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How Research on Young Adults Informs Evangelism

Gary Comer

Abstract

In a time when the church is missing members of the younger generations, it is important to look to generational research and listen to compelling voices regarding currents in the culture, with the aim of informing evangelism among these generations. This treatise provides an analysis of two missiological-relevant aspects of these generations: profile and receptivity. Based on this analysis, the author proposes correctives to increase the effectiveness of evangelistic efforts.

Introduction

Scanning the roughly 200-person church service, making a mental note of the many older adults in the chairs, my visceral reaction was, “Where are all the young people?” Though the scene was marred, like a masterpiece painting with missing brushstrokes, what I observed that January, 2019, morning at a campus of The Summit Church in North Carolina (pastored by SBC President J. D. Greear) was no surprise. Based on the data available (Barna Group, 2020; Clydesdale and Garces-Foley, 2019), this church is not an outlier. The demographics of this church were not a surprise for me, nor

would they be for anyone who has observed what has been reported across the ecclesial spectrum. Even prominent churches such as this one does not know how to reach and retain the younger generations.

Having a noticeable demographic missing from church is a problem. When the next generations are missing, the church's growth and future are threatened. Thus, when the Great Commission Research Network chose to address this topic at its conference in 2019, I saw a worthy research project to pursue. This article allows me to put into writing the key concepts which surfaced from that study, to not only document my findings, but also to contribute to solving this puzzle challenging the 21st century church.

For those of us from among the older generations, relating to and reaching members of the younger generations can seem intimidating, if not impossible. When I joined a very young staff at Sandals Church when I was in my late forties, people glared at my gas-guzzling SUV and my belted phone holder. They kept asking, "How old are you?" Although I may not have been as generationally attuned as I should have been, serving for five years at that youthful megachurch opened my mind to alternative ways of thinking, especially concerning evangelism.

This overview of generational research focuses on developing applications to reach younger generations with the gospel, not on merely reporting generational characteristics. Amid my analysis, I have threaded practical insights to inform evangelism. This will lead to the rationale for why I favor a particular biblical approach, along with three guiding directives aimed at improving our efforts. First, we must begin with what we know of these younger generations.

The Young Adult Vacuum in Churches

The need for the church to attract and integrate younger members is urgent. The Barna Group's (2020) pre-pandemic article *The State of the Church: What's on the Minds of America's Pastors*, reported that half of the study's participants listed their top concerns as (1) declining evangelism by members and (2) reaching a younger audience. With layers of complexity, this issue is a conundrum, a puzzling but not-yet-solved mystery.

And if one enigma were not enough, we now have 2020's COVID-19 pandemic, racial-injustice unrest, and the increasing political and cultural polarization to consider in understanding today's generations. But from God's perspective, these phenomena are not occurring haphazardly. They will be used to serve his purposes, as will be the leaders of his people whom he has chosen. As Paul described how he was "set apart" from his mother's womb (Gal 1:15), Jesus has chosen leaders to serve his church in such times. May the ideas presented here equip such leaders to meet the challenge!

The Square Peg Soul

Many of us have a way of thinking about generational outreach implanted in our collective memory. Some of us remember the revolutionary attractional model of church, the seeker-focused Willow Creek model originated by Bill Hybels of Willow Creek (1975), and further developed by Rick Warren (1980). Saddleback Church was first to profile their target audience whom they called "Saddleback Sam." He represented a typical person who was living in Saddleback Valley suburbs. His characteristics and needs helped define how the church would strategically reach its community. In 1993, Willow Creek followed with their own profile of an unchurched target audience, described in the book *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, assuming again that the description would help the church effectively reach the people in its community (Strobel, 2007).

Following this logic, should we not simply define "Millennial Matthew" or "Gen Z Zoe" and provide programs which attract them to the church? If it is safe to conclude that our younger constituents have common characteristics, why have we not defined who they are in order to develop the corresponding programs and tools to draw them to Christ and his church? This is a key question. However, a simple, typical profile of today's young adults may not be possible, pulling us into a dilemma.

To understand why a typical profile may not exist, we need to objectively examine the data collected on this generation. In my quest for the best resources, Oxford University Press's *The Twenty-*

something Soul: Understanding the Religious and Secular Lives of Young Adults by Tim Clydesdale and Kathleen Garces-Foley (2019), became my preferred source of information. It is a broad, academic study that is reasonably objective. Since twenty-somethings include younger Millennials and older members of Gen Z, I will use the following terms interchangeably, “those born in the 90s,” “young adults,” and “twenty-somethings.” Although referenced at times, I am not including younger members of Gen Z or the younger members of the generation Jean Twenge (2017) calls iGen or the iPhone generation (those who are currently teenagers).

Clydesdale and Garces-Foley’s (2019) findings are based on the 2013 National Study of American Twentysomethings (NSAT) which includes longitudinal data from 1,818 survey participants collected over several years and numerous in-depth interviews of young adults in their twenties. The research found that young adulthood is a period of development where behaviors and values are quite fluid (Clydesdale & Garces-Foley, 2019, p. 149–51). This observation provides both a warning and hope concerning our current situation: Twenty-something believers can lose faith, while spiritually-distanced twenty-somethings can acquire it. The interviews affirmed the plasticity of their beliefs, often linked to notable life events such as changes in community, friends, location, school, and partner, marital, and parenthood status. Their beliefs today are not fixed, and we should never take the faith of those who are believers for granted or consider non-believers as without potential for faith.

Analysis: Generational Profiles

To answer why we do not have a Millennial Matthew or Gen Z Zoe, we can look at Clydesdale and Garces-Foley’s conclusion. They describe twenty-somethings as “America’s most truly pluralist generation of adults” (Clydesdale & Garces-Foley, 2019, p. 184). The most dominant characteristic of twenty-somethings is that they have few, if any, characteristics in common. As CNN pundit Van Jones has noted of younger voters, it is “the most diverse generation ever.” (Jones, 2020). More than preceding generations, they are pluralistic in beliefs, views, and backgrounds. So, a graphic such as

Saddleback Sam cannot exist. It is not possible to describe a typical person in their twenties today.

Although some important generalizations can be made about this generation, the research does not support a simple profile concerning their values, their beliefs, and what might help them to progress spiritually. If we were to seek to profile today's twenty-somethings, as was done for the white Boomers of Southern California's 1980 suburbia (i.e., Saddleback Sam), we might need 7 or 8 different profiles to describe the same proportion of the population that was described by Saddleback's single profile.

What would it look like if we tried to create a single profile for Millennial Matthew or Gen Z Zoe? Although the characteristics observed to create a description of yesterday's boomers and the characteristics observed to create a description of today's twenty-somethings are quite different, the domains of observations are similar. Concerning their religious identity, in addition to evangelical, four other major identities exist. The twenty-somethings in Clydesdale and Garces-Foley's (2019) study identified as following:

- 30% Evangelical
- 18% Roman Catholic
- 14% Mainline Protestant
- 9% Other Religions
- 29% No religious identity

Additionally, the research revealed four categories of "Nones" (those with no religious identity). Most were *Indifferent Secularists* (54%), young adults who do not prioritize pursuing meaning in their life. In contrast the *Philosophic Secularists* (12%) pursue a philosophic view of life's ultimate meaning yet reject religious faith; this would include many atheists. A third group, *Spiritual Eclectics* (17%), includes those who embrace a spiritual view of life coming from a mixture of influences. Fourthly are *Unaffiliated Believers* (17%) who believe in God but who are either "Dones," those having given up on the church, or those who have distanced themselves from church involvement and association for at least the moment

(Clydesdale & Garces-Foley, 2018, p. 155).

Compounding the diversity even further, we could similarly divide the 9% who identified with “Other Religions” into Muslims, Jews, Mormons, Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus, and others. My Imam friend fits within this category, along with the hundreds of all ages who attend our neighborhood’s mosque daily. This category, which represents a very broad range of religions, is sure to grow as America continues to become more diverse.

How Research Informs Evangelism: Pluralistic Range

It is important to note that young non-religious adults have widely divergent beliefs. *Thus, evangelism to younger generations cannot be based on one single approach or one specific form of presenting the gospel; but rather the approach to evangelization should be determined by the non-believer’s spiritual stance; we should bring them from their particular point of departure to the knowledge of Christ. In short, we need a dynamic evangelistic approach that adapts to the needs and experiences of each twenty-something with whom we want to share the gospel. We must have the discernment necessary to share with them in a resonant and effectual fashion.*

Because so many young adults today are far from believing in Christ, evangelism must be built around giving them the opportunity for processing the message and its implications. James Emory White, in *Meet Generation Z* (2017), mirrors that conclusion in the chapter Rethinking Evangelism, “The most foundational rethinking is one that in previous writings and in multiple settings I’ve sketched out to try to persuade pastors and church leaders of one foundational dynamic: the importance of process” (p. 107). It was from seeing ineffective evangelistic “presentation” models that led me to design an evangelism approach called the *Relational Evangelism Process* (Comer, 2013) and to define an assortment of practical faith-sharing skills.

Here are some “process” skills I believe all believers need to have in their repertoire:

Framing: The skill of inviting someone into an ongoing conversation. It can be used when building a relationship, learning together, or discussing a question or objection.

Safety: The skill of reducing risk in a relationship enough to enable open, honest conversations. This is where we communicate that whoever the person is, and whatever the person believes or expresses, will not alter the friendship.

Drawing: The skill of asking deeper questions in order to draw out a person's true thoughts and feelings. This practice affords vital information to deepen the dialogue and get to the place of spiritual influence (Comer, 2018, p. 332).

These skills are similar to those due to the Holy Spirit's influence on Philip in Acts 8, directing him to "get beside the eunuch," and then "stay there" for a time, and finally to step up into the chariot to share in a conversational journey (See Acts 8:29–31). These are "positioning" skills. Every spiritually related expression of interest, question, or objection can be leveraged into an exploratory dialogue.

In essence, in our attempt to reach this demographic, we need to broaden our evangelistic focus from merely proclaiming the gospel to discerning what it takes to have "influence" on a twenty-something, motivating them to be receptive to, and enabling the necessary processing of, the gospel message. This change of emphasis from proclamation to influence is essential but difficult. Given their diversity of beliefs, how will we know what they understand of the gospel?

Analysis: Gospel Receptivity

Many of us are familiar with common generational categories (Table 1). For analyzing how the gospel might be disseminated, a basic question is to ask if generational distinctions influence how the gospel is received. If we are to better understand how to reach younger generations, we must answer the question: *Is the generational shift of such a nature that it alters how people are*

influenced? Does it affect the way a person receives, hears, and responds to the gospel?

Generation	Approximate Birth Years	Influential World Events and Phenomena
Baby Boomers	1946-1964	JFK's assassination (Early Boomers), Watergate, Energy Crisis, Cold War
Gen X	1965-1980	Challenger, Berlin Wall, Gulf War, Rodney King
Millennials	1981-1995	Columbine, 9/11, War in Iraq
Gen Z	1996-2012	iPhones, texting, terrorism, school shootings, gender diversity, COVID-19

Table 1. *Common Generational Categories*

In my book, *Soul Whisperer*, I argued that such a shift did indeed take place between the Baby Boomers and Generation X (Comer, 2013, p. 30–41). I built a case that the modern-to-postmodern transition was a change in culture that influenced gospel receptivity. Here, I am referring to “postmodern” as a broad cultural outlook, not the philosophy that cast doubts upon the certainties created by modernism. It is rather the realism that followed a period of idealism, similar to Disney’s vision of Tomorrow Land being followed by the MA-rated programs of today’s Netflix. During the transition, pop culture evolved when the Boomer-led hair metal bands of the 80s were unseated by the darker-emotive angst of Gen X-led grunge bands, with Nirvana’s *Smells Like Teen Spirit* (1991) leading the way in reshaping the rock world (cf. Loudwire, 2021, “How Grunge Killed Hair Metal”).

Postmodernism’s emergence, which some have dated by the fall

of the Berlin Wall in 1989, led to the death of an assumption within the church (Oden, 1995). Suddenly, effectively communicating the gospel focused, not on perfectionism, moralism, or scientific and economic progress, but on present experiences, relationships, and un-pretentious honesty. Focusing on how people are, not how they should be, became the center of all parts of society including language and church.

Understanding this historic change is a prerequisite to evaluating the experience of twenty-somethings. The question we must ask about those born in the 1990s and early 2000s, is whether a generational shift has altered how people are influenced by the gospel. My readings and personal observations lead me to conclude that such a shift has not occurred. Let me qualify and explain what I mean. Understanding generational changes for the sake of effectively communicating the gospel seems prudent at face value. But do these changes, such as increased use of computer-mediated communication, change how people hear and understand the gospel?

If those born in the 90s received meaningful life-changing information from nothing but their electronic devices, this would be a major shift in human nature. The church would have to radically change how it communicated the gospel. Although a high percentage of the younger generations are proficient in computer-mediated communication, online addictions and isolation are growing problems (Clydesdale & Garces Foley, 2019, p. 158). Because of these problems, the presumption that social media is the main force influencing their faith is not defensible. This does not mean that young adults do not consume online information, nor that they are immune to what they see and hear on media. Rather, important aspects of life, such as developing one's faith or making major decisions, are not primarily influenced by social media or church advertising, which are more similar to background noise than the primary forces which influence them. Rarely will people say that they have been influenced by social media or church advertising. This is no different than previous generations.

Alan Noble agrees in *Disruptive Witness* (2018) that we should not focus on improving media communication with young people, but rather on capturing their attention and meaningfully engaging

them. Noble's thesis is that our addiction to electronic devices has left us so wearied and distracted that we fail to process information, especially the gospel, beyond the surface level. "The modern mind is often not prepared to engage in dialogue about personally challenging ideas, particularly ones with deep implications. The fatigued mind would rather categorize a conversation about God as another superficial distraction" (Noble, 2018, p. 21). Thus, he argues that we need to provide a "disruptive witness."

Jean Twenge, in her book *iGen* (2017), argues those born after 1994 need "in person" relationships to be healthier and happier (Twenge, 299). Moreover, in order to rectify the consequences of distraction and shallowness, we need real, incarnate relationships as the seedbed for deeper searching and dialogue (Frost, 2014, p. 11–12). This need for meaningful connections has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic which has increased the desire for meeting with others. Although non-believers may be less welcoming of sharing a physical space with strangers, they may be more welcoming of those with whom they are familiar and whom they trust. In fact, in this new world, establishing a relationship is now a prerequisite for communicating with others. Such personal connection can occur through a phone, Zoom, or messaging.

How Research Informs Evangelism: Meaningful Communication

The Missional Behavior Survey, a study conducted by Christ Together, revealed that 73 percent of Christians saw themselves as ineffective in sharing the gospel with nonbelievers (Kozey, 2014). Most church members see themselves as lacking knowledge, confidence, and the ability to influence others. The research indicates that "authentic-meaningful conversation" is valued more by younger generations than by older generations. A popular television series for the younger generations is *The 100*, based on the book by the millennial Kass Morgan, which focuses on moral dilemmas. Through seven seasons, the characters never stop having deep, gut-wrenching conversations about who they are, what they did, and what they should do. Comparing this type of conversation to the message that churches communicate to those who do not

attend indicates that gospel-related communication is too shallow for this generation.

We desperately need to be able to go deeper in our conversations about the spiritual life. The church would benefit from teaching members how to develop conversations around the gospel that are naturally authentic and highly relevant. I suggest two ways in a latter section which I call “Identification” and “Interpretation.”

Addressing the Rise of the Irreligious

If recent generations are not influenced in radically different ways than previous generations have been influenced, then why do we have cultural and religious polarization growing so rapidly? Here is my theory. I see it as the continuation of trends that started with postmodernism. That means that the trends which began with postmodernism are now more intense, especially concerning how the gospel is heard and received. Clydesdale and Garces-Foley calls twenty-somethings “Practical Postmoderns” (Clydesdale & Garces-Foley, 2018, p. 163). Contemporary generations are not fundamentally different from the first postmodern generation.

If this continuity is correct, research should reveal that the authenticity valued by Generation X remains valued by younger generations and is necessary for them to be receptive to the gospel. This means that relational honesty and transparency are essential for reaching young adults today. Is this confirmed by research? Yes. Clydesdale and Garces-Foley write, “Authenticity came up repeatedly in our interviews with Evangelicals. They told us that their churches enable them to be themselves, without fear of judgement, something that they did not find possible at other churches. Alicia, a 24-year-old college student we met at New Life, also talked to us about authenticity. ‘You can talk about the problems that you have and be honest, and you feel like it’s a safe place for that...People can be real, and people are free to have their own opinions or struggle with whatever they are struggling with’” (Clydesdale & Garces-Foley, 2019, p. 122).

The continuation of postmodern values from one generation to another makes mutual understanding possible, but also brings the same difficulties. Twenty-somethings will distance themselves from

institutions which are not perceived as authentic. “I am spiritual, but not religious,” or “I do not believe in organized religion” are common sayings. Researcher Nancy Ammerman said, “Identifying as spiritual but not religious is evidence of an individual’s desire to distance him or herself from the perceived evils perpetrated by organized religion, rather than descriptive of the individual’s beliefs and practices.” (Ammerman, 2013, p. 258–278). And she offers this assessment, “If [people] do not learn the language of spirituality in a religious community, it does not shape their way of being in the world. Spiritual, but not religious. Probably not” (Ammerman, 2014, para. 15).

I see a parallel to this sort of permanent spiritual distancing in what happened with outreach to the Jews in the first and second centuries. At first, the church was initially Jewish as Hebrews embraced Jesus as their Messiah (Green, 1970, p. 78–87). But as the Christian movement grew, Christianity was perceived as being anti-Jewish, slowing its growth (See Origen’s argument against the Jewish interpretation of Isaiah 53, *Contra Celsum*, I:55). The church continued to grow but increasingly took on gentile values. I submit that a similar postmodern poisoning of the air has occurred today, and is now rather absorbed, undermining the church’s influence.

When sitting down with Cru leaders at a central California university, I proposed this idea regarding cultural pre-conditioning, “A good proportion of young adults seem to have made emotive-level predeterminations about the Christian faith. From what they have gleaned of Christian voices and their associated beliefs, a barrier now precedes the gospel.” The Cru staff immediately nodded in affirmation. They had seen it firsthand in the reactions of students they had tried to reach, reactions which indicated that the gospel message was viewed as powerless, if not intolerable.

The self-image of young people is a powerful force in forming their identity, which, in turn, influences their beliefs. If perceptions of Christians, Christianity, and church policies do not align with their notions of love, fairness, justice, equality, truth, and tolerance which they ascribe to themselves and their network of friends, why should they listen to the religious jargon of Christians or consider accepting an invitation to visit a church? Having already rejected the

institutional form of Christianity, they believe they already know where pursuing further understanding of Christianity would lead.

How Research Informs Evangelism: Untangling Knots

These preconditioned responses to the gospel underline the insufficiency of a simple “Just go tell them about Jesus” approach. Because of their preconceived notion of Christianity, a close relationship with a genuine Christian or Christian group becomes crucial to the unraveling of misinformed conclusions. It was for this reason that Jesus emphasized love so much. With God, and the Spirit, there is always hope. But a deep, unobservable barrier exists for many young progressives.

Let me slightly modify the familiar biblical story of Jesus and the woman at the well (John 4). What if, hypothetically, the Jewish nation was primarily concerned, not with the Roman occupation, but with the loss of racial purity by intermarriage? It is clear that Jews did not routinely associate with Samaritans (John 4:9), but what if it was far more severe than that? What if the number one issue to the Jewish nation was racial purity and interactions with the Samaritan people were seen as the greatest threat? With all the religious fervor and rhetoric in the synagogues, the zeal against Samaria would flow into the streets stirring up crowds with chants of hatred.

If Jesus’ visit to Jacob’s well occurred in such a context, what would be different? The Samaritan woman would probably ask a different question. In the biblical account, she asks a theological question concerning the place of worship. But in this new version, she might ask a political or social leaning one such as, “Why do the Jewish people hate us so much?”

Is this not similar to what we observe with people outside the church who are conditioned to see Christians in a negative social and political light? I propose that, in the new scenario, though Jesus could have led the conversation in many different directions, the all-important spiritual conversation that took place that day might not have occurred. In that context, the hostility would be too great to overcome. In our reconstrued encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, perhaps not even Jesus could have influenced

her. It would certainly have been a different conversation. The Samaritan woman might not have been able to meaningfully dialogue with him, the contempt of her people being too painful. I had this exact kind of conversation on a New York radio program with a young caller named Jenny, where feelings of judgement and rejection from the church hindered her from understanding the love of God (Dr. Kevin interview, 2019).

Now, picture all those young progressives at colleges, on the streets protesting racial injustice, or in cities across the nation celebrating Biden's victory. Trump lost the 18-to-29-year-old vote by about 20 percent (Orr, 2020). Christians, including those who lean to the political right, should not view any of these people as beyond redemption. In a period of intense political polarization, Christians need a higher wisdom that prioritizes the gospel. I recall the day my pastor friend Mike Barnes described how he lost a friendship with his non-believing neighbor when he placed a Save Marriage initiative sign in his front lawn. He ended the story by declaring, "I will never do that again."

Analysis: The Efficacy of Evangelism

Because we are concerned about the most pluralistic generation in history, and because their resistance to institutional religion has biased them against the gospel and motivated them to leave church, we should ask, "How should we think about and do evangelism?"

First, we need to admit, as Clydesdale and Garces-Foley do, that understanding the religious attitudes of twenty-somethings does not necessarily show us how to reach them with the gospel. Likewise, Jean Twenge's proposals for saving *iGen* (Twenge, 2017, p. 289–313) do not provide any soteriological information. Research reveals what young people are predisposed to believe, but it does not describe how salvific faith develops from the multitude of starting points which characterize this generation. However, effective evangelism may not depend as much on generational distinctives as it is does on human nature. This is a simple point, but one that is important to make. Generational differences explain how people may be conditioned, but they do not change what it means to be human. So, the younger person has more in common

with the older person than we may realize.

Second, Jesus's communication strategy focuses on human needs and storylines, not especially on generational distinctions. However, there are several references to age in the Bible. *The Prodigal Son* is a parable about a young man, but his age is not the focal point of the story, nor of humanity's need for a Savior as seen in the rest of Scripture. Modern market research into generational differences is valuable, but we should be careful not to overemphasize descriptive information of broad groups at the expense of responding to the exact needs of an individual. Rather than focusing on reaching a demographic, we should seek to reach unique individuals who happen to be a member of a specific generation.

Back to Jesus: A Dynamic Mission Approach

Jesus' method of evangelism is precisely what we need for the most pluralist generation for this one reason: His method is dynamic. It can reach anyone whatever their background and values may be. Christ's pattern of communication is powerful and can be summarized as: (1) Start where they are, (2) Read what they need, (3) Know where to take them. Christ's pattern does not reduce a person to a member of a demographic, but instead accurately assesses the unique needs and characteristics of the individual. (1) *Start where they are*: What does your twenty-something friend really think and feel about life and faith? (2) *Read what they need*: Become adept at seeing their needs and situations. Only then can you convey the gospel in a way that addresses those needs. (3) *Know where to take them*: This involves both accurately communicating the gospel and understanding the relational process and spiritual journey that are necessary so that they respond positively to the message.

An approach that takes into consideration the multitude of potential beliefs and backgrounds of the individual is likely to have a greater influence on younger generations than a more programmed approach. Here are three concepts that can be taught to members of churches to develop such an approach: (1) Identification: Personal connection, (2) Interpretation: Meaningful communication, and (3) Interception: Relational commitment.

Identification Through Story

Jean was in her 70s and a spiritual giant in my eyes. At a training class, she told of a conversation she had with a young woman who had shared about having marital troubles. As a Boomer, Jean saw this as an opportunity to speak of the power of Christ. Proud to shine as a light in the darkness, she quickly responded, “We are Christians, we don’t have marital issues.” My heart sank.

Such a response quickly diminished the likelihood of a positive response to the gospel. I tried to help Jean see things from a postmodern perspective, and how she could have replied more constructively. I pondered how difficult such a change of thinking would be for her. For her whole life she had been told that *if she really lived the Christian life* then others would see Jesus and want to know him.

As stated previously, postmodernism does not accept modernisms’ idealistic beliefs about the communication of the gospel. The inability to relate, to connect, to help others see the realness of faith from the backdrop of their own human condition creates a massive gap between the believer and the unbeliever and an urgent need across the church. If we are to communicate more effectively with younger people, we must be more credible. To help Christians be more credible, I have taught a specific skill which involves using what I call “The Disclosure Window.” This window is understood through adages such as “If they never see your darkness, they may never see his light,” and “When you open up, you open a window to Christ.”

Those who apply this skill have seen fruit. Scott Brennan describes the time with a college student he met through casual interactions at a Starbucks in Boston. As the relationship progressed, they had open and honest dialogues. During one conversation, the young adult revealed his struggle with same-sex attraction. Scott, in turn, told of the anguish he experienced from the words and abandonment of his father when he was twelve years old, and how the devastating wound wreaked havoc on his soul. In the video Scott recounts, “Right after I shared that, he began opening up, saying, ‘You are talking about my life.’” As they continued the discussion, “Disclosure led to other disclosure. Through that I was able to allow

him to share—to bring him to the place to come all the way out, and expose the fears, expose the sense of abandonment and shame. From there, it was so easy to direct him to Christ, saying: ‘Is there anything holding you back?’” (Comer, 2015).

Having returned from visiting a church for four consecutive weeks, my 26-year-old mentioned that not once had the pastor shared anything related to his own life. He went on to inform me that he will not be going back. Pastors preaching sermons with a focus on abstract ideals do not connect emotionally with today’s younger generations. Such pastors are more likely to have an effective ministry with Boomers and older seniors. Postmodern culture is hungry for something more transparent, reflecting the grittiness of human experience. Someone who has experienced life as they have experienced it is more likely to influence them. Does this mean Christians need to reveal all of their sins, doubts, and fears to lead someone to Christ? Not always, but identification is a potent means to connect with young adults and to open the possibility for meaningful conversation.

Interpretation Through Story

Joshua Stock, president of Snowboarders for Christ (SFC), relayed how his young constituency understood that building relationships with unsaved friends was crucial, yet they saw few positive responses to the gospel. Many of their snowboarding friends lacked the motivation to follow Jesus (J.B. Stock, personal communication, July 19, 2012).

In Jesus’ pattern of sharing the good news, he *reads what they need*, and then *interprets the good news* according to their situation. By “interpreting” so that the benefits and relevance of the gospel become clear, Jesus *motivated people to want to have faith*.

Dayna, one of our trainees, met with a nonreligious Japanese woman for lunch who shared that her husband had just confessed to having been unfaithful with scores of women. Practicing this skill of interpretation, she listened to this woman unload her sorrow, and asked herself. “What is her need? What does the gospel mean to her right now?” Sensing that the woman was overwhelmed by her feelings, Dayna saw a large planter close to their table, pointed to it,

and said, “Maiko, you were not made to carry that planter, and you cannot carry this burden.” She then shared about Jesus, the only One who could carry such a burden. Like Christ’s “living water” metaphor, the massive planter became the image that led her to faith (Comer, 2018, p. 171).

A friend of mine who is a church leader in Kenya once made this observation, “In cities,” where there is so much exposure to religions, “people are where they are regarding faith, not by chance, but by choice” (Z. Kingori, personal communication, August 10, 2013). What is the choice disbelieving urban Africans and young people all over the globe are making? *They are choosing to believe that a self-directed life is better than the life Christ offers them.* The church needs to be equipped to challenge that belief. We need Christians who grow close enough to young adults to help them understand what it means to have a relationship with Jesus. This is the power of interpretation.

For interpretation to occur, Christians should learn a process that leads to discovering how faith in Christ can respond to the particular needs of the unique individual:

Listening → Discovery → Interpretation → Communication

Again, this type of closeness and understanding rarely develops through social media; rather, it develops through a relationship, either through face-to-face communication or through video conferencing, in safe contexts that permit authentic sharing.

Interception Through Story

In a case study of a 4,000-member church in California, 36 believers were interviewed on sharing their faith; only two of them had an “ongoing” relationship with an unsaved person, making it highly unlikely that most of them would share their faith effectively. Though well-intentioned, church members who have no non-Christian friends rarely reach anyone. Even non-believers see this problem. Cru’s research of 400 unbelievers from cities across America revealed that 84% had favorable views toward Jesus and were open to having conversations about him, most did not think

Christians would be willing to have a conversation with them because of the differences in their beliefs (Monaco, 2018).

To reach contemporary generations, we must develop relationships with those who do not believe as we do. Giving honor to others and creating a safe context for authentic conversations are essential virtues. Spiritual influence requires the right evangelistic approach. The “Philosophic Secularists” among twenty-somethings include skeptics and atheists. They can be reached if we help them to progress through the following:

Open to believing → *Able to believe* → *Wanting to believe* →
Choosing to believe.

My experience of reaching two millennial skeptics indicates that they first need to be open to talk, for example, by meeting together every week. They then need sufficient information for the rationale to be able to believe; this may take months of weekly conversations. They then need to understand the benefits of the gospel so that they want to have faith; this comes through the interpretation of the benefits. Finally, they need to choose to follow Jesus, repenting and trusting him as their Lord and Savior.

Often, young adults reject the gospel because of a particular opinion or belief. Recently I watched a video of a millennial woman who, in all-earnestness, asked, “How can God save only Christians, while dismissing the people who have not yet heard or those who faithfully hold to other beliefs they have been taught?” Unfortunately, the apologist did not know how to address the core issue driving her inquiry. He needed to work the third part of Christ’s pattern of communication, *Know where to take them*. Because he did not know how to do this, the woman eventually gave up and walked off.

There is only one way to respond to such a person whom I would call *the God accuser*. The details are in *Soul Whisperer* (Comer, 2013, p. 248–251), but my main point is that some young people will only be reached with sound, solid answers to their questions. Today, more than ever, we need church members who are relationally engaged but also specifically trained to reach those far from the gospel.

Twenty-Somethings and the Church Service

What about reaching young adults through church services? A strategy of attracting new people through programing, having the core group invite their friends, and encouraging belonging before belief has worked in the past. It is a simple, proven strategy, but its effectiveness has lessened dramatically with younger generations. A college minister invited 5 of his non-Christian friends to a church-sponsored event, but not one would attend. But were they willing to enter into a one-on-one conversation with him about their beliefs? Absolutely.

So, at church activities with young adults, make sure to promote a culture that is valued by this generation. The leaders should be relatable, authentic, up to date on current affairs, tech savvy, and socially conscious. These characteristics are useful for influencing those who are willing to come to church activities. But they do not always help to influence the rising number of younger people who will not come to a church activity. Church members with the necessary skills will need to gradually bring them into the community.

The proposed practices of identification, interpretation, and interception are essential for doing so. They enable Christians to influence today's youth. The church as a whole has failed to equip its members to be influencers of this generation. Mission concepts and practical skills are not widely taught, are not supported with viable structures, and are not valued by the church body. So we remain stuck in mission mediocrity. Ed Stetzer prophetically wrote, almost a generation ago, that postmoderns "need to be reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the current pattern of church isn't reaching them" (Stetzer, 2003, p. 130).

Conclusion

Jesus critiqued his contemporaries, "How is it that you cannot interpret this present time?" (Luke 12:56). The church must read what is unfolding during this present time and be willing to change, otherwise it will lose what it has. A better missiological way lies before us. A time such as this, demands it.

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