a span of some 30 years, the world had both. Technology grew quite rapidly. People saw the practicality and convenience of technology, and never questioned its use. The "use now and ask questions later" model has not served society well. Today, as research, studies, and surveys are being conducted, they are uncovering how we have failed to wisely handle technology.

The biggest of those failures comes when considering the usage rate of technology by young adults. According to the Pew Research Center, "some 95% of teens now say they have or have access to a smartphone, which represents a 22-percentage-point increase from the 73% of teens who said this in 2014-2015. Smartphone ownership is nearly universal..."⁶⁶ One would be hard-pressed to find a high schooler without a smartphone. They exist, but they are certainly becoming the exception. That same study also revealed this jarring statistic:

⁶⁴ "6 Tech Habits Changing the American Home," *Barna Group*, Published 18 April 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/6-tech-habits-changing-american-home/>.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Monica Anderson and Jingjing Jiang, "Teens, Social Media, & Technology 2018," *Pew Research Center*, Published 31 May 2018, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>.

As smartphone access has become more prevalent, a growing share of teens now report using the internet on a near-constant basis. Some 45% of teens say they use the internet “almost constantly,” a figure that has nearly doubled from the 24% who said this in the 2014-2015 survey. Another 44% say they go online several times a day, meaning roughly nine-in-ten teens go online at least multiple times per day.⁶⁷

Having a smartphone means that teens can be connected to just about anything at anytime or any place, even home. The lines are becoming blurred.

Technology will be so seamlessly integrated into our lives that it will effectively disappear. The line between self and technology is thin today; by then it will effectively vanish. We will think with, think into, and think through our smart tools but their presence and reach into our lives will be less visible.⁶⁸

If this “seamless integration” has not happened already, it is likely that it soon will. This poses a great question. What will happen when teens “think with, think into, and think through our smart tools?”

Dr. Jean Twenge has spent much of her life’s work recording generational differences in behaviors, attitudes, and personality traits. She began noticing a small crescendo from the 1980s to the 2000s. But around 2012, she started seeing large, abrupt shift in teens’ behaviors and emotional states. Unsure if it was a random occurrence or not, she continue to track the trends. The trends only continued to skyrocket. “Then it occurred to me: 2011-12 was exactly when the majority of Americans started to own cell phones that could access the Internet, popularly known as smartphones.”⁶⁹

As smartphones allowed people to become more connected, they desired more avenues or platforms to express that connectedness. That is where social media comes into play (FaceBook, Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat, etc.). “While social media provides an arena for increased

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Taylor, 155.

⁶⁹ Twenge, 4.

interaction for adolescents, it can also lead to feelings of isolation....”⁷⁰ Media that is used to encourage social activity often promotes the exact opposite. Teens have begun to fear this isolation so much that a new acronym was created: fear of missing out (FOMO). That is a large reason why teens are so tied to their “online life.” If they are not continually checking their phone, they will not be able to find out what their friends are doing or where they are. If they are not able to be involved or included, many teens suffer from anxiety that comes at the hands of social media. Janis Whitlock, a Cornell University researcher, said “if you wanted to create an environment to churn out really angsty people, we’ve done it... they’re in a cauldron of stimulus they can’t get away from.”⁷¹

If occasional loneliness was the only negative result of social media, it is possible that it would not be as hotly debated an issue as it is. Unfortunately, loneliness often has company. Dr. Twenge discovered that “loneliness, depressive symptoms, major depressive episodes, anxiety, self injury, and suicide are all on the rise, mostly since 2011.”⁷² What has fueled social media to have such an impact on the emotional well being of a teen? Doctors Mike Brooks and Jon Lasser point to social comparison as a cause. “All the world’s indeed a stage due to technology, the media, and advertising. Our sense of adequacy and perspective is compared to essentially the entire world.”⁷³ If a teen can use social media to see the academic success that everyone else is having, they notice their perceived lack of success. If a teen can use social media to see the popularity of everyone else, they notice their perceived lack of popularity. The comparisons of status, talent, identity, body image, and possessions can lead teens to feel unhappy about their

⁷⁰ Sifers, Nolan, & Houlihan, 234.

⁷¹ Twenge, 102.

⁷² Ibid, 302.

⁷³ Brooks and Lasser, 42.

own situations in life. “Eighth graders who spent ten or more hours a week on social networking sites were 56% more likely to be unhappy, compared to 47% for 10th graders and 20% for 12th graders.”⁷⁴

Call it unhappiness. Call it a lack of contentment. This is one of the dark sides of social media. It can cause teens to play the comparison game, which then leads to a reaction. A positive reaction would be to thank God for the many blessings that he graciously gives to his children, appreciating their unique and valued identity in Christ. However, they can also react negatively, allowing jealousy and resentment to build. When those things build inside a teen, it has the potential to lead to bullying. Because of the constant comparisons, it is not a surprise to note that the link between social media use and depression are strongest among youngest teens.⁷⁵

Aside from issues of mental health, social media and technology have created issues in the faith life of teens. “Technological access allows them to experience and examine content originating from nonbiblical worldviews, giving them ample reasons to question the nature of truth.”⁷⁶ With unlimited access to nearly every worldview imaginable, teens can become overwhelmed and confused by everything that they read, see, and hear. “Finally, young adults’ location in a post-Christian culture encourages them to reject the authority of the Bible and of spiritual leaders and even to question the existence of truth.”⁷⁷ With accessibility comes skepticism. This is not an inherently bad thing. We want teens to ask questions, because asking questions can lead to the discovery of truth. When teens are the ones discovering truth, there is a certain ownership that comes with that truth.

⁷⁴ Twenge, 79.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 291.

⁷⁶ Kinnaman, 42.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 71.

The best part is that we know where to find absolute truth. We see it as we open up the pages of Scripture. Technology and social media have given us the ability to hear or read, at anytime or any place, the truth of that Word.⁷⁸ The allure of differing worldviews, however, can still pull young adults away from the church. “Given their *access* to all kinds of information and a wide variety of worldviews, many young adults no longer believe that the local church and Christianity provide the only or even best avenues to spiritual growth and maturation.⁷⁹ When questions have gone unanswered, when topics have gone undiscussed, when doubts have not been reassured, young adults feel abandoned by the church. This feeling fosters the thought that the church does not want to help them out or that the church does not know how to help them. If young adults buy into this logic, many will not turn to the church for assistance with their faith journey. Instead, many will either go “solo” or turn anywhere else. With access to all the information and wisdom of the world, church becomes unnecessary and irrelevant.

Technology and social media have greatly amplified the differences between generations of past and present. Research author David Kinnaman acknowledges the changes that each generation goes through, but he has this to say about the changes that current generations go through.

In fact I believe a reasonable argument can be made that no generation of Christians has lived through a set of cultural changes so profound and lightning fast. Other generations of Christ-followers have endured much greater persecution. Others have had to sacrifice more to flourish or even survive. But I doubt many previous generations have lived through as compounded and complicated a set of cultural changes as have today’s Christians in the West.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ John 17:17.

⁷⁹ Kinnaman, 71.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 38.

Those cultural changes made themselves known many decades ago. Churches were struggling with young adult losses then, just as they are today. The only difference is that today, churches have the chance to view data collected over time. The data shows that young adults are leaving church for a number of different reasons. Some believed that science and religion cannot exist. Others had a "shallow" experience that pushed them to look elsewhere for spiritual guidance. The "exclusive" nature of Christianity was another reason that was given, as was the feeling that young adults cannot express their doubts in church for fear of being misunderstood. Many of these reasons have remained an issue over decades, but what cultural changes have also contributed to young adult losses within the church?

In their striving to get into the best college, and thereby get the best job, many teens have overloaded their plate with activities, social clubs, and work. Their lack of balance has greatly affected them, as many teens deal with fatigue and stress on a regular basis. This lack of balance is also apparent at home, as many teens now live in broken homes or homes that have been affected by divorce. Studies have shown the importance of parental influence in character development and emotional stability, and many of the teens in these homes are not receiving those things that they desperately need. Technology and social media also have an immense impact on the emotional state of a teen. In their desire to stay connected to their friends, many teens experience anxiety, loneliness, and depression at the hands of social media. They compare themselves with others and notice their own deficiencies. And to add to their already fragile emotional state, their constant access to worldwide views has left them overwhelmed and confused.

As parents, educators, and proclaimers of God's Word, we need to be aware of these influences in order to best help our youth stay connected to Christ. The jarring studies, statistics,

and surveys are a wake up call for all who have interaction with young adults. “iGen is crying out for help, and we need to listen.”⁸¹

⁸¹ Twenge, 302.

Part Three: Preparing, Equipping, & Utilizing Teens

The challenge with teen ministry is that it is always changing. What once worked back in the 1970s might not work today. What works today might not work in twenty years. In this way, teen ministry is like a moving target. The previous section noted the importance of keeping a pulse on the current state of teen lives in the 21st century. That knowledge is like a diagnosis. Once a doctor best understands the ailment or disease, only then can he most effectively treat that ailment or disease. The same can be said for pastors, teachers, and parents. If they are aware of the issues impacting teen life today, only then can they best hope to help teens stay connected to Christ.

Despite the complexities of teen ministry, there are a number of principles that are a constant. The first is that relationships are critical for person to person ministry. If teens do not have a connection or a relationship with the person trying to minister to them, they may not receive or rely on that message with the same confidence as if it came from someone they have a relationship with. Another principle is that teens need good instruction when it comes to what they should believe. The previous section noted their unlimited access to worldviews and the impact it can have, leading them to have doubts or questions as to what is true. The third principle is that teens want to do something with their faith. They want to put it into practice in a very real and meaningful way. For those reasons, pastors, teachers, and parents need to ask themselves three important questions: How should we treat teens, what should we teach teens, and how can we best incorporate teens? Each question will have a section dedicated to providing potential solutions.

How do we need to treat teens?

It could be summarized as "love your neighbor as yourself."⁸² Yet so often, that is not the case. Teens are treated like 2nd class citizens, participants, and bystanders in God's kingdom. Their opinions and thoughts are not always welcomed, and some think it would be better if they were seen and not heard. Dave Coryell suggests that most churches view students from one of three perspectives: rocks, receivers, and reservoirs. First, teens are viewed as rocks in the sense that they have little value. Because they are "adults in waiting," they need to be patient, understanding that their time for having a significant role in church will come. Second, they are viewed as receivers in the sense that their only role is to learn the values, norms, ethics, traditions, and beliefs of the church. Third, teens are viewed as reservoirs in the sense that churches know they have much to contribute. However, they need ample time to develop their gifts and talents.⁸³

Whether it be in the church, classroom, or home, we need to treat teens with honor and respect by valuing the relationship that we have with them. It can be easy to show someone how valued they are! Talk to them. Seek them out. Ask them about their lives. Start a conversation with them that begins with something other than, "How are you doing today?" Teens crave authenticity. Pastors and teachers can show their authentic desire by getting to know teens better. If this is not possible to be done in person, it can certainly be done via messaging. To show that teens are valued, the pastor can send a text of encouragement to a teen during exams, or a message of congratulations to a teen after their performance on a stage or field. The pastor can message teens who recently helped with a service project, thanking them for their hardwork and

⁸² Mark 12:31.

⁸³ Cannister, 117-118.

time. Any simple form of communication, especially one that teens are accustomed to like text messaging, can go a long way in strengthening the relationship between a pastor and teen.

Another way that the church can show that teens matter is by stressing the importance of relationship building, especially between youth and elderly. Intergenerational relationships have the potential to bring out the best of both worlds. Because teens often have their own groups and meetings, they miss out on this opportunity. “As a by-product of this approach, the next generation’s enthusiasm and vitality have been separated from the wisdom and experience of their elders.”⁸⁴ Educators always look for ways to bridge the gap between youthfulness and experience. Brenda Snailum found that intergenerational ministry helped to bridge the generation gap, improve connections, and reduce the detrimental effects of generational disconnectedness.

According to Snailum, these are just a few benefits of intergenerational relationships:

1. Promote individuation and identity development
2. Promote overall well-being and healthy development
3. Promote positive behavior
4. Influence religiosity, intrinsic religious motivation, and faith maturity
5. Influence experience of God and/or relationship with God
6. Influence church attendance and participation during adolescence and adulthood
7. Facilitate and promote the transition to adulthood
8. Provide modeling for a variety of life and faith issues⁸⁵

Around the country, it is not uncommon for grade schools to have 8th graders read books to kindergarteners. This is one way in which schools have incorporated mixing generations of different people to create a culture of unity and respect. Practically speaking, a church can do something very similar. Mentorship programs offer an opportunity for teens to mix with those of differing generations, allowing energy and enthusiasm to mix with wisdom and experience.

⁸⁴ Kinnaman, 203.

⁸⁵ Cannister, 137-138.

Mentorship programs can also foster a sense of unity and community within the church as members can build each other up, pray for one another, and shoulder burdens together.

Another benefit of a mentorship program would be that teens are given a view into how the church operates. This is done with the goal of raising up future leaders in the church. At times, however, there are preconceived notions that the youth in the congregation should remain quiet, like a rock. As a pastor or teacher, offer them chances to give their opinion. When they give their opinion, do not simply brush it off. Tell them what you like about their opinion and how their comment benefits the situation. That would certainly tell a teen that they are valued. After all, if teens only hear about how they have little value, about how they need to wait patiently to gain a significant role, or about how they need more time to develop their gifts, what will that do to their faith life but suffocate it? They need to be reminded that their opinions are valued and that they are instrumental members of the church. They are not the future of the church, but the present.

Perhaps the best thing that can be proposed when discussing how to treat teens is their identity in Christ. At times, adults may struggle to see value in their teens. Thankfully, Jesus never saw it that way. He never saw teens as an inconvenience or a burden. He saw them as his children, and he eagerly desired to win them back. In doing so, he gave his children a new identity: his! Through baptism, God placed his name on that person and made him or her his child. He washed them clean of their sins and wrote their name in the book of life.

When a person's identity is in Christ, it can change everything. For the teen struggling with the effects of social media, remind them that it no longer matters what someone else thinks about them because they know what God thinks. It no longer matters how others see them because they know how God sees them. Having a new identity in Jesus means that his children

are not inadequate or deficient in God's eyes, but perfect! They have Jesus' robe of righteousness that completely covers them from head to toe in perfection. When churches help teens understand their value in Christ, teens will be eager to use their God-given talents and see how the church can best equip them to live out that new identity in everyday life.

What do we teach teens?

The first topic that should be addressed in this section is the manner in which classes are taught. In the past, lecture-based teaching reigned supreme. But what do teens think today?

When I've polled my students about how they'd prefer to spend class time, most have said they are fine with lectures as long as they convey information that is helpful to doing well on the exams. They like discussion but don't want it to take too much time away from learning the material they'll be tested on.⁸⁶

Once again, academic pressure comes into play. Teens want the important information, "depth over breadth,"⁸⁷ because they see that information as having a direct impact on their futures.

"iGen'ers also come to college with much less experience reading books or even long magazine articles. To bridge the reading gap, publishers are turning to e-textbooks with videos, interactive figures, and built-in quizzes..."⁸⁸ If this is a beneficial way to teach teens today, all educators would be wise to cater to their specific learning strengths. This may require extra work and time on the part of the teacher, but the results will be far superior than educating the way it was done decades in the past.

Before proposing different styles of teaching, it will be important to discuss lecture-based teaching. When there is little to no knowledge about a certain subject, a lecture-based style can help to transmit the needed information. It can also be used to help clarify some information that

⁸⁶ Twenge, 307.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 308.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 307.

students already know. The downside of lecture-based teaching is that the learners are passive. This means that students do not necessarily have a chance to give their own opinions, feel involved in their learning process, or take ownership of the material because it is largely acceptance of what is being taught.

In order to give students a chance to be active learners, teachers could employ a question and answer style. Because there is more involvement, students will have to digest the material and formulate answers. Teachers will have the added benefit of being able to gauge the retention rate of the material. When the students are not answering correctly, educators know what they need to review in order to give students the best chance to recall what has been learned.

The third type of teaching method can be categorized as group work based. In this style, teachers can utilize partner or group learning activities to guide students to the point that the teacher desires. This may come in the form of articles to read and reflect on, questions to debate, or simply asking group members' opinions on the topic being covered. It may be one of the more time consuming teaching methods in terms of preparation, but it pays dividends in the fact that the learners become active. This gives them a chance to give input and also to apply the key point of the lesson with their peers.

The last type of teaching method is a research based one. Just like the group work style, it forces the learner to be active as they are asked to dig into the material by researching it on their own and coming to their own conclusions. When the students are the ones doing the studying, they take ownership of the material and they are learning far better than if it was delivered in a lecture-based style.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ David Kuske, *The Shepherd Nurtures God's Lambs and Sheep*, (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Press, 1995), 2-11.

When asked which teaching style to utilize, a teacher should answer "yes." There are times in class when it would best serve the student to have a lecture-based approach, just as there are times when any of the other teaching styles would best serve the needs of the learner. When it comes to the religious material that teens are taught, they are looking for variety and they are looking for a challenge. "It's imperative that students wrestle with and explore their faith, rather than simply accepting the faith of their parents or their youth leaders. For teenagers to have a deep faith, they need to wrestle with their faith and own it for themselves."⁹⁰ Give them something to wrestle with, but do not stop there!

When teens are asked to wrestle with a difficult topic, the chances are that they will have further questions or thoughts, or that they may be looking to push back on what was stated in class. Welcome this! That is one way that pastors and teachers can downplay the notion that teens leave because they are unable to share their doubts. But how can this be done? In Professor David Reuter's book *Teaching The Faith At Home*, he proposes creating a thinking climate. Reuter began installing this climate by designating specific youth group nights for teens to ask any question that may be on their heart or mind. He reminds his readers to be patient when beginning a thinking climate, because the questions might not all come at once. Teens want to feel comfortable with teachers before asking the questions they really want to ask. When the questions do come, take them seriously, because "as youth begin to offer initial, less personal questions, they will learn that their questions are valid and worth seeking an answer. They will additionally learn that the Church is a place in which such deeper reflection is encouraged."⁹¹

⁹⁰ Cannister, 68.

⁹¹ David Reuter, *Teaching The Faith At Home: What does this mean? How is this done?*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2016), 93.

Another benefit of a thinking climate is that it can help teens sift through differing worldviews to identify what is true. As they see pastors and teachers talk through different aspects of a question, it will help them to establish "thinking skills that will allow them to know how to evaluate arguments and reach biblically founded, well-reasoned conclusions."⁹² Guiding students through the process of reaching truth is of the utmost importance, because "if they are going to honestly embrace the Christian faith, they need to make intentional decisions about what *they* believe."⁹³ While discussing questions that teens may have, acknowledge the difficulties that reason can add when trying to find a solution, and continue to encourage them to be like the Bereans, diligently searching to find the truth.⁹⁴

Teens are also in search of instruction that is relevant. They do not want to spend all of class time talking about hypotheticals. They want to talk about real issues, issues which often go undiscussed.⁹⁵ These life issues and questions are coming quicker than ever before. The digital age has made sure of that. Teen access to differing worldviews have raised "questions about the proper role of faith in politics, sexuality, science, media, technology..."⁹⁶ These worldviews have often put teens on the defensive in regards to their faith. They want to live it, but they do not necessarily know how to defend it.

While the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod excels in catechetical and dogmatic training in God's Word, that does not necessarily mean that teens know how to defend their

⁹² Ibid, 93.

⁹³ DeVries, 135-136.

⁹⁴ Acts 17:11

⁹⁵ This information was related to me in a personal interview with Megan Conte, Evah Pinnow, Kaitlyn Rhyner, Mahysam Salim, Chloe Strand, and Meghan Smrz at Wisconsin Lutheran High School, received January 18, 2019.

⁹⁶ Kinnaman, 42.

beliefs. Apologetics, or the defense of something (like Christianity), is being discussed more and more often for a reason. "There has been a resurgence in Christian apologetics as a direct result of the challenges Christianity has faced in the form of militant atheism in college classrooms, on the Internet, and in TV documentaries and best-selling books."⁹⁷ For this reason, it would be very beneficial for churches or schools to consider implementing some kind of instruction in apologetics. In the classroom, it could be a unit in the curriculum. In a church, it could be some type of seminar that is offered to help equip Christians with some ways to best defend their faith. Ultimately, it will be important to remember that the greatest defense of God's Word is God's Word itself.

On the opposite side of defending one's faith comes the challenge of sharing it, what we call evangelism. This can be modeled in churches and schools as an emphasis placed on sharing the gospel with those who have not yet heard it. This is of course easier said than done. A pastor can do a number of different things to help teach a teen about what evangelism looks like. They could do a study on Paul's evangelism techniques in his missionary journeys or witness Jesus' active and compassionate heart as it reached out to the lost. One practical way to equip teens would be to point out some ways in which they can meet and create relationships with people in the community. It is important that pastors show teens how to have a welcoming personality in any situation they are in. They can also instruct teens to get involved in their communities by interacting with their neighbors or friends outside of church. By being personable, a teen can form many relationships which may lead to opening a door to share the gospel with someone who has never heard the truth.

⁹⁷ Troy Anderson, "A New Day for Apologetics," *Christianity Today*, Published 2 July 2008, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/july/14.29.html>.

Once a relationship is formed, teens need to be instructed on ways in which they can turn the conversation spiritual. Often times this can be done if a teen has the opportunity to go with the pastor on an evangelism call. After all, modeling is one of the best forms of teaching. When a teen is able to witness the pastor turning the conversation spiritual, they are more likely to feel comfortable doing it on their own with their peers. By taking the teen with them, the pastor is valuing them as a crucial part of the Church and reinforcing the importance of sharing the gospel with those who do not know it.

These issues deserve a good amount of discussion time in order to give teens the tools they need to defend or share their faith in the world they live in. Failure to equip teens in these endeavors could prove disastrous. “The next generation is aching for influence, for significance, for lives of meaning and impact.”⁹⁸ There is no better impact than that of faith. When churches and schools focus on teaching and equipping their teens, then they can search for opportunities for their teens to become lights in a world of darkness.⁹⁹

How can we best incorporate teens?

“We tend to expect too little of our young people...”¹⁰⁰ This ideology is nothing new. It is something that the Apostle Paul said to Timothy nearly 2,000 years ago.¹⁰¹ The thought is that youth equals inexperience, and inexperience equals a higher chance of failure. What people fail to remember is that some of the greatest learning comes through experience. As a church body, we need to be giving our teens some experience so that they can learn and grow in their own faith lives. But how can the church best incorporate teens, giving them that opportunity?

⁹⁸ Ibid, 106.

⁹⁹ Matt 5:14.

¹⁰⁰ Kinnaman, 124.

¹⁰¹ 1 Tim 4:12.

When it comes to evangelism, one of the best things teens can do is put their faith into practice. Whether that means they are going on a mission trip or helping another church with vacation bible school or soccer camp, they are being given the opportunity to grow from experience. Another way in which teens can grow from experience is by allowing them to lead their own teen Bible study or teen night at church. If the teen is leading a Bible study, the pastor could sit down with them the week before and teach them the material, so that they, in turn, can succeed in teaching their peers.

Teens have much to offer when it comes to their God-given gifts and abilities. In many churches, we utilize the strengths of adult leaders. We also need to be utilizing the strengths of our teens. Having a teen take a Strengthfinders assessment can help the pastor to know where he can best utilize the strengths of that teen in their collective ministry.

For example, if a teen is exceptionally artistic, consider asking them to make posters for church activities or lead the arts and crafts in vacation bible school or Sunday school. They could also create postcards to send to prospective members. Another example would be a teen who is exceptionally gifted in technology. The pastor could ask the teen to help update the church website, run the sound booth, start a social media page, start a livestream, upload videos to the livestream, or create online promotional materials for the church. For a teen who has an outgoing personality, the pastor could encourage them to introduce themselves to one new person in the church every week.

Jesus set down a good example of how to incorporate those who lack experience. Simply put, he incorporated his disciples. Although they may have been a few years older than the teens in our church today, they similarly lacked ministerial experience. Yet Jesus gave them the chance to use their gifts for the benefit of God's kingdom. We need to give teens that chance too. Give

them some responsibility in the church. “The church is a wonderfully multifaceted community in which there is great opportunity for individuals of all ages to contribute.”¹⁰²

A lot of times, this can be easier said than done because. Pastors need to consider giving teens the opportunity to participate in the various groups, projects, and ministry of the church, because “transformation happens most deeply in the lives of teenagers when they are engaged in the broader life of the church and connected to a network of caring adults.”¹⁰³ When teens find a connection in the church, or when they feel valued and have the chance to make an impact, they feel like they are a part of something bigger. They feel that they have a purpose. As a church, we need to follow through on this goal and be consistent. As teens continue growing the gifts God has given them, they may far exceed expectations.

Even though teen ministry may be a moving target, it should not discourage the church from continuing to ask how they can best provide opportunities for teens to remain connected to Christ. Reflecting on how to treat teens, churches can value their relationships with teens by welcoming their opinions, helping them to create relationships with others in the church, and reminding them of their identity in Christ. Reflecting on what to teach teens, pastors and teachers will remember the importance of not just the material, but also the manner and style of teaching. Creating a thinking climate will also help teens to feel comfortable asking any questions they may have. More material on apologetics and evangelism would also be good additions to the curriculum. Reflecting on how to best incorporate teens, churches will provide them with opportunities to use their God-given abilities and skills. In doing so, teens can live out their faith as they put it into practice in a very real and meaningful way.

¹⁰² Cannister, 124.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 117.

CONCLUSION

Teens may make many different promises throughout their lives, but one of the more important ones is the promise they make on their confirmation day. Promising to remain faithful in the use of God's Word and his sacraments, teens have all they need to be connected to Christ for their lives. Sadly, it is not always that simple. Satan works hard to lure believers away from their loving God using mankind's sinful nature and the things of this world to do so.

Specifically highlighted in this thesis were reasons given by teens on why they left the church. The studies used from 2011 and 2018 showed many similarities. There is a growing belief among teens that science and religion are not compatible, and that one must choose either science or faith. The second similarity was a "shallow" experience within the church. Teens who attended did not find the depth and relevance they were searching for. The third similarity was the accusation that the church is exclusive, more like a special club or group than a family of believers. Finally, there was the belief that teens are not able to express their doubts for fear of being misunderstood or looked down upon for not having a "stronger" faith.

The studies showed some differing reasons for young adult losses within the church. This highlights the fact that the world in which we live is always changing. Now more than ever, teens are struggling with academic pressure. In their quest to be the best, get into the best college, and get the best job, many teens are overwhelmed with different clubs, activities, sports and work. The burden of overloaded schedules causes unnecessary stress and fatigue. Another source of stress for teens is the breakdown of the family. Most teens no longer come from two-parent households, and as a result, they do not have the same support and parent influence that is so essential for character development and emotional stability. Social media and technology is another thing that has greatly impacted the teens and the world in which they live. For fear of

missing out, teens are constantly online to see what their friends are posting about, what they are doing, and where they are. As a result, many teens struggle with comparing themselves to others. They notice only their own deficiencies and experience anxiety, loneliness, and depression. On top of those issues, technology and social media have opened them up to differing worldviews and cultural philosophies which continue to overwhelm and confuse them.

Pastors and teachers have been given an incredible gift by God in that they have the opportunity to have a relationship with teens either in church or in school. They have been given a great responsibility! So what can the church do to best prepare teens to stand firm? How can the church best empower teens to keep the promise that they made to their Lord? There are three main questions that pastors and teachers can ask themselves: How do we treat teens? What do we teach teens? How can we incorporate teens? These three questions can serve as the backbone for a solution.

Because teens have a new identity in Christ, we treat them as such. They are blood bought, redeemed children of God. What matters is how God sees them and what God thinks of them. And when God looks at teens, he sees his Son's perfection. Pastors and teachers would be wise to remember this in their day to day interaction with teens. In treating teens as a valued member of the body of Christ, pastors and teachers need to show care and concern for them. Being involved in their lives is a good way to do so. Another good way is to set up a mentorship program in the church. Allowing teens and those of other generations to create meaningful and lasting relationships can help teens to see that they are not only valued by the pastor but by all of God's people.

Valuing teens also means that we make the most of the time we have with them in the church or school classroom. In addition to the importance of what we are teaching our teens is

how we are teaching teens. Pastors and teachers need to evaluate the style in which they are teaching. When there are more active learning styles and variety, students will have a better chance of remembering and applying what was taught. As spiritual caretakers of teens, we want them to be able to ask any questions they may have about life or faith, and to feel comfortable coming to pastors and teachers with those questions.

Creating a thinking climate is one way to help in those endeavors. Thinking climates are comfortable learning environments where teachers show they are open to any question, that they take the teen's question seriously, and that deeper reflection of God's Word is encouraged and welcomed. When teens have the opportunity to witness a pastor or teacher approach different questions through the lens of God's Word, it will give them an example of what it looks like to search for the truth in a world that offers many different views.

The many different worldviews have left teens overwhelmed at the thought of defending or sharing their faith. For this reason, it would be very beneficial to cover some apologetic and evangelism materials in class. Pastors and teachers have a tremendous opportunity to show teens the importance of sharing their faith with others, whether it be in a nursing home visit, a coffee shop, or an evangelism call. The next generation is searching for lives of meaning and impact. What better way to help them find meaning and impact than to teach them how to share their faith with others!

Teens have much to offer when it comes to their abilities and talents. When churches and schools utilize those talents, they allow teens to "own" their faith and to put it into practice in a very realistic way. Having teens assist or volunteer in mission trips or vacation bible school programs is a great way to utilize some of those gifts. For a more well-rounded view of their strengths, it would be beneficial for churches to have their teens take a Strengthsfinders test. That

way, pastors and teachers could be thinking of meaningful ways in which teens could serve the ministry, whether it be with their leadership skills, artistic abilities, or technological skills. When teens have a purpose, when they are valued and included, when they are surrounded by the means of grace, they are best equipped to keep their promise to God.

The means of grace will forever be the power of God to turn those lost in sin into his dear children. The church understands this, and will continue to use every opportunity to keep teens connected to their loving God no matter what may come. In the confirmation rite, there is a closing prayer that summarizes much of what was said in this thesis. It will continue to be a prayer that the church uses until our Savior returns.

Lord Jesus, author and perfecter of our faith, in mercy you joined *these brothers and sisters* to your Church when *they* were born again of water and the Spirit. In mercy you taught *them* your saving truth. Grant that *they* may offer themselves as living sacrifices to you as *their* spiritual act of worship. Transform *them* by the renewing of *their* minds so that they will not conform to the pattern of this world. Help all of us live in love and harmony with one another and to work together in serving you. Keep us united in your Spirit, and bring us at last to your eternal kingdom, where you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ *Christian Worship: Occasional Services*, 20.

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