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Tanita Maddox  
Young Life, tanitamaddox@gmail.com

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# Applying Paul's Areopagus Model to Generation Z

Tanita Maddox

Young Life

## Abstract

*The members of Generation Z are today's adolescents and young professionals, bringing with them their own culture. This culture requires other generations to use a cross-cultural approach to evangelism, as modeled by Paul in Athens (Acts 17:16-34). Paul observed the Athenian culture, built rapport, used common language with his audience, found common ground as a cultural doorway for his message, and redefined the audience's understanding of the relationship between God and humans. The same steps can be applied to gospel proclamation to Generation Z for effective and relevant evangelism.*

Key Words: Generation Z, Gen Z, Paul, Areopagus, evangelism

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The topic and the ideas in this article are addressed more extensively in the author's doctoral thesis on file at Phoenix Seminary in Scottsdale, AZ (Maddox, 2020).

Generation Z (Gen Z) has arrived, filling the rooms of middle schools, high schools, colleges, and workplaces, but not churches. Accompanying the arrival of Gen Z are the complexities brought about by social media and smartphones (Twenge, 2017), increased levels of anxiety, depression, and isolation (Twenge, 2018, pp. 93–118), and biblical illiteracy (Copan & Litwak, 2014, p. 36). Gen Z is morally fluid: their moral standards and ideals shift over time and with different circumstances (Barna Group, 2018, p. 55). For Gen Z, what is morally unacceptable in one situation (e.g., cheating) is acceptable in another situation (e.g., cheating is permissible when the test is biased; Jensen et al., 2002). Absolute or universal truth has been replaced with a personal or individualized definition of truth; in other words, truth is determined by each individual (Barna Group, 2018, p. 65). Gen Z brings a culture of its own, one most churches do not understand.

It is critical to recognize that, for older generations (Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers) who minister to Gen Z, this ministry is not only cross-generational, but also cross-cultural. Like any culture, Gen Z brings its own set of values, norms, taboos, mores, language, and dress, distinguishing the culture of Gen Z from others (Livermore, 2009, p. 29). In this way, older generations ministering to Gen Z are cross-cultural ministers. Thus, gospel proclamation to Gen Z requires a different approach to evangelism than those used with previous generations, necessitating cultural intelligence to understand the audience and communicate effectively. Because of this, contextualization principles historically applied to ethnic or geographical cross-cultural evangelism can and should be applied to gospel proclamation to Generation Z.

Cross-cultural contextualization of the gospel for a specific generation, versus culture based on ethnicity, has often been ignored as a topic of study. Paul's Areopagus speech (Acts 17:16-34) is an example of cross-cultural contextualization and evangelism that can be applied to reaching Gen Z. Because Paul's speech provides an example of cross-cultural contextualization, and those ministering cross-culturally to Gen Z require skills in contextualization, studying Paul's Areopagus speech can contribute to the discussion regarding contextualization of the gospel to Gen Z. Paul's Mars Hill method of gospel proclamation can be applied to a Gen Z audience in a way that appeals to their cultural values as a means to share gospel truth.

Western cultural philosophies increasingly reflect the pagan Athenian culture to which Paul was preaching (Copan & Litwak, 2014, p. 37). While Gen Z is not pre-Christian, as the ancient Athenians were, they are post-Christian, with little-to-no cultural reference to matters of the Christian

faith and prioritizing their own cultural beliefs over those of the Bible (Barna Group, 2018, p. 36). Moreover, Gen Z is biblically illiterate, just as the Athenians were biblically illiterate.

This article proposes that common Gen Z cultural values can be utilized as doorways to effectively proclaim the gospel to Gen Z, as modeled by Paul in Acts 17:16-34 (see also Maddox, 2020). This article focuses on Gen Z and the cultural values and beliefs of this generation for the purpose of identifying cultural doorways for gospel proclamation and cultivating what is good news for Generation Z. This article proposes Gen Z's values create a sort of cultural doorway, an entrance point, through which gospel proclamation can be received in an understandable and relevant way. The aim of the evangelist is to engage with culture in order to transform it (Flemming, 2005, p. 265). If churches understand the values and worldview of Gen Z, they can respond with relevant proclamation and discipleship that allows this new generation to engage its values in a way that reflects the Kingdom of God.

### **Paul's Cross-Cultural Proclamation at Mars Hill**

Paul's message at the Areopagus in Acts 17:16-34 is often applied within missiology, cross-cultural ministry, and gospel proclamation. Paul's Areopagus speech provides a skillfully crafted, culturally sensitive, and sophisticated model for evangelism, "enabling his audience right away to feel at home" (Flemming, 2005, p. 74). Paul's approach in Athens includes observing his audience's culture (Acts 17:16, 23), building rapport (Acts 17:22), finding common ground to effectively share his message (Acts 17:23-24), using culturally appropriate language (Acts 17:28), and redefining the relationship between humanity and God (Acts 17:24-31).

Paul lived in and understood three different cultural contexts: Second-Temple Judaism, the Roman Empire, and Hellenistic culture (Wright, 2009, pp. 3-5). This is not unlike the experience of a Christian in the United States today, who is a member of the following cultural contexts, among others: the Christian Church, one's own generation, and the post-Christian, capitalist Western world. In some ways, the evangelist to Gen Z must become culturally trilingual, as Paul was, to share the gospel message. Paul demonstrated in Acts 17:16-34, that proclaimers of the gospel can approach people within their social and cultural world and also guide those people and their values toward the gospel (Schnabel, 2012, p. 176).

### **Gen Z as a Culture**

This article argues Gen Z should be treated as its own culture with its own

cultural context. Generations have their own culture and unique sets of “mental software” (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 5, 18.). David Livermore notes the cultural differences between generations “can equal” those between socioethnic groups (Livermore, 2009, p. 29). Gen Z possesses its own distinct attitudes, beliefs, social norms, and behaviors, defining it as its own culture (Seemiller & Grace, 2016, p. 1). While Gen Z could be considered a subculture or microculture within a greater culture, it can be deduced from their own distinct values, beliefs, language, and systems that Gen Z possesses its own cultural identity (Howell, 2016, p. 66). Born between 1999-2013, the bulk of Generation Z are adolescents, and it can be difficult to separate and identify specifically what is generational and what is a developmental stage within this generation. However, when it comes to evangelism and contextualization of the gospel to Gen Z, at least at this point in time, both are important and are in fact, intertwined in understanding Gen Z. This article discusses treating Gen Z as a culture of its own in order to help previous generations engage in cross-cultural evangelism as the preferred method of gospel proclamation.

### **Paul’s Five Principles Applied to Generation Z**

Paul employed five principles in his Areopagus speech: 1) he observed the culture, 2) he built rapport with his audience, 3) he used common language, 4) he utilized a cultural doorway as a gateway for proclamation, and 5) he redefined the relationship between humanity and the divine. These principles are commonly discussed in missiology and cross-cultural evangelism. This article will now apply Paul’s five principles from Acts 17:16-34 to the work of gospel proclamation to Gen Z.

#### **Observe Gen Z Culture**

The first principle outlined in Acts 17:16-34 was to become familiar with the audience’s culture. Paul is a student, “a careful observer,” of the culture around him (Sampley, 2016, p. 392). Paul “walked around and looked carefully at [the Athenians’] objects of worship,” even reading the inscriptions (Acts 17:23). Understanding the Athenians’ culture, Paul used their language to communicate to his audience in their terms (Copan & Litwak, 2014, p. 14). He “intentionally uses the philosophical language of his audience” to translate the Christian message for a pagan audience (Flemming, 2005, p. 79). He knew pagan poetry familiar to his audience and cited some of those poets in Acts 17:28. Paul’s observation of the Athenian culture allowed him to identify familiar poetry and rhetoric for his audience.

Churches can see Gen Z’s values of authenticity, safety, inclusion,

personal freedom, and the belief of inherent dignity of all human beings. While these values may have timeless aspects, the context and translation of these values, and how Gen Z both experiences and expresses them, are distinct to their generational identity. The value of authenticity is of utmost importance to Gen Z and has been formed, in part, by social media. Generation Z had early access to interactive technology and is “tech-fluent.”(J. Walter Thompson Intelligence, 2012, p. 3). Because they are aware social media is full of falsities and façades, Gen Z attributes trustworthiness and credibility to transparency (Witt & Baird, 2018, p. 46) and is highly attuned to the fact that a person may have multiple identities or versions of oneself, even if these have conflicting values or morals. Gen Z wants to know who is actually who they say they are or who they present themselves as. Because they are immersed in the false realities of social media and the internet, Gen Z’s principle rule is to look for those who can be themselves (Twenge, 2018, pp. 106–107, 286). This thirst for authenticity extends to the need for authentic relationships and real-life connections with people rather than digital ones (Seemiller & Grace, 2016, pp. 62, 94).

Gen Z defines authenticity based on its own terms. For example, generally, Gen Z views Christians as intolerant (Twenge, 2018, p. 139), hypocritical (Barna Group, 2018, p. 29), and judgmental (Barna Group, 2018, p. 30), among other descriptors. If a Christian does not admit to being guilty of such things, a member of Gen Z is likely to describe that Christian as inauthentic. For example, a Christian may share about his or her failures, shortcomings, and even areas of embarrassment or shame, but if these do not directly relate to the areas where Gen Z believes Christians are hiding or being dishonest, then that Christian is still likely to be described as inauthentic by Gen Z. When it comes to evangelism, Gen Z is looking for an authentic source, as well as an authentic message, rooted in transparency, honesty, and credibility as they view the world.

Gen Z is coming of age during a global pandemic, the proliferation of social media, and a continued trend of school shootings. Gen Z wants to feel safe all of the time, which includes physical, emotional, psychological, and perceived safety (Twenge, *iGen*, p. 159). This has led to the following belief: If something is not absolutely safe, it is dangerous and must be avoided (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, p. 177).

Gen Z values belonging, an expression of acceptance and inclusivity, (Brown, 2014, p. 11), and believes themselves to be more open-minded than previous generations (Premack, 2018). Their cultural context reflects increasing acceptance of people or ideas that may have been traditionally rejected or restricted by older or past generations. Gen Z has only existed

in a world with a black president, legalized gay marriage, legalized marijuana in many states, and females in high-ranking political offices (Weise, 2019, pg. 24). Seventy percent of Gen Z teenagers think it is “definitely or probably acceptable to be born one gender but identify as another” (Williams et al., 2019, p. 274). Because Gen Z views Christians as intolerant, as mentioned earlier, it can be deduced they have not witnessed churches embracing all those whom Gen Z accepts.

There is a clear link between perceived or actual rejection by others and experienced depression (Williams et al., 2019, p. 274). This impact of acceptance, or lack thereof, on Gen Z’s well-being reflects how deeply rooted the value of acceptance is. Gen Z’s cultural understanding of freedom is related to the generation’s cultural value of acceptance. To live authentically for Gen Z, one should be able to do or be whatever one wants. For Gen Z, personal freedom should not be limited or restricted because restriction prevents a person from living authentically. Thus, obstructing personal freedom is obstructing authenticity, which ultimately communicates rejection, not acceptance, of one’s “true,” authentic self. Relativism not only protects personal freedom but allows for the acceptance and inclusion of others (Barna Group, 2018, p. 69). Gen Z subscribes to the cultural fear of exclusion or rejection: They are worried that belief in universal truth could lead to “oppressing those who disagree” (Copan & Litwak, 2014, p. 50). The values of tolerance and acceptance became more important than believing in universal truth, creating a system in which Gen Z Christians deny their own beliefs if said beliefs are perceived as intolerant (Nappa, 2012, p. 73). Gen Z would rather be fully accepting of others than commit to a truth that rejects any belief system or person. Because Gen Z believes faith restricts personal freedom, many Gen Zers avoid it (Kageler & Clark, 2014, p. 56).

While the need for personal freedom is important to Gen Z, this generation also values social justice and fighting for the dignity of all people, especially the outcasts or oppressed; they long for justice (Gould, 2019, p. 31). They strive to be socially aware and make the world a better place yet they have a complex relationship with acceptance and social justice (Shankar, 2019, p. 15). After all, the very concept of justice hinges upon defining what is wrong, what needs to be rectified, and identifying the values or actions that need to be rejected. Understanding this tension can help the evangelist decipher what is good news to a generation that longs for both acceptance and justice.

## **Build Rapport**

Paul also exercised the use of a *captatio benevolentiae*, *words of praise*,

in the opening of his speech with his Athenian audience to gain rapport (Rothschild, 2014, pp. 52–53). In Acts 17:22, Paul built rapport by connecting with his audience's values, calling Athenians *δεισιδαιμονεστέρους* (*deisidaimonesteros*), which translates as devout (Grimm et al., 1963, p. 127). Paul also acknowledged the Athenian's respect for the divine (Holladay, 1988, p. 1102). Many scholars agree it is likely Paul was speaking positively. This also fits within the rhetorical fashion, which is why *δεισιδαιμονεστέρους* should be translated in a positive way rather than as negative or rebuking. If this was Paul's first line in addressing the council at Areopagus, it was likely in order to communicate respect and honor to his audience.

The first sentence in a proclamation to a Gen Z audience can be powerful when it identifies, addresses, and honors a Gen Z cultural value. An anecdotal reflection on how Gen Z is described in the media and by older generations will often result in words like weak, fragile, snowflake, entitled, over-emotional, or over-sensitive. Building rapport with a Gen Z audience means changing the message communicated by older generations. For example, rather than refer to Gen Z as anxious and weak, one can acknowledge the courage and strength it takes to navigate the world of social media and/or "cancel culture." It could be stated as the following, "Gen Z! I can see in every way you are courageous and strong, navigating the constant toxic messages coming to you from social media. I cannot imagine what it is like to grow up in a time where simply asking the 'wrong' question can lead to public shaming and rebuking of your 'ignorance.' I am in awe of your continued strength and bravery." This positive messaging acknowledges the positive attributes of the generation and builds rapport.

### **Find Common Ground**

Paul established common ground with his audience and used a cultural doorway for his message. In Acts 17:23, Paul highlights a "point of agreement" with the Epicurean audience by saying he will preach about the "unknown god" (Schnabel, 2012, p. 730). Paul chose to build a bridge to his audience's culture and worldview, rather than yell "across a yawning cultural gap" (Wright, 1997, p. 80). Then, Paul turned from the common ground to teach about the one true God of the Bible (Schnabel, 2012, p. 732). Paul presented a new idea of the divine, arguing that "we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill" (Acts 17:29).

In the same way, Gen Z values can provide common ground for the gospel message. The Gen Z value of acceptance is reflected in a call to

respond to the gospel. Gen Zers can trust in a God who will accept them: “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37). The rejection that Gen Z fears in life can be alleviated when they are assured that they can “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence” (Hebrews 4:16).

Gen Z’s values of social justice and the dignity of human life can also provide common ground. After all, human dignity is rooted in how God treats humans with dignity as bearers of his image (Vorster, 2007, pp. 334, 337). Murder is taken seriously because it is taking the life of someone made in the Image of God (Genesis 9:6). This common ground reinforces the divine underpinning of human life. Discussion around the image of God and the dignity of all human life allows Gen Z to engage their generational values through a biblical lens provided by the evangelist.

### **Use Common Language**

In his speech to the Athenians, Paul demonstrates the use of a common language as he “intentionally uses the philosophical language of his audience” (Flemming, 2005, p. 79). He addressed the Epicurean and Stoic philosophies in his speech (Copan & Litwak, 2014, p. 72). As stated earlier, Paul quotes his audience’s poets in the middle of his speech (Act 17:28). Using common language contributes to contextualization in gospel proclamation.

Using language in common with Gen Z does not necessarily mean using Gen Z vernacular or slang. It could mean quoting a song, artist, or influencer familiar to the Gen Z audience. More practically, using common language means utilizing terminology that lines up with their espoused values in a way that is familiar to them. For example, words like acceptance and authentic may perk their ears, but they will be paying particular attention to the context in which those terms are used. More specifically, a church, pastor, or evangelist from older generations may feel they are being authentic, genuine, and transparent; however, as touched upon earlier, if that authenticity or transparency is not executed in the way Gen Z is expecting, those attempts at genuine connection will only create an impression of inauthenticity. In a proclamation setting, an evangelist can admit to his/her need for Jesus by humbly admitting to such things as being judgmental or hypocritical (descriptions of Christians employed by Gen Z) while expressing the desire to be authentic to the Gen Z audience. This provides a values-driven, common language.

### **Redefine the Relationship Between God and Humans**

Paul uses common ground and common language, but he does not allow the Athenians to maintain a flawed view of God. Paul departs from the

Stoic belief in divine providence to teaching about “the one true God of biblical revelation” (Schnabel, 2012, p. 732). In Acts 17:24-25, Paul argues idol worship is flawed, further redefining the worship relationship between humans and the divine (Gempf, 1993, p. 52). Paul distinguishes between the created and the Creator, clarifying that it is God who is to be worshiped without being compromised in physical representation (Rost, n.d., p. 123). In his contextualization, Paul moves his audience toward biblical truth.

Contextualization of the gospel for Gen Z allows the gospel to be placed in the language of a cultural moment (Newbigin, 1986, p. 2). By understanding Gen Z and principles of biblical contextualization, older generations ministering to Gen Z can “transmit the gospel...to a radically different” culture than their own (Newbigin, 1986, p. 1). This can include redefining what it means to be free or safe, thus engaging Gen Z’s values of freedom and safety without promoting a flawed worldview. If Gen Z views freedom as freedom from any constraint or limitation, the gospel proclamation can include deconstructing that idea of freedom and redefining it in a more biblical sense. The Parable of the Lost Son portrays a son who pursues what he thinks is freedom, only to find himself with nothing (Luke 15:11-32). In fact, his flawed idea of freedom only leads to the opposite. Thus, the gospel proclamation illustrates the nature of true freedom: Freedom comes from Jesus (John 8:36), and in Jesus one will no longer experience slavery (Galatians 5:1). A Gen Z audience, valuing and desiring freedom, can then be encouraged to link this cultural value with a gospel proclamation relevant to their worldview. The gospel proclaimer thereby moves the audience toward a biblical model of freedom rather than a flawed understanding of freedom.

## **Conclusion**

Ministry to Gen Z by older generations is not only cross-generational, but cross-cultural. Gospel proclamation to Gen Z requires a cross-cultural approach to evangelism in order to be effective. Thus, examining and applying Paul’s cross-cultural contextualization model employed in Athens provides an effective approach for evangelizing Gen Z (Acts 17:16-34). Paul’s method includes: 1) observing the culture, 2) building rapport, 3) using common language, 4) finding a cultural doorway, and 5) redefining the relationship between God and humans.

Because Gen Z has much in common with Paul’s Athenian audience, his evangelism methodology can be applied to this generation. This article has demonstrated how common Gen Z cultural values can be utilized as doorways to effectively proclaim the gospel, as modeled by Paul in Acts

17:16-34. Gen Z values of freedom and authenticity can be used as a doorway to share the gospel in a relevant and understandable way, highlighting the good news to Gen Z. If ministers of the gospel understand the values and worldview of Gen Z, they can cultivate a relevant, cohesive message that allows this new generation to engage its values in a way that brings the Kingdom of Heaven down to earth.

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### **About the Author**

Tanita Maddox serves as an Associate Regional Director for Young Life. She completed a Masters of Christian Leadership from Fuller Theological Seminary and Doctorate of Ministry from Phoenix Seminary.