

COMPARING GENERATION Z AND GENERATION X: THE STRUGGLES OF TEENS
FOLLOWING IN THE FAITH OF THEIR PARENTS

BY

CALEB M. ROTHFUSS

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PROFESSOR JOEL D. OTTO, ADVISOR

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ABSTRACT

Roughly every two to three decades, a new generation comes on the scene. The newest generation, Generation Z, is the largest on record. Spanning approximately from 1995-2015, this generation accounts for 32 percent of the global population. For a group so large, it seems only natural that numbers in the Christian Church should be going up too. Unfortunately, that is not the case. In each generation from “The Depression Era” to “Generation Z,” the number of those attending church is shrinking rapidly. The fastest growing group in the world is the “Nones.” This group of people do not affiliate with any religion at all. They simply do not believe in any religion. Gen Z is known to be the most unchurched generation in recent history, but it could not have started with them. What is the cause of this? Who influenced them? How, if at all, can we change it? This paper will focus on Gen Z and their relationship to their parents, Gen X. Growing up under the shadow of their parent’s faith, Gen Z is continuing to be the most unchurched and post-Christian generation we have ever seen. This thesis will show what struggles they have following in the faith of their parents and suggestions on how we can best reach them with the gospel.

INTRODUCTION

Every generation has had its impact on the world. Each one brings its own strengths and weaknesses to shape the world in their own unique way; each one paving the way for the next one to follow in their footsteps. The most recent generation, Generation Z, is not only the largest generation by population in the United States, but in the world as well.¹ Born from 1995 to 2015, they are the largest population in the US with 25.9 percent being born in that timeframe, and with a 32 percent total global population.² Like every generation before it, it has key identifying characteristics that make it unique. Gen Z grew up in a world where they always knew the internet. The majority of them grew up after the events of 9/11. They will never know a world in which Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat did not exist. They are the connected generation. The most important key identifier of them all is this—they are the first post-Christian generation.

1. James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 37.

2. US population statistics: Gen Z (25.9 percent); Millennials (24.5 percent), Gen X (15.4 percent); and Boomers (23.6 percent).

With connectedness in mind, it is hard to believe they have a hard time building relationships with others around them. It seems unnatural for them to not want to be connected to a group of people they can call their own. After all, with a smartphone always in their pocket, they are at instant access to a world of information previous generations could have only dreamed of. They are always connected. Why is it then, that they are the first post-Christian generation? What has influenced them to venture away from organized religion altogether and become a generation disconnected from God? While their connectedness does not always equal disconnect from God, their ability to come in contact with ideals from around the world connected with their distaste for a religion that speaks of sin creates a generation that becomes post-Christian.

Meet Madeline. She is an 18-year-old freshman in college. She was born to a fairly regular church-going family. She went to public school beginning from preschool all the way through her local public high school. She would attend Sunday school, on occasion, but never really liked going. She always felt pressured by her parents to go, so to appease them, she did. She would also occasionally convince them to let her stay home. Beginning in middle school, she began her confirmation instruction at church. It was never a question by her parents that she would become a confirmed member at their home congregation. She was at the top of her class in middle school and her standing in confirmation class reflected that as well. She knew the facts, but never

seemed enthusiastic about it. She did not seem to apply the information she was learning.

After becoming a confirmed member of her church, her desire to attend worship seemed to fade. She never enjoyed waking up early on Sunday morning for worship. After being dragged out of bed by her parents, she would reluctantly go with them—most Sundays. She would go through the motions during the service although they always felt “old-school” to her. Church had not changed a bit since she could remember and its flavor seemed stale. She could recite all the orders of worship by heart, but did not exactly know why her church did not change it up. She called this her home church, but she did not feel “at home” here. She would be friendly to her pastor and anyone else that talked to her, but her mind was always somewhere else. She would always long for the weekends when she would spend the night at her friend’s house where they would not have to go to church.

Her parents did not understand what went wrong. They both grew up attending the same church and raised her practically how they were raised. Church was an important part of their lives and they wanted it to be important to her as well. What was the difference? Why did she seem disconnected?

Today, Madeline is in her first year of college away from home. The freedom she feels is nothing like she has felt before. She can eat when she wants, sleep as long as she wants, and worship if or when she feels like it. Every Sunday, her parents attend church

at home without their daughter with them. They wonder if she is worshipping regularly at the local congregation near the college she is attending. They want to ask, but they do not want to be “helicopter parents.” “What can we do? She is an adult now and can make her own decisions. We cannot force her to go to church.”

While she is away at school, she tries out the local congregation in the same synod as her own. She knows a few of her classmates attend as well, but she does not know them by name. She misses some of the connections she felt at her home congregation, even though worship itself was not interesting to her. She wants the feeling of being connected, but has not received the warmest welcome from the local congregation. Is this what she really wants, or is she just following in the faith of her parents? At this time in her life, she is being exposed to countless different ideals and religions, but they all seem the same. Why even go to church?³

In the church, we are faced with situations like this frequently. The future of the church is in the next generation, but keeping them in the church is a heavy task. The world is changing and, with it, the generations that initiate the change. When we compare Generation Z with their parents, Generation X, what do we see? They are more than just people defined by a bracket of years. The way we approach Gen Z is vastly different than how we approached their parents, Gen X. When we consider how we can

3. This is a hypothetical situation of a young adult belonging to Gen Z who questions her faith in the church. I am hoping this situation may remind others of similar situations one could/ has faced.

reach them, it is important to understand who they are. What makes Gen Z unique? What are they being exposed to? Why are they the most post-Christian generation? What are they looking for in a church? Taking a close look at Gen X will help us unpack the home life of Gen Z and how it has influenced their view on church.

With the resources mentioned in the next portion of this paper, as well as a few others, this paper will look at Generation Z. When we look at their parents, Gen X, we will see how they were shaped from childhood into the people they are today. Being a generation that is about connectedness, we can see Gen Z not as people who hate the church, but as people who need to be reached in a different way. After explaining this foundation, this paper will briefly touch on some suggestions about how we could reach out to Gen Z with the gospel on their level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper covers two generations and their relationships with each other. Hopefully this will aid us in how we reach out to the youth in the world around us today. In the first section of this paper, the focus will be on who Gen Z and Gen X are. In his book, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World*, James Emery White explores the most recent generation. He looks at how the world is becoming increasingly unchurched and how Gen Z is no exception. Not only does he help the reader understand who Gen Z is in a very detailed way, but he looks at ways in which they can be reached within the church.

To help understand the faith of Generation X, *GenXers After God: Helping a Generation Pursue Jesus* provides a great understanding as to how this generation was pursued by the church at their time and how their faith influenced their lives. Todd Hahn and David Verhaagen showed very well how Gen X approached church differently than the generations before them because of how they were raised and what defined them as a generation. Although our approach to Gen Z and Gen X are different in many ways, there are some ways in which our approach is similar based on

the timeless message of the gospel that is preached in the church. Another book regarding how we approach generational ministry, *Effective Generational Ministry: Biblical and Practical Insights for Transforming Church Communities* by Elisabeth Sbanotto and Craig Blomberg, describes the lives of Gen X between the Boomer and Millennial Generations. This was insightful to show the priorities in the ministry that was used to reach Gen X and how that shaped them as a generation.

The Barna Group proved to be an invaluable resource to help give data and information to church leaders about the various groups of believers in America.

In its 30-year history, Barna Group has conducted more than one million interviews over the course of hundreds of studies, and has become a go-to source for insights about faith and culture, leadership and vocation, and generations. Barna Group has carefully and strategically tracked the role of faith in America, developing one of the nation's most comprehensive databases of spiritual indicators.⁴

On Barna's website, they provide these resources in articles, blogs, helpful videos, and informational charts and graphs. Along with the website, their book, *The Connected Generation: How Christian Leaders Around the World Can Strengthen Faith & Well-Being Among 18-35-Year-Olds*, was a great resource to provide graphics to show the statistics of how this generation of people is affecting the world and how we can reach them on their level. While this did extend to generations like Millennials, it helped show how we can reach young members of society today. *Unchristian: What A New*

4. "About," Barna Group, <https://www.barna.com/about/>.

Generation Really Thinks About Christianity by David Kinnaman, the president of Barna Group, and Gabe Lyons, was helpful in looking at Christianity from the outside. Many times, the church can be blind to the ways in which it is perceived, but this book helped pull back the curtain to show how the latest generation views Christianity. This could also prove helpful our understanding of how to reach Gen Z.

While looking into the relationship between Gen Z and Gen X, *The Collapse of Parenting: How We Hurt Our Kids When We Treat Them Like Grown-Ups* by Dr. Leonard Sax, shows the problems that are facing the youth today and gives some solutions that he thinks would be helpful to them. This book was helpful in seeing how every little thing that a parent does with their children can have a huge impact on not only their lives now, but long into the future.

How do we reach out to Gen Z? What are effective ways to create good youth ministry? The book, *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith* by Chap Clark, looks at the context, call, practice, and skills of youth ministry. With these categories, the book explains where this particular ministry starts and how there are a multitude of caveats to reach out to this generation of people with the Word of God that he has given to us. Another book on the topic of youth ministry, *Foundations for Youth Ministry: Theological Engagement with Teen Life and Culture* by Dean Borgman, looks at someone in the ministry and asks some important questions. How

does one relate Christ to a particular culture? And, how will one bring practical theology in an engaging way?

PART I: MEET GENERATION Z

Who Are They?

“They will not simply influence American culture, as any generation would; they will constitute American culture.”⁵ When James Emery White wrote that quote, it is hard to not stop and think about how the world around us has changed and will continue to change so drastically—all thanks to the most recent generation. Generation Z, as mentioned earlier, is the generation spanning from 1995-2015. Some say that this generation stops at 2010, while others say the end has not been reached. For the sake of this paper, we will focus on people born from 1995-2015. With two decades covering this group, it is no wonder they are influencing the world more than any other generation has.

How does a generation become defined? As David Kinnaman points out, “This is a generation of contrast, of contradiction. As one example, they are more connected than ever before, yet their connectivity coexists with paradoxical levels of isolation and

5. White, *Meet Generation Z*, 37.

loneliness.”⁶ The generation that came before Gen Z, Millennials, were born and raised in a time of optimism. For the most part, the world was at peace. The internet was coming around to the average person and following in the footsteps of Gen X, they felt entitled to mark out their path in history. Things, by-in-large, were looking up. When Gen Z began in 1995, the world was in chaos.⁷ A few years later, during a time when many older Gen Z can barely remember, 9/11 shocked the world. The relative peace that the country was experiencing seemed to be shattered altogether. Coupled with the economic downturns of 2000 and 2007, Gen Z was formed by crisis and chaos. Growing up with these crises, Gen Z went out into the world with a sense of responsibility to fix it and change it. If they are going to live in this world, they are going to make it how they want it—a safe and comfortable place for all to live. Not only have their lives begun with anxiety and fear, but they grew up with luxuries previous generations never had. Here is a list of some truths that have always been evident in the lives of Gen Z:

- Created in 2004, Facebook was in the lives of Gen Z at the latest, the age of nine.
- Email is the most formal form of “mail” they send.

6. David Kinnaman, *The Connected Generation: How Christian Leaders Around the World Can Strengthen Faith and Well-Being Among 18-35-Year-Olds* (Barna Group, 2019), 20.

7. White, *Meet Generation Z*, 39.

- Texting, tweets, and instant messages are the preferred modes of casual communication.
- Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram are likely to be on the smartphones of all.
- The “turn of the century” to them is 2000, not 1900.
- Non-smartphones are ancient technology to them.
- The average age of a child to receive a smartphone is ten.
- Wi-Fi is not a luxury, but a necessity in their lives.
- Classrooms are fixed with smartboards and Apple products instead of chalkboards.
- Instead of physical textbooks, many students receive Google Chrome books with built-in digital textbooks.
- Google is the most valuable resource of information to them.
- Streaming services like Netflix and Hulu have replaced the need for television.
- Amazon has replaced the need to go to any brick-and-mortar store for shopping.
- TVs will always be less than an inch thick, and always connected to the internet.
- Memes and Gifs are the preferred modes of communication with each other.

Many more items could be added to this list, but the truth remains that the identifiers of this generation are vastly different than other generations in the past.⁸ The biggest truth, the biggest identifier of this generation—they are the most unchurched generation in recent history.⁹

What Is Their Mission as a Generation?

With a mindset of helping fix the world, and the capability of connecting to people all around the world, Gen Z is by far the most diverse generation we have seen.¹⁰ Gone are the days of being connected only to the people who live within driving distance, or in a few square miles. Having a global reach puts them in a unique situation—they can be connected to anyone and everyone. Because of their global reach, Gen Z is influenced by many cultures, ideals, and religions. With such a diverse group of acquaintances, they do not feel the need to be connected to a single religion, but are widely inclusive and accepting.

On a smaller scale, Gen Z is also on a mission not only to fix the world in a broad sense, but fix and help the people living in it as well. When they see the problems many people are facing on a personal level, they feel the need to help in whatever way they can. Inclusivity and acceptance have led Gen Z to be the most supportive generation of

8. White, *Meet Generation Z*, 35-37.

9. White, *Meet Generation Z*, 35-37.

10. White, *Meet Generation Z*, 46.

homosexuality and transgenderism. This, at first, may seem like a product of this generation—as if they are the first generation to support these issues—but that is not the case. After years of previous generations trending toward acceptance and passing laws that change the way the country thinks about abortion and same-sex marriage, they are a product of previous generations.

This all may seem bad and may be painting Gen Z with a broad brush, but they have many defining characteristics that make them a generation to embrace and equip in the church. Gen Z thinks outside the box and embraces change. A few ways in which Gen Z can be a blessing to the church:

- They are very willing to start working.
- They look to be educated, but in more non-traditional ways.
- They can multi-task very well.
- Their outreach to others spans the whole world.
- They are more mature than we give them credit for.
- They love to collaborate with others.
- They are very aware of the impact an organization or church has on the world and the community around them.
- They like to pursue avenues of choices that may not be an instant win (one that may not seem to be the best choice).
- They account for the majority of market consumers (40 percent).

- They can understand technology in a much deeper way because they grew up with it.
- They thrive on involvement that helps them feel at home in their environment.
- They embrace changes that can be a good thing in the long run.

This list may not seem to be very useful at first. These apply very well to the secular world, but these characteristics can all be used to prepare and equip the church for the current generation.¹¹ Knowing how we can reach Gen Z on their level can help the church in their in-reach and outreach to this generation of people loved by God.

What Is Their View of Church?

As a generation who is talked about so often and talked over for being so young, it can be hard to understand them for who they are, not just what we read about them.¹² This is a big dilemma for churches around the country. We hear in the news and in the media about who this generation is and too often we may not take the time to get to know the people in our midst and the generation that will fill the pews in the coming years. We see them as the connected generation, and that is a true point. Their connection defines who they are. With most of their lives being shared on an online profile, they crave the feeling of being connected, but that does not necessarily equate easily to the church environment. With previous generations, specifically Gen X, their

11. White, *Meet Generation Z*, 48.

12. Kinnaman, *The Connected Generation*, 21.

mode of connectivity was person-to-person. Gen X did not have the luxury of the internet, so they relied on church as one way to connect them to others of the same faith and of the same ideals. Attending church was a way to make new friends and become close to people who shared their same mindset and had similar experiences. Today, all that needs to be done is change your preferences on your Facebook page and you are all set; you are connected to a group of people who think, talk, and feel the same way you do without leaving the comfort of your own bed.

In a survey given to students at Wisconsin Lutheran College, they were asked what they enjoyed and disliked about worship. For the eighty-one students that completed the survey, fifty-nine (72.8 percent) of them attended worship growing up on a frequent basis. One of the biggest draws for them in worship was singing. This does not seem surprising. With access to an infinite amount of music in their pockets on their phones, they listen to music constantly. Music attracts them and can influence them. One dislike of the music in their church going experience is the “out of date” or “old” hymns. While all the responses were not negative, the majority of them showed a mild sense of contempt for the music they experienced in church. In many churches who only use an organ, hymns may seem ancient and slow. Churches who take advantage of piano and praise ensembles consisting of guitar, bass, and keyboard may be more appealing to younger audiences. While this is not the general consensus of all, the move toward more contemporary styles of worship seem to make them hopeful. Depending

on the congregation, options for leading music in worship will vary. Each congregation could continue to look at how they can improve worship to best serve the worshippers. With the introduction of the new *Christian Worship* hymnal in 2021, there were some in the survey that had high hopes that it would change their mind about worship. While the purpose of the new hymnal is not to make everything more contemporary, the options and resources available might benefit many congregations.

Another opinion the survey brought out was that the church service seemed too rigid and formal. To a generation whose attention span is shorter than previous generations, they need to be visually or aurally stimulated constantly. The services they grew up with became so engrained in them that the repetition became monotonous and boring.

Young people engage in a nearly constant search for fresh experiences and new sources of motivation. They want to try things out themselves, distaining self-proclaimed experts and “talking head” presentations. If something doesn’t work for them, or if they are not permitted to participate in the process, they quickly move on to something that grabs them. They prefer casual and comfortable to stuffy and stilted. They view life in a nonlinear, chaotic way, which means they don’t mind contradiction and ambiguity. They may tell someone what that person wants to hear, but then do whatever they desire.¹³

When reading this quote through the lens of leading worship, it may seem impossible to please Gen Z. We cannot just stand up there and fly by the seat of our pants in worship just to cater to this generation. Having an order of worship that we follow is

13. David Kinnaman, *Unchristian: What A New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ... And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 23.

important to the structure of worship and has always been a part of the church. I believe one way in which we can shake this view of “stiff” worship is by explaining why we do the things we do. Why do we have a confession of sins at the beginning of the service? Why do we follow the same structure, but with different words? Teaching people the purpose of the form of worship may help them find an appreciation for the service. One must be careful not to just cater to the needs of Gen Z, because they are not the only people in church, but to teach, teach, and teach. With the integration of the new hymnal in winter 2021, there will be new resources to help educate members about why we worship the way we do and how worship has changed, but also stayed rooted in God’s Word.

It also helps to listen. With Gen Z craving new experiences, it can help to get their feedback as to how we can improve worship to fit their spiritual needs. If that means using alternate settings of worship once or twice a month, it may pay dividends with engaging this newest generation. Believe it or not, spirituality is very important to Gen Z, but it is not always a single top priority. While the sinful nature always resists spirituality in any generation, one can see how Gen Z wants to find a sense of purpose and belonging together.

Spirituality is important to young adults, but many consider it just one element of a successful, eclectic life. Fewer than one out of ten young adults mention faith as their top priority, despite the fact that the vast majority of Busters¹⁴ and

14. Born between 1965 and 1983 (Gen X)

Mosaics¹⁵ attended a Christian church during their high school years. Most young people who were involved in a church as a teenager disengage from church life and often from Christianity at some point during early adulthood, creating a deficit of young talent, energy, and leadership in many congregations. While this is not a uniquely Buster or Mosaic phenomenon—many Boomers did this too—our tracking research suggests that today young people are less likely to return to church later, even when they become parents.¹⁶

According to the research done in the book, *Unchristian: What A New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity*, “Young adults enjoy challenging the rules. They are extremely—you might say innately—skeptical.”¹⁷ When church does not sit at the top of the priority list in the lives of Gen Z and when they are skeptical of what is placed before them, church can become an obstacle to their faith.

Why Are They Skeptical about Church?

The connection that Gen Z has with the world can be a great tool for them, but it can also be a stumbling block in the way of their faith and their view of church. The world has a view of Christianity, both a positive and negative view. In the church, we cannot claim to be sinless and spotless in our appearance at all times. We are sinful too. There have been times when some certain denominations of Christianity have tarnished the Christian name. With other denominations, the conservative viewpoints they hold clash with the progressive and accepting viewpoints of the world. When Gen Z sees how the

15. Born between 1984 and 2002 (Millennials and Gen Z)

16. Kinnaman, *Unchristian*, 23.

17. Kinnaman, *Unchristian*, 21.

rest of the world views Christianity, they become extremely skeptical of their involvement in the church. As mentioned before, they are hyper-aware of their impact on the world and are extremely self-aware of how the world views them. If they attach themselves to a church that has any negative connotations in the community, they may have hesitations doing so.

Six themes have been shown to become the basis of skepticism among Gen Z with the first being that the church is hypocritical. When we preach the message of the Bible, how we are to lead better lives in the light of our forgiveness, and the world sees us do the opposite, it leads them to deem us hypocrites. They claim we do not always practice what we preach, and sadly that, on occasion, holds true. We cannot stand up to the perfection God demands and the secular world is our witness. We have never been perfect in our actions, but we strive to live lives centered on the example Jesus has given us.

The second theme is that we are too focused on numbers. When we do outreach, to the world it seems like we are too focused on numbers and not the people we want to join the church. When Gen Z feels like another number or statistic to boost attendance, they veer away from it. We are also viewed as wanting more money. Offerings are taken and sermons are preached on giving to the church. To an outsider, it may seem like we are greedy for money, not caring for the souls of the people in the pews.

The third theme is that we are an “anti” church. We are anti-homosexual, anti-abortion, anti-acceptance, anti-personal freedom, etc. To the world, we may seem like doctors who are trying to cure the world of its illnesses. It can be extremely difficult for young adults to side with a church body that seems so anti-everything. Because Gen Z is the most accepting generation the world has ever seen, their belief clashes with what the Bible teaches and what the church preaches.

The fourth theme is that we are sheltered, old-fashioned people. We are so focused on the way things used to be that we are out of touch with the world. We like to try and solve things with simple, blanket statements instead of talking about the complex issues at hand. We talk about people who lived more than 2000 years ago and try to apply their way of life to our own. We live in the past. While there may be no sense of history in this generation, we believe that the Bible is based on historical facts that involved actual people.

The fifth theme is that for a church that does not like to be involved with politics, we come off as very right-wing conservative. With Gen Z being a very diverse generation politically, being associated with a strictly conservative church body does not sit well with them.

The last theme spoken about is that we are a very judgmental religion. We are seen as people that are quick to point out the sin of the world around them and not fixing the issues in their own homes and churches.¹⁸

These themes can be easily refuted by those in the church. We can have a rebuttal to every one of the accusations against us, but that does not take away the fact that they exist. The world sees us through the lens of these themes and I am sure many more could be added to that list. When Gen Z hears and sees how the world views the church and is influenced by those themes, it can be difficult for them to justify associating with such a church. They are skeptical by nature.

Does this perception matter though? Why should we care so much about how the world sees us? If we continue preaching the message of the gospel, that should be enough. The reality is, perceptions do matter. If the themes mentioned above are becoming such a stumbling block to the faith of the most recent generation, then unless we address this perception, it will be next to impossible to reach them, even within the church.

What people think of Christians can change. Another reason Christians should care about the image of their faith is that people's attitudes are constantly in flux, particularly in a society that is as fluid and dynamic as ours. Just a decade ago the Christian faith was not generating the intense hostility it is today. If the Christian faith has image problems today, the every-changing environment means we will have opportunities tomorrow to change those perceptions. They won't happen if we try simply to make ourselves look good. The reputation of

18. Kinnaman, *Unchristian*, 29-30.

the Christian faith should never be managed or spin-doctored, but we can change how we're known by becoming more Christ-like.¹⁹

Becoming Christ-like is not only understanding what being Christ-like means, but to use it in our outreach and in-reach. In the church, it is vitally important to preach and teach this to members. What we do and how we carry ourselves matters. It not only matters to our God, but it shows itself to the world around us. Not only is it important to preach and teach this in the church, but this attitude begins in the home. During a child's most influential years, during adolescence, no one has more sway in and on a child's life than their parents. Generation Z has been influenced the most by their parents who, for the most part, belong to Generation X. If Gen Z has mostly been influenced by their parents, then why do they have trouble following in their footsteps of faith? The next chapter will discuss Gen X and their influence on their children, Gen Z.

19. Kinnaman, *Unchristian*, 37-38.

PART II: PARENTING GENERATION Z

Who Are Their Parents?

For the most part, the portion of Generation Z who are at a point in their lives where they question their faith grew up with Generation X parents.²⁰ Gen X was a generation defined by hope. They were hopeful of finishing school, the ability to get a job, having a family, and overall hopeful for the future ahead of them. They had hope in things they could, to some extent, control. They did not as a majority, however, possess hope about who was ultimately in control of everything: God.²¹

This generation's well-documented experiences with divorce, child abuse, and domestic violence have caused them to be largely disconnected from others. Many struggle with the legacy that their parents have given them—difficulty with commitment, intimacy, and relational integrity. Some do not know how to relate well; others simply keep their emotional distance. This is not to say that many do not have significant, deep relationships. They clearly do, but as a generation they do not understand others well. They have difficulty in family relationships, dating relationships, and friendships.²²

20. White, *Meet Generation Z*, 51.

21. Todd Hahn, *GenXers after God: Helping a Generation Pursue Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 18.

22. Hahn, *GenXers after God*, 19.

A disconnected generation parenting the connected generation. What made Gen X a generation of disconnected people struggling with their relationships? In the case of many parents of Gen X, they were often too busy working to look after their children when they came home after school. Without much supervision, they did not experience much consequence for their actions, but when they did, it was met with punishment.²³ Many children also grew up in split homes with divorced parents as divorce rates slowly continued to rise. They focused on having relationships with their friends who slowly became their family more than their actual family. Family was not always the people living in the walls of a home who shared the same blood, but those chosen to be members of a family by choice. This sense of independence caused Gen X to feel alone to fend for themselves.

Gen-Xers do not see their independence or individualism as a selfish pursuit but rather one of self-protection and preservation. On both the collective and individual levels, Xers see themselves as being alone in the world, unable to depend on others for support and needing to make their own way in life. Where Boomers carry with them a sense of needing to pull themselves up by their bootstraps while the community is there to support, affirm, and encourage them in their endeavors, Xers feel more that "I have to do it myself; no one's going to help me, and I'm going to do it my way." This sense of being alone in one's journey is rooted in Xer's historical location in both American society and the home. Time and experience have shown Xers that they generally are alone, and while their family or community might not actively oppose their efforts, they are unlikely to experience much direct support.²⁴

23. Hahn, *GenXers after God*, 132-136.

24. Elisabeth A. Nesbit Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry: Biblical and Practical Insights for Transforming Church Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 86.

This quote from Elisabeth Sbanotto might help show the reason why Gen X raised their children the way they did. It can give an understanding of the mindset they had going into adulthood and how they want the lives of their children to be. They wanted their children to have, like many generations before them, a better childhood than they had growing up. They wanted them to experience life without the struggles they endured.

While Gen X is statistically more religious, that does not mean they are automatically on board with religion, more specifically Christianity.²⁵

In keeping with the rest of their values and lived experiences, Xers' skepticism is only perpetuated when "people talk about Christian values and Christian principles but then, they're not very Christian." In a world where Xers value close relationships of authenticity, transparency, and equality, any religious or spiritual community that presents a holier-than-thou persona or attempts to elevate one member of the community or congregation above the others will be viewed with much skepticism if not outright rejection.²⁶

Gen X wants religion to be real. Being an overly suspicious generation, they, like the Boomer generation, liked to question institutions, and in this case, religious institutions.²⁷ This quote shows how many of the thoughts and feelings Gen Z has about religion do not come from a vacuum; they come by influence from their parents.

When looking for relationships outside the family, Gen X would sometimes turn to others in the church. Church was a place where they could find others who perhaps

25. Gen X (77 percent) compared to Gen Z (66 percent).

26. Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry*, 106.

27. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 177.

understood the struggles they went through and find answers to their problems in the Bible. While not all were associated with a religion, they were a much more churched generation. Despite this fact, we can see that Gen Z's view of church was affected by the way their parents thought of church. Statistics continue to show the decline in Gen Z slowly when it comes to their association with a religion.²⁸ Why is that the case? Why are the young people in our world today struggling to follow in the faith of their parents?

How Were They Raised?

Much like their parents, Gen Z is largely self-reliant when it comes to fending for themselves as children. Gen X continues to raise their children with this question constantly on their mind: "Am I being a helicopter parent?"²⁹ Because this question of being a helicopter itself over the minds of their parents, Gen Z has been given more opportunities for connections than any previous generation.³⁰ The independence Gen X felt when they were children is showing itself in the way they raise their children. Play dates, club sports, and extracurricular activities became wildly popular with Gen Z. When given the opportunity, many parents also might simply give their children a

28. From 77 percent in 2009 down to 65 percent in 2019.

29. A "helicopter parent" is a parent who seems to be constantly hovering over their children— frequently asking their whereabouts, what they are up to, and being overprotective in nature.

30. White, *Meet Generation Z*, 51.

screen to parent them because they know it can keep them occupied for much longer than anything else.³¹ Parents who worry about and constantly keep tabs on their children risk the “helicopter” title, and this fear has led Gen Z to be raised by an under-protective generation. When parents become under-protective and let their children fend for themselves, they feed into a disconnect with their children. Disconnected children do not always respond well to discipline and begin to turn into little adults. Little adults tend to not respond to parenting the same way children do. “The issue isn’t always that parents are unwilling to assert their authority. Sometimes they believe that they are helping their children by stepping back and letting their kids decide. Here’s an example of what not to do—in other words, an example of how many American parents now behave.”³²

Having raised “little adults,” when it comes to attending church, parents may not have the respect of their children to listen to them and attend regular Sunday worship. Without the respect, and the lack of influence by the parents, one can see the dilemma: strained relationships in the home leading to diminished worship attendance.

Not only is the worship attendance diminished, but the outlook of what religion means for the family. Of the responses I received from a question in my survey of

31. “Screen” here can refer to a smartphone, tablet, TV, or game system.

32. Leonard Sax, *The Collapse of Parenting: How We Hurt Our Kids When We Treat Them Like Grown-Ups*, (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 27.

college students, asking if religion was talked about in the home, roughly 67 percent of students answered that their families talked about religion every once in a while, while roughly 17 percent said that they never talked about religion at home. When religion only becomes a topic discussed in church on Sunday morning and rarely in the home, children do not feel like it is an important part of their lives. They see it as something their parents have dragged them to for their whole young lives and do not see it as a top priority on their list.

If the skeptical attitude of many Gen X parents regarding church permeates into their parenting, Gen Z will more than likely mature with the same thoughts and emotions, only exaggerated. That, coupled with the era in which they are raised, one can see the signs of why Gen Z has difficulty following in the faith of their parents. It is clear why they are known as the most unchurched generation—they are a product of their childhood and their generation. The question remains: how can we reach them?

PART III: REACHING OUT TO GENERATION Z

It Starts in the Home

When reaching out to this unchurched generation, it is important that the home life gets the foremost thought. By the time children are old enough to make a decision about attending church on their own, if they do not have a solid foundation in the Word of God as their guide in this world, they will have a difficult time turning back to God's Word if they fall away.

Too often we've considered youth apart from their families and the other primary (or micro-) systems that surround and support, or fail to support, them. All microsystems are important—family, neighborhood and community, schools (including extracurricular activities), media, peers, and maybe church. In most cases, though, family—for positive or negative reasons—remains most influential, so we will begin our discussion with the family.³³

In the first chapter of this paper, one can see how the world influences young people today. In the second chapter, one can see how the relationship between parents and children greatly affects how they view church. This section from Borgman's book, *Foundations for Youth Ministry: Theological Engagement with Teen Life and Culture*, points

33. Dean Borgman, *Foundations for Youth Ministry: Theological Engagement with Teen Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 215.

out that there are many factors and systems that support and have a great influence on children, but the most influential one is the relationship between a parent and child.

The minds of children are like sponges: soaking up anything and everything that comes their way. If it is true that “the defining mark of members of Generation Z, in terms of their spiritual lives, is their spiritual illiteracy,”³⁴ then we must do something about it. White continues to add, “They do not know what the Bible says. They do not know the basics of Christian belief or theology. They do not know what the cross is about. They do not know what it means to worship.”³⁵ Learning starts in the home, and when children soak up knowledge from their parents about the love of their Savior and how important staying in the Word is, they will be better set up for the rest of their lives. This also recalls what was mentioned earlier in this paper — when parents lead Christ-like lives, it will have a positive impact on their children. The children will understand how self-sacrificing is not a sign of weakness, but showing love to others and their Savior through their humble actions. Not only is humility important from a biblical perspective, but in a worldly perspective too.

Humility has become the most un-American of virtues. And partly for that reason, humility today is the most essential virtue for any kid growing up in the United States. Because so many American parents have confused virtue with success. The only real sin, for many middle-income and affluent parents today, is failure. Teaching humility, and trying to practice what you preach, is the most useful corrective. Most American parents are fine with the idea of teaching

34. White, *Meet Generation Z*, 131.

35. White, *Meet Generation Z*, 131.

openness, agreeableness, and so forth. But humility? They don't know where to start, or how, or why.³⁶

This quote from Leonard Sax's book, *The Collapse of Parenting: How We Hurt Our Kids When We Treat Them Like Grown-Ups*, shows the importance of humility in our culture as a whole. If we can show Gen Z what it is like to show humility in their lives as a general principle, how much more will they grasp the humility Jesus showed when he walked among us here on earth and seen the most clearly at the cross?

It Continues in the Church with Outreach

As Christians we look to the Bible to give us the "big picture." We look to it for guidance, assurance, and comfort. "The most serious consequence of the shift from a parent-oriented culture to a peer-oriented culture is that parents no longer are able to provide that big picture to their children."³⁷ If Gen Z is focused on fixing this broken world that they are a part of, they are not alone. Christians see the sin in the world and know there is no human solution that is going to fix it all. The only real solution is the message of the gospel. If parents can impress upon their children from a young age the knowledge that our mission is to tell others about Jesus, that can be their drive to "fix" the world.

36. Sax, *The Collapse of Parenting*, 160.

37. Sax, *The Collapse of Parenting*, 198.

Making church a habit instead of a chore can also be a key way to keep young adults in the Word of God on a regular basis. If parents view church as a chore and do not instill in their children the importance of it, they may show contempt for attending worship. I will admit that church will not always be “fun,” but showing the importance of it and making it a good habit can have a very deep impact on their lives.

“This generation doesn’t just want to know whether Christianity is true; they want to see that it is good.”³⁸ When we think about outreach, we should be mindful of how we present ourselves. Are we people who throw facts, as truthful as they are, in the faces of young people in a confirmation class? Or do we apply those truths—showing Gen Z how the truths of Scripture have a much larger impact on their lives than they will ever know. While this can be the case with any generation, more than ever before if we can answer for them the “why does this matter to me” question, we can prepare the next generation to share the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord.

Equipping the next generation with the truth of the gospel is one of the missions of the church—creating witnesses of the faith that do not just know the news, but share the news with others. In that light, we must also be aware of where Gen Z is coming from. While knowing what defines them as a generation is important, it is even more important to talk to them. What drives them? What do they need help understanding?

38. Kinnaman, *The Connected Generation*, 97.

How is their faith being attacked from outside the church? As the church looks to reach out, it could possibly think about the impact schools have on children. What are the children experiencing in the public schools? If a church has a private, parochial school, how can they better use it for reaching and teaching children? While getting to know Gen Z better, it is important to know what motivates them. Getting to know young people on a much deeper level can help understand what they see as their purpose and their longing to be loved and appreciated.³⁹ Schools and early childhood centers may be a valuable asset to do just that.

It Continues in the Church with Worship

For many children, what they view as “church” is the worship they are experiencing. When they sit in the pew, they take more in than we may realize. When they judge worship, they in some aspects, like their parents, look for it to be real. They want it to mean something to them, not just a pastor reading, speaking, and singing to them because that is the way it has always been. The main way a pastor can reach them is the message they preach. “Pastors are experimenting increasingly with the way they communicate—not tinkering with the nature of the message itself, but trying to express the gospel with a gravity and buoyancy that catches the attention of a skeptical and disinterested audience.”⁴⁰ While not every young person in the pew will attend Sunday

39. Marv Penner, *Adoptive Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 42.

40. Kinnaman, *Unchristian*, 211.

school or stay after worship to talk, when they attend church, they will hear your message. Yes, a pastor must preach a message that reaches all age levels, but it is important to apply it to those who may seem like they do not want to pay attention to what you have to say in the pulpit.

As mentioned in chapter one, one can see how one of the biggest positives, or negatives, for young people in a worship service is the service itself. While there was some consensus in the survey I received about the “old school” nature of worship, that does not account for every member of Gen Z in every different context. All we can do from this point forward is continue to get better at how we reach out to members through the service. When mentioned that there was hope for the new hymnal to spark new life in many young people, this quote from Jonathan Bauer sums it up well.

This hymnal won't just benefit your congregation's worship. It will also benefit your congregation's outreach. The tools and resources provided don't just allow congregations to do more in worship. They allow congregations to do it with less time and effort. They facilitate and streamline many of the time-consuming mechanics of worship planning and preparation. They allow pastors to get out of their offices to spend more time engaging people with the gospel and equipping their members to do the same.⁴¹

When we look at how we reach young people with worship, it is not that we need more screens and fewer hymns; they want the service to mean something to them. As we approach any generation, and especially Gen Z, we must ask ourselves, “why should this matter to them?” “How can I take every opportunity to make every service ring

41. Jonathan Bauer, “Worship and Outreach” (pending publication), 3.

home to every young person in the pew so they will understand the importance of being Christ-like?" "How can I break down every barrier that will not make Christianity look like the faith of their parents, but their faith as well?"

CONCLUSION

When we see a new generation emerge before us, we are given an amazing opportunity—an opportunity to bring Christ to a new generation of young people to whom grace and love have been given through Christ. As we approach the most recent generation, Generation Z, it is important to be aware of who they are as a generation. They bring a pessimism of seeing the way the world is, while being optimistic they will have the tools to change the world.

As the first unchurched generation, there will never be a lack of people to whom we can bring the gospel, but there will be challenges faced in reaching them. How they view the church through the eyes of their parents is one of the biggest threats to their generation. They are not just a product of their culture, but of the way in which they are raised by their parents. As each generation continues on the downward slope of those who are churched, faith will continue to play less of a role in the lives of young people.

As we continue to reach the connected generation let us help connect them to their Savior. By understanding who they are and what motivates them as a generation, we can better reach them on their level—showing them what their Savior has done for them and why it should mean everything to them.

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