ABSTRACT

Narrative Preaching for Millennials: Inviting the Next Generation into God's Story

by

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Millennials are leaving the church at an unprecedented rate in the western world. As many as 59% of millennials who were raised in the church have already left (faithit). This mass exodus of millennials is the primary reason for the dramatic decline in church membership in the United States (Gallup.com). As preachers become painfully more aware of the lack of young people in the pews they must consider adapting and improving their approach to preaching to better connect with and engage millennials. Homiletics professors, such as Jeffrey Frymire, see narrative preaching as an effective approach in preaching to millennials.

This research addresses how narrative preaching can better connect with and engage millennials in the weekly sermon. While working with self-identifying Christian millennials living in western Washington state, I used a mixed-method approach by surveying 81 millennials, interviewing 10 millennials, and facilitating two focus groups of millennials around the various elements that help or hinder how they connect with and understand preaching.

The findings suggest that millennials want relevant preaching from well-informed preachers who demonstrate strong moral character outside the pulpit. Additionally, when listening to sermons, millennials readily connect with quality storytelling and value the characteristics of great storytelling, such as character development, suspense, and conflict and resolution.

Narrative Preaching for Millennials
Inviting the Next Generation into God's Story

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CHAPTER 1

NATURE OF THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

Chapter one provides the framework for understanding the ways narrative preaching can help millennials better understand and connect with the weekly sermon. I give a rationale for the project based on personal experience and supported by research. The overview of the research project includes a purpose statement, research questions, a description of the participants, and a statement about how the results were collected and analyzed. To strengthen the findings of the project, a literature review covers relevant themes along with contextual factors.

Personal Introduction

I currently serve as co-pastor at Mountain View Presbyterian Church (MVPC) located in Marysville, Washington, 35 miles north of Seattle. MVPC was planted in 1963 and today our congregation has approximately 250 members with many others who consider MVPC their home church. I was called to MVPC in the summer of 2015 as their first associate pastor. In June of 2021, I was officially installed as co-pastor and I work alongside co-pastor John Mason who has been at MVPC for 26 years. MVPC originally called me for several reasons, but one important reason was MVPC's desire to see more young people in church. In additional to being a younger pastor (I'm currently 35), I spent four years prior to coming to MVPC working with college students in residence life. In many ways, MVPC invited me to this congregation to invest in the next generation.

Although I would consider our congregation multigenerational—especially when compared to other aging, mainline churches—a noticeable low percentage of millennials attend MVPC. We have children and youth along with people in their 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s but we are missing millennials (people from age 25 to 42). As of 2021, millennials represent roughly 16% of our church population. The ministry problem I want to focus on is directly related to the lack of millennials in the church. I am not interested in solely starting new programs and small groups crafted for millennials. I want to truly understand this generation (which I'm a part of) and getting down to the root cause of why they are less and less a part of the church.

As I learn more about millennials, I am especially curious about how preaching can better connect with them. As the recently installed co-pastor, I am now officially in charge of the preaching calendar and the overall teaching direction for the church. I am passionate about preaching and I believe in the importance of hearing the gospel proclaimed within the context of worship. I grieve that so many young people—who are anxious, depressed, and lonely—routinely miss out on hearing the good news of hope and participating in the life of the church.

I do not assume that simply improving my preaching will automatically draw more millennials to church. The noticeable absence of the younger generation is a complicated problem for many mainline congregations. But I certainly do not want to minimize the importance of faithful preaching in the life of the church. Bad preaching is not the only reason millennials are leaving, but it is one of the reasons.

In the summer of 2019, I started a Doctor of Ministry program in biblical preaching and leadership and took a preaching class with Clay Schmit and Jeff Frymire.

In this class, I was introduced to what is called "narrative preaching." In these lectures, Frymire convincingly theorized how narrative preaching can be especially effective in connecting with millennials who are "wired for story." Personally, I found this approach to preaching to be very exciting because I love the craft of storytelling and the stories found in scripture are fascinating. Additionally, I think people long to be a part of something greater than themselves and they can find increasing meaning and purpose as they learn to see their life as a part of God's ongoing story of restoration.

Statement of the Problem

Millennials are the least churched generation and the least likely to identify as Christian (Barna). In fact, low millennial church membership or attendance is the leading cause in the overall decrease in church membership in the USA (Jones). When compared to the older generations (gen x, boomers, traditionalists), millennials in America are more likely to identify has having no religious affiliation. But millennials were not all raised outside the church, some say as many as 59% of the millennials raised in the church have already left (Faithit). A fair amount of research and speculation explores the question "why are millennials leaving" but has the church asked that question within the context of preaching? Are millennials tired of being preached at? Do they want something more than propositional preaching or advice for good living? How can narrative preaching help reengage millennials and draw them into God's story?

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this research was to identify the ways narrative preaching can help self-identifying Christian millennials living in western Washington better understand and connect with the weekly sermon.

Research Questions

I formulated three research questions to discover how narrative preaching can help millennials relate to the church.

Research Question #1

What about preaching prevents Christian millennials in western Washington from understanding and connecting with the sermon?

Research Question #2

What about preaching helps Christian millennials in western Washington understand and connect with the sermon?

Research Question #3

How can Narrative preaching help Christian millennials in western Washington understand and connect with the sermon?

Rationale for the Project

As millennials continue to leave the church, some might be tempted to address this problem in a frantic attempt to save the institutional church in America. The church is never "ours" to save and operating out of self-preservation probably stems from fear rather than a deep missional commitment toward future generations. Many aging churches are afraid of dying and often look longingly at young adults as the next reservoir of tithers. However, if we take the great commandment and the great commission seriously, our love for millennials will fuel a desire to see them experience the beauty of community, worship, and formation.

The reality is that the western church is facing a new kind of crisis, a schism of generations. As the young and old go separate ways, it is the responsibility of the church and preachers to fully investigate this problem in great depth. Preachers not only exegete scripture to proclaim the truth of God's word, but the task of preaching also calls for exegeting the congregation and culture. Millennials represent a significant portion of the community of faith that is missing from the church. Why are they missing? To proclaim the gospel more faithfully, preachers are compelled to study the attitudes, behaviors, values, beliefs—the worldview—of millennials.

Preaching is a sacred practice that ought to be taken seriously. As James famously said, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (New Revised Standard Version, Jas 3:1). Whenever the preacher stands before the gathered people in the name of Jesus Christ and opens the Bible and says, "thus saith the Lord," followed by a sermon, preachers are inevitably forming how people see God. Preachers can help or hinder how others connect with God. The weight of this responsibility must never me underemphasized. Such work is done with the help of the Holy Spirit, but faithfulness in preaching requires examining the theology and the method of the craft. There has been a lot written about narrative preaching these last few decades and it is worth investigating how this preaching method could help millennials better hear God's Word. Thus, it is both worthwhile and essential to seek a fuller understanding in the link between narrative preaching and the mind of the millennial.

Definition of Key Terms

Four key terms have emerged while researching and writing this dissertation.

Narrative preaching has several definitions but for the purposes of this project,

narrative preaching is defined as *a method of preaching where the sermon is structured*

like a story. Narrative preaching is not necessarily sharing one long story, or strictly a

first-person narrative monologue. Technically, a narrative sermon can be void of stories

entirely. As Eugene Lowery says, "narrative preaching refers to a sermon the follows the

principles of a plot…conflict to resolution" (Lowry, *Plot* 125). However, narrative

preachers are informed by the entire biblical narrative and place a high value on the craft

of storytelling.

Millennials are young adults born between 1980 and 1994.

Understand the sermon refers to the level in which one can perceive the

intended meaning of the sermon. Understanding deals with the head.

Connect with the sermon indicates the level in which one is emotionally moved

by the sermon. Connection deals with the heart.

Delimitations

For the purpose of this study participants were limited to men and women born

between the year 1980 and 1994. Because participants needed to have at least an

elementary understanding of faith, church, and preaching, this study was limited to self-

identifying Christians. However, participants did not need to be actively attending a

church, in fact, the perspective of non-church attending participants was especially

valuable. The geographical boundary of participants was limited to millennials whose

residence was in western Washington state, anywhere west of the Cascade mountains.

Review of Relevant Literature

Chapter two consists of a survey of relevant topics in various academic fields pertinent to narrative preaching for millennials. I consulted numerous books, academic articles, and online resources by leading experts. The literature review begins with laying a biblical and theological foundation for narrative preaching. The Bible can be seen and understood as God's great story with all the elemental narrative qualities, a beginning, middle and end, engaging characters, and conflict and resolution. The primary text analyzed is Luke 24:13-35, the famous "walk to Emmaus," which is a narrative account where Jesus links the Old Testament with his own life story as one within the greater biblical narrative.

The next type of literature looked at the world that shaped millennials. I reviewed articles and books on postmodernity to provide cultural, social, and philosophical context describing the major influencers for the mind of the millennial. I surveyed material around the relationship between postmodernity and preaching. Additionally, I incorporated statistical trends to provide data on the current religious state of millennials and their diminishing relationship with the church. The work of millennial expert, Jean Twenge, is especially prominent in chapter 2. The practices, trends and values of millennials are compared and contrasted with previous generations (Gen x, Baby Boomers, and others).

The literature review progresses with an overview of neuroscience and narrative. It looks at how the human brain is built to connect with story and how stories help the brain learn and remember information. The importance of story is further developed by

underscoring the healing power of narrative therapy, which is a therapeutic theory and practice within the mental health field. The literature review includes several articles that highlight the special connection between millennials and story. These range from range from advertising, Netflix consumption, and ministry methods. Next, there is a discussion on the traditional elements of narrative and how expert story tellers craft and frame narratives. The study then highlights homiletical theory that culminates with special emphasis placed on narrative preaching. The work of various homiletical experts is included but the teaching of David Buttrick, Fred Craddock, and Eugene Lowry are particularly important.

Research Methodology

This Ministry Transformation Project relied on a mixed method approach using qualitative and quantitative techniques to gather data. A combination of three research instruments—a survey, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews—provided information on the millennial perspective on preaching for today. The survey was sent to self-identifying Christian millennials who reside in Western Washington in order to obtain quantitative data. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews provided the qualitative elements for the data. To provide meaningful suggestions for today's preachers, I collected and analyzed the information.

After a substantial survey of the relevant literature, it was essential to hear directly from millennials on how they engage and connect with preaching. These two collection points—literature review and millennial research—helped provide a better understanding on how preachers can improve in the way that they speak to millennials from the pulpit.

Type of Research

      This study was pre-intervention because it offers specific data designed to equip preachers to better cater their sermons for millennials. A combination of a quantitative and qualitative methods was used to provide a robust perspective on millennial views toward preaching. A survey using the platform, Survey Monkey, was sent via email to 100 millennials in Western Washington, which provided the quantitative information. The qualitative information was gathered through two focus groups and ten semi-structured interviews.

Participants

      The research focused on self-identifying Christian millennials who live in Western Washington. Millennials include anyone born between 1980 and 1996. This demographic was chosen because of the previously noted mass exodus of millennials from the institutional church in North America. Participants were selected who identify themselves as Christian because, whether they actively attend church or not, they have a working knowledge of preaching and what they like and dislike. The geographic location of Western Washington was selected because of the unique cultural and social context of the pacific northwest.

      The survey included eighty-one participants to demonstrate accurate trends in millennial thinking as it pertains to preaching. Participants for the survey were selected based on some form of connection with Mountain View Presbyterian Church—member, attender, friend, or related to a member—along with millennials connected to various churches within the region. Ten millennials participated in semi-structured interviews. These ten millennials were selected to bring various perspectives. Both men and women

were chosen. Some actively attend church but others no longer attend church. I conducted

two focus groups, one group with seven participants and the other group with six, to

generate interaction among millennial's and provide additional information.

Instrumentation

The three research instruments utilized were a survey, ten semi-structured

interviews, and two focus groups. The survey consisted of thirty-four total questions. The

first thirty questions came in the form of a Likert Scale to measure general thoughts and

impressions millennials have about preaching in addition to four multipole choice

questions that revolve around the theme of narrative preaching. The two focus groups

covered six questions on preaching and narrative. The ten semi-structured interviews

included six questions designed to provide additional insight on how narrative preaching

can help millennials better connect with and engage with sermons.

The survey addressed all three research questions regarding the way that

preaching today either helps or hinders millennials from connecting and engaging with

the weekly sermon and how narrative preaching may assist. The two focus groups were

conducted to provide qualitative data for the three research questions. The ten semi-

structured interviews were also designed to provide qualitative data on the three research

questions with special emphasis on the third research question about how narrative

preaching can help millennials connect and engage with preaching.

Data Collection

The data collection occurred over a span of five months. The participants who

were emailed the survey were given fourteen days to respond and the data was collected

using the platform Survey Monkey. The first focus group was conducted at a private

residence with seven millennial participants on October 28, 2021. The second focus

group was facilitated on zoom with six millennial participants on November 13, 2021.

The identities of the participants were kept confidential. The ten semi-structure

interviews were conducted at various locations (MVPC, Starbucks, restaurants) between

the months of August and October of 2021. I collected all the data, and it was kept on a

password protected laptop.

Data Analysis

The research design was pre-intervention with a mixed method approach, which

utilized a survey from eighty-one millennials, two focus groups and ten semi-structured

interviews. When I analyzed the survey, I paid special attention to the questions that had

the highest concertation of selections whether it was with the Likert Scale questions or

the multiple choice questions. I looked for prominent patterns and themes as I analyzed

the data collected and recorded in the two focus groups and ten semi-structured

interviews.

Generalizability

This research is applicable to preachers throughout North America and beyond.

Even though the millennial participants came from the unique culture of the pacific

northwest, as the work of Jean Twenge suggests, general social and psychological trends

exist among millennials nation-wide. All preachers can be better informed about the

applicability of narrative preaching in their given contexts. Additionally, the results of

this research are dependable and reliable because this was a mixed method approach with

direct feedback from actual millennials. The data found is consistent with information

provided in the literature review.

Project Overview

This project identifies ways that narrative preaching can help self-identifying Christian millennials in Marysville, Washington better understand and connect with the weekly sermon. Chapter two provides a literature review of topics related to narrative preaching for millennials. Chapter three outlines the various ways I investigated the research questions. I synthesize and analyze the evidence for the project in Chapter four. Chapter five outlines the study's major findings with implications for each discovery now and in the future.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

As millennials continue to leave the church at an alarming rate, preachers must not only develop a deeper understanding of their preaching craft, but also to become better acquainted with the world and mind of millennials. The mixed method approach of this ministry transformation project is designed to provide understanding about how narrative preaching can better help millennials connect with and engage with the weekly sermon. However, before ascertaining this information, it is necessary to look at the various fields of study related to this topic. Chapter two lays the academic foundation based on the work of leading experts, which provides the launching pad for the research methodology behind the whole project.

This chapter begins by laying a biblical and theological foundation for narrative preaching. It then moves into a discussion around the world of millennials, looking at postmodern theory in addition to statistical and social trends of the millennial generation. Next, the chapter surveys expert material on the connection between neuroscience and narrative, narrative theory, and the healing power of narrative therapy. Chapter two concludes with a thorough review of homiletics with special emphasis on narrative preaching.

Biblical Foundations

A narrative is a spoken or written account of connected events—a story. The Bible is composed of the Old and New Testaments, and each Testament is made up of

numerous books, but at its core the Bible is a story. The Bible is the account of God's

activity in history. Describing narrative, Peter Miscall writes,

> A narrative is the telling, by a narrator to an audience, of a connected or sequence
> of events. The series of events involve characters and their interrelationships, and
> the events occur in a place or places, the setting. The plot is the events selected
> and the particular order in which they are presented. A theme is an idea, an
> abstract concept, that emerges from the narrative's presentation and treatment of
> its material (540).

The Bible is composed of various literary genres: the law, wisdom literature, psalms,

prayers, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic literature, gospels, epistles, and historical

narrative. Overall, these many books and literately genres comprise an overarching

narrative that tells God's story in human history. Joel Green writes:

> To speak of "the narrative of Scripture" is to make a theological claim that takes
> us beyond the warrants of any one of the books comprising the Bible, or even
> what might be strictly authorized by one or another of the Bible's Testaments. It
> is to insist that the whole of the Bible is, in Christian engagement, more than the
> sum of the parts, and that we can and should account for a theological
> presumption behind and woven into this collection of books. The particular
> contribution of the concept of "narrative" is the attribution to these books of a
> single, coordinating and unifying, plot. These words, these books, these
> collections of books, read as a whole, are said to generate a coherence that might
> otherwise be missing, or hidden, apart from the whole (28).

Although the biblical story is not perfectly chronological, the overall flow and

sequence of events is presented like a narrative. There is a beginning, a middle and an

end. Great stories also include interesting and engaging characters, which are a prominent

feature throughout the Bible. Additionally, one of the most important aspects of great

storytelling revolves around conflict and resolution. The Bible immediately erupts with

profound conflict in Genesis chapter 3 and moves toward the ultimate resolution found

Revelation 21. At its core, the Bible is the record of God's salvation story and because

preaching is the practice of sharing the message of God's salvation, it is appropriate to identify the biblical foundation for narrative preaching within God's story.

Old Testament Foundations

The first words of scripture are "in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth…" (Gen 1:1). Narratives often begin by introducing character(s) and a setting. In this case, the main character is God, and he will appear throughout the entirety of the narrative. The setting is the world, God's world which he created. Genesis is mostly composed of stories: Adam and Eve, Cain and Able, Noah and the ark, Abraham, and Sarah, and many others. Torah, the first five books of the Bible, are not entirely narrative in form. However, the Law is given to us as a combination of story and command. The stories, such as the account of the Fall, Abraham's call, and the Exodus event, help interpret the purpose and meaning of the law by providing context and meaning.

In Deuteronomy 34 Moses dies and Joshua is introduced as the new leader of Israel. The book of Joshua marks the beginning of the conquest narrative as Israel seeks to take possession of the Promised Land. Joshua and the following books, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther, are all presented as historical narrative and chronicle the account of the rise and fall of Israel. Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon come next as poetic writing related to the overall narrative of God's relationship with the people of Israel. The rest of the Old Testament concludes with the major and minor prophets who prophesy within the historical context of Israel's story. The Old Testament sets the scene for the

coming of Christ in the New Testament, which is a continuation and eventual climax of God's activity in human history.

New Testament Foundations

The New Testament moves God's salvation story forward with Jesus Christ as the central character. The first four books of the New Testament—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—are narrative in form, resembling a new kind of biography called a gospel. They tell the story of Jesus, the Messiah who the Old Testament prophets promised would come.

After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the book of Acts propels God's story onward by describing the beginning of the church and its mission of sharing the Good News of Jesus' resurrection. Under the power of the Holy Spirit the church bears witness to Christ "in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) and churches are established throughout the Mediterranean and Asia Minor. The Epistles of the New Testament are written to churches who are seeking to follow Christ in the new age of hope. Revelation, the last book of the Bible, points to the end of God's story and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth where God will dwell with mortals (Rev 21).

The One Story: The Road to Emmaus Connects the Old and New Testament

In his commentary on Luke, Fred Craddock comments on the Road to Emmaus story saying, "persons with an interest in the narrative form for preaching and for doing theology need look no farther for a model than the story before us" (*Luke* 284). Luke 24:13-35 in and of itself is a fascinating story, but it also serves as an interpretive lens in binding the Old and New Testament together.

Jesus appears to two disciples walking to Emmaus and asks them what they are discussing. Not knowing they are talking to the risen Jesus, Cleopas refers to Jesus as "a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" (Luke 24:21). Although more than a prophet, throughout his gospel account Luke paints Jesus in line with the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson argues throughout his commentary that "Luke is shaping Jesus in the image of the prophet like Moses" (393). Joel Green continues developing this theme, "clearly, Jesus' presentation by Cleopas and his companion is designed to reflect traditions about the prophet-like-Moses" (846).

The prophetic theme begins with the birth announcement of John the Baptist. The angelic instructions, such as John never drinking wine or strong drink (1:15), is reminiscent of the prophets of the Old Testament. Jesus is cast in a similar prophetic fashion. Later in Luke, after Jesus raises a widows son, the people will say, "a great prophet has risen among us" (7:16). When Jesus asks his disciples, "who do the people say I am," they answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen" (9:19). Foreshadowing his own demise, Jesus, who has already set his face toward Jerusalem according to Luke 9:51, says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing" (13:34). Like the prophets of old, Jesus would soon be rejected and killed.

As Jesus walks with the two travelers, he says, "was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (24:26). Then the

narrator tells us in verse 27, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." This is similar to what Jesus previously told his disciples in Luke 18:31, "see, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished." Jesus interprets his life and eventual death as a continuation of the same story about God's activity in human history depicted in the Old Testament.

While writing about this text, Hughes Oliphant Old identifies various Old Testament passages used in connection to Christ. "Luke preserves quite a bit of the same material the other Gospels preserved about how Jesus interpreted the Scriptures, among the most important of which would be Isaiah 53, Isaiah 54, Isaiah 61, Psalm 110, and Psalm 118" (Loc. 1762-1765). These are passages often associated with Jesus. However, the Emmaus account pushes us to not only see Jesus in individual Old Testament texts, but to understand how Jesus fits into the whole biblical story as God's Messiah.

The final scene of the Emmaus story concludes at a table. This scene at the table is designed to remind the reader or hearer of the Last Supper in Luke 22:14-23, where Jesus instituted a "new covenant" in his blood. The Old Testament contains several covenants. Some of the more notable covenants were with Noah (Gen. 9), Abraham (Gen. 12), the nation of Israel (Exod. 19-24) and with King David (2 Sam. 7). The language of Jesus from the Passover meal in Luke 22 and the Emmaus account in Luke 24 are almost verbatim where Jesus took, blessed, broke and gave the bread. As a biblical image, "bread is a divine gift. For it is God who fills the hungry with good things (Luke 1:53). That God is quite literally the giver of bread appears in several remarkable miracle stories…Bread is one of many biblical images that, if traced through the canon, yields a

picture of salvation history" (Reken et al., 118). When we recall the feeding of the 5,000 (Luke 9) and the Passover feast (Luke 22) and consider the Old Testament significance of God as the giver of the bread, we can conclude that Jesus is more than a prophet. Indeed, Jesus is the Messiah promised from the Old Testament and the fulfilment of God's grand story.

It is in this climatic moment at table as Jesus gives the bread that the eyes of the two disciples are opened and they recognize Jesus. As the giver of the new covenant, Jesus fulfills the narrative arc of the two Testaments. The Emmaus text clearly connects with the covenant nature of God who establishes a loving partnership with his children through the promise of covenants. This covenant from Christ extends into the present-day church as God's people continue to play a part in this ongoing redemptive story.

Theological Foundations

The theological foundation for narrative preaching stems from a robust understanding of narrative theology.

> Central to the concept of narrative theology is the assumption that the scriptures of the Abrahamic faith traditions – Christianity, Judaism and Islam – are first and foremost narratives of faith. In terms of Christianity, this means that the Bible is perceived not as a collection of doctrinal or theological principles, but rather as a set of stories that tell about the revelation of God through history and of God's redemptive love for humankind (Reed, et al., 299).

Even the major doctrinal categories, such as eschatology, ecclesiology, soteriology, pneumatology, and Christology are shaped by the entirety the biblical canon. Theological truths are derived from biblical stories. The whole scope of scripture, the narrative of God's activity in human history, informs the church's comprehension of who God is and who God calls the church to be.

Narrative preaching is rooted in the theological understanding that the church is God's covenant people invited into the continuation of God's overarching story by going forth and making disciples of all nations. Narrative preaching implores the church to step into God's story. As Joel Green says, "the result in this case is a theological schema that allows us to articulate intelligibly the significance of the whole, and that opens the door to the adventure of living in this narrative—or, perhaps better, to living out (and out of) the narrative by conforming our lives to its sense of value and time" (28).

Michael Pasquarello writes, "if we take the Bible as our script, authored by God and spoken in our own language and life, its story can be retold through our words and actions" (181). Pasquarello sees the Bible as a guide and the source for homiletical discourse which "identifies our lives as participants in the story of God and the world" (181-182). Narrative preaching is an instrument that helps the church interpret the biblical story in a way that makes sense in the present day. To borrow John Stott's famous title from his book on homiletics, preaching is a bridge "between two worlds."

Modern Literature on Narrative Preaching for Millennials

There are several topics that need to be explored to sufficiently understand narrative preaching for millennials.

The Influence of Postmodernity

As Stephen Hicks notes in his book, *Explaining Postmodernism,* the term "post-modern" situates the movement historically and philosophically against modernism (Loc. 567-568). Thinking in the modern era, which matured in the Enlightenment, began with nature, reason and that which is scientific and observable, as opposed starting with some form of "the supernatural, which had been the characteristic starting point of pre-modern,

Medieval philosophy" (Loc. 579-582). The premodern form of thinking relied upon faith, mysticism and tradition. With the rise of the Enlightenment and the respect for reason there was a "significant decline in religious belief among the intellectuals" (Loc. 1293-1295).

As postmodern thinking developed in the 20th century truth claims came under scrutiny and "postmodernism denies that reason or any other method is a means of acquiring objective knowledge of that reality" (Hicks Loc. 556-559). Postmodernism then becomes an activist strategy against the coalition of reason and power (Loc. 497-498). Postmodernism has since influenced many intellectual fields including philosophy, art, architecture, and even theology. For example, "literary criticism rejects the notion that literary texts have objective meanings and true interpretations" (Loc. 701-702).

Describing the postmodern environment, Christopher Butler proposes that most given information is to be distrusted. "The postmodernist attitude is therefore one of a suspicion which can border on paranoia" (4). Using art, architecture and politics as examples, Butler suggests that the growing complexity of knowledge and information has created more skepticism. Understanding postmodern art, for example, means being resistant to a singular interpretation. "By the time of the student uprisings of 1968, the most advanced philosophical thought had moved away from the strongly ethical and individualist existentialism that was typical of the immediately post-war period …towards far more skeptical and anti-humanist attitudes" (6).

Butler notes that most French intellectuals responsible for the theoretical development of postmodernism did so with a Marxist paradigm. As postmodernity brings ambiguity to knowledge then it makes sense that the French masters wrote in a

"resolutely avant-gardist way against the clarity of their own national tradition. It is the thousands of echoes and adaptations, and unsurprising misunderstandings, of their obscure writings that have made up the often confused and pretentious collective psyche of the postmodernist constituency" (9). In other words, the writing of certain French post-modern philosophers is open to "all sorts of interpretations" (11).

Jacques Derrida brought forth an elaborate version of the deconstructive attitude, which depends on relativism, meaning truth itself is "always relative to the differing standpoints and predisposing intellectual frameworks" (16). Especially interesting on the present discussion on narrative preaching is a resistance to grand narratives in postmodernity. It was Jean-François Lyotard who famously said, "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). Responding to Lyotard, Butler writes, "we now live in an era in which legitimizing 'master narratives' are in crisis and in decline" (Butler 13). Postmodernism is essentially an assault on authority and reliability. Butler writes that, "all this skeptical activity has a complex relationship, not just to the attitudes of academics and artists, but to what was seen as a more general loss of confidence within Western democratic culture" (110).

According to Mark Wedig, the distrust in meta-narratives, especially those that provide a foundation for moral reasoning, has led to an inability to create a space for moral conversation and agreement. Postmoderns of course still make moral choices, but such choices do not come from an objective or absolute truth. This has led to "a great deficit of a moral compass that often gives way to deeply felt ethical ambiguity. By and large there is a loss of certainty, objectivity, authority, and trust in those institutions or persons who in previous eras guided moral praxis" (32). Postmoderns are skeptical and

mistrustful and can tend to believe that "politicians are corrupt, lawyers are crooks, and priests are child molesters. One is not only to question authority but to deconstruct authoritative institutions, people, ideas, and texts" (34).

Even our understanding of history is suspicious according to the postmodern perspective. Raluca Ciochina suggests that written history was once regarded as objective and reliable but now can just as easily be considered fiction. "There is no longer just one history but there are several histories, more subjective and interested in peripheral events, in defeats and losers as much as in winners, in regions and small groups as well as in the central parts - the historical meaning of the Past changes" (933).

In his book, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, James K.A. Smith seeks to provide an understanding and engagement of postmodernity to assist the church in navigating the ways culture is changing under the influence of postmodernity. In fact, Smith even suggests that "postmodernity is a condition that Christians should, in some sense, welcome" (22). Smith spends most of the book looking at the "unholy trinity of postmodern thinkers: Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault" (21). These three French philosophers each have their own slogans (for lack of a better term): "There is nothing outside the text" (Derrida 144); postmodernity is "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv); and "Power is knowledge" (Foucault). Foucault writes, "truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A regime of truth" (Foucault 133). Hence the connection between knowledge and power, or the slogan, "knowledge is power." Smith admits that these "slogans" are often misunderstand and

perpetuate a several myths about postmodernism that are not necessarily anti-Christian (Smith 22).

Speaking about Derrida's claim that there is "nothing outside the text (Derrida 144)," Smith suggests that it "can be considered a radical translation of the Reformation principle sola scriptura" (Smith 23) and that such a claim should push the church to interpret scripture within community (Smith 56). Derrida argues that all of us interpret our world on the basis of language. When he argues that "there is nothing outside the text," the "text" is linked to interpretation (Smith 39) and everything we experience is an interpretation (Smith 56). The danger here of course that even the gospel could be considered an "interpretation," however, Smith argues that not every "interpretation" is necessarily wrong (Smith 34).

Smith believes Foucault's claim that "power is knowledge," and the relationship between truth and power (Foucault 133), should help enable formation and discipline. Smith says, "we need to think about discipline as a creational structure that needs proper direction. Foucault has something to tell us about what it means to be a disciple" (24).

Regarding Lyotard, Smith looks at his frequently misunderstood aphorism that postmodernity is "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv) suggesting that it is a claim to be affirmed by the church, "pushing us to recover the narrative character of Christian faith, rather than understanding it as a collection of ideas, and the confessional nature of our narrative and the way in which we find ourselves in a world of competing narratives" (Smith 23). Smith suggests that Lyotard's understanding of metanarratives does not include the biblical narrative but "For Lyotard, metanarratives are a distinctly modern phenomenon: they are stories that not only tell a grand story (since even

premodern and tribal stories do this) but also claim to be able to legitimate or prove the

story's claim by an appeal to universal reason" (65). Smith believes that Lyotard's

philosophy should not do away with thinking of Christianity as narrative, but reinforce it.

He goes as far to say,

> Christian worship should reenact the narrative of the gospel week by week in order to teach us how to find ourselves in the story…To do that, we need to know the story, and that story should be communicated when we gather as the people of God, that is, in worship. This is why the most postmodern congregations will be those that learn to be ancient, reenacting the biblical narrative (75-76).

Smith further explains his interpretation of Lyotard in his essay, "A Little Story

about Metanarratives: Lyotard, Religion, and Postmodernism Revisited." "For Lyotard,

the term metanarrative does not simply refer to a "grand story" in the sense of stories that

have grand or universal pretensions, or even make universal claims. What is at stake is

not the scope of these narratives but the nature of the claims they make" (124-125). Smith

cites the story, Enuma Elish, a Babylonian creation myth, as an example of a non-

metanarrative "because it does not claim to legitimate itself by an appeal to scientific

reason" (125). The same could be said about the biblical narrative. "As a result,

postmodernity's 'incredulity toward metanarratives' ought to be understood as an

opportunity for religious thought in a contemporary context—an ally rather than a foe"

(125).

In his essay, *Onto-theology, Metanarrative, Perspective, and the Gospel,* Merold

Westphal notes that Lyotard is the only postmodern thinker who defines postmodernism

as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv) but no other definition produces as

much frustration among Christian scholars (147). Westphal describes Lyotard's

metanarrative as a "metadiscourse in the sense of being a second-level discourse designed

to legitimize one or more first-order discourses. It is this question of legitimation which is absolutely central for Lyotard and which makes such a tight link between modernity and metanarrative in his mind" (148). Modernity "resorts" to narrative in order to legitimize its "new authorities" (148). Westphal says that "Christianity is not Lyotard's target. Nor is it inherently the kind of story he criticizes. But once again it does not follow that we are immune from his critique" (150). In a way, Christianity can become a kind of metanarrative "whenever we become too eager to justify ourselves, either by turning to a philosophical apologetics to prove that we are the bearers of the truth or by telling the Christian story in such a way as to privilege our practices with a divine sanction that renders them immune to sobering criticism" (151).

Of course, simply because postmodern thought has influenced the surrounding culture does not mean that western culture is entirely postmodern. Andrew Kirk says, "there is no culture which has been completely pervaded by post-modern principles. What we find everywhere in Western societies is a mixture of perspectives, mainly between modern and post-modern outlooks, but sometimes including pre-modern" (34). Indeed, much of western society is still modern. "Talk of living already in a post-modern culture reflects a decidedly partial analysis of society" (35). However, it is undisputable that there has been a rise in skepticism, relativism and plurality. This is very much the world of the millennial mind.

Postmodernity and Preaching

Paul Scott Wilson suggests that "postmodernity has not been an organized movement with a particular worldview or end product in mind—it is more a variety of reactions against modem attitudes" (12). Wilson says, "goodness, history, truth and the

Bible as our story (meta-narrative) are also in question so it is no wonder that many

preachers are left reeling" (14). Wilson writes, "In ascribing to postmodernism the status

of a movement (implying a unified worldview, something many scholars would deny),

postmodernism is open to the same critique it offers: it becomes a saving meta-narrative

in danger of making the same totalizing or universal claims as any other meta-narrative"

(17-18).

      Wilson suggests that the church needs to view postmodernism as an opportunity.

"The church needs to learn from postmodernism in order both to value and to speak to

coming generations…postmodern thought is open to differing perspectives including

Christian" (18). The postmodern ground preachers now walk on "has been a big part of

the New Homiletic with its emphasis on image, metaphor, story and idea" (13). As

experience becomes paramount for the postmodern mind, the narrative form of preaching

can help generate experience and persuasion with greater effect than propositional

statements. "The path suggested here is that preaching in the future should concentrate on

its strengths, both on God and on poetry…Reason and its prepositional formulations are

inadequate on their own to portray the sublime. Preaching needs to be re-conceived as a

kind of poetry" (19).

      In an article titled, "Following Jesus as the Truth: Postmodernity and Challenges

of Relativism," Mark Chan suggests that Christians who claim Christ as truth risk being

"tarred with the brush of narrow mindedness or even bigotry" (306). Chan notes that

"postmodernism in its atheistic form is wary of truth claims and suspicious of religious

authorities and pronouncements. To some postmodernists, the claim that Jesus is the truth

may simply be a mask for colonial imperialism, religious intolerance, or even patriarchal

chauvinism" (310). This means Christians, and especially preachers, need to be willing to listen and learn in the postmodern world and speak the truth in love. Preaching needs to be welcoming and has to enlist participation for postmodernists to discover and experience the gospel. Chan highlights the power of narratives saying,

> It is often said that postmodernity prefers narratives to propositions, real life stories over grand but abstract theories. Reaching our postmodern generation entails investing time and effort to listen to their stories and share our stories. It is in the context and process of the sharing of stories that we introduce God's story, a story of the divine love and search for lost humanity. It is only befitting that God's love story should be communicated in a loving manner. And learning to speak the truth in love is crucial in commending Christ to the postmodern (315).

The World of Millennials

Millennial expert, Jean Twenge, responds to the question, *how do we know the millennial generational exists?*, with the following statement, "all you have to do is think about transporting a 25-year-old to 1965. Even after she got over the shock of losing her smartphone, she'd probably still be baffled. Why are so many women her age married with two kids already? Why is everyone wearing suits? And where did all of the gay and lesbian people go" (23)? Twenge asserts that although the dividing lines between generations are debated and even blurred—how different is someone born in December, 1979 compared to someone born in January, 1980?—there is an enormous amount of data showing that "millennials differ from previous generations in, for example, living situations, religious beliefs, sexual behaviors, attitudes toward work-life balance and support for same-sex marriage" (23). Twenge also suggests that the differences between millennials, generation x, and baby boomers is not small. "In the General Social Survey, young adults' approval of same-sex relationships soared from 14 percent in 1987 to 66 per cent in 2016" (24). Twenge concludes her answer to the original question by firmly

stating "managers and educators can rest easy: It's not just you; young adults really are different than they were a few decades ago. Generations do exist—we just need to keep mining the best data to understand them" (24).

Bruce Drake highlights "6 New Findings about Millennials," in his Pew Research article. First, while millennials are less politically and religiously engaged, "they connect more to personalized networks of friends and collogues through social media." Second, "millennials are optimistic about the future yet more burdened by financial hardship than previous generations." They are the first in the modern era to "have higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and student loan debt" and "lower levels of wealth and personal income." Third, millennials are getting married less and later than previous generations. "Most unmarried millennials (69%) say they would like to marry, but many lack a solid economic foundation." Fourth, due to a large influx of "Hispanic and Asian immigrants," millennials are more racially diverse than any other in American history. "43% are non-white." This is one reason why millennials are more politically liberal. Fifth, "millennials are less trusting of others" compared to older generations. Sixth, most "millennials do not believe Social Security will provide them with full benefits when they retire."

In their book, *The Millennials,* Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer note that the Millennial generation is not only larger than the Boomers, but they are also the most educated. Four out of five older Millennials received education beyond high school. One out of four graduated from college. Additionally, "Millennials are marrying much later, if at all. In 1970 about forty-four percent of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-old Boomers were married. Today only 15 percent of Millennials in that age group are married" (Loc. 170). Instead, millennial couples have opted to live together. About 65 percent of young

adults cohabit at least once prior to marriage, compared to just 10 percent in the 1960s (Loc. 179). Although millennials are determined to have healthier marriages than their Boomer parents, "more than eighty percent of millennials believe they will marry only once" (Loc. 576). This also helps explain why millennials desire to choose a career that will allow them to have balance between work and life. millennials are self-confident and optimistic about their future role in society. To the statement, "I believe I can do something great." About sixty percent agreed strongly, and another thirty-six percent agreed somewhat (Loc. 360).

Regarding issues related to faith, Rainer and Rainer were shocked to find that "only 13 percent of the Millennials considered any type of spirituality to be important in their lives" (Loc. 456). Indeed, most millennials think religion is unimportant. Only thirty-one percent of Millennials surveyed said that Jesus is the only way to get to heaven (Loc. 472). "Millennials are the least religious of any generation in modern American history. Millennials are still spiritual. Three out of four Millennials say they are spiritual but not religious" (Loc. 78). However, Jean Twenge's research disputes that claim about being spiritual but not religious (see below). Millennials are also more open to diversity in their friendships than past generations. Many claim to be friends with people from a different religion, lifestyle, or race. Furthermore, a theme that runs throughout the studies on Millennials, they are "definitely more open to same-sex marriages than predecessor generations. Six out of ten expressed no concern about homosexual marriages" (Rainer and Rainer Loc. 1368).

Malcolm Harris takes a different approach in his book, *Kids These Days*, by looking at the "major structures and institutions that have influenced the development of

young Americans over the past thirty to forty years" (10). Harris notes that Millennials are comparatively less prepared for adult life because of the over-supervision they received growing up under helicopter parents. "Young people feel—reasonably, accurately—less in control of their lives than ever before" (6). Millennials also spend more time in school and doing homework instead spending time doing things that make them happy. "Between 1981 and 1997, elementary schoolers between the ages of six and eight recorded a whopping 146 percent gain in time spent studying, and another 32 percent between 1997 and 2003, making it a threefold increase over the time surveyed, in addition to a 19 percent increase in time at school" (19). However, the extra work and education hasn't paid off. "Millennials are worse off economically than their parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents. Every authority from moms to presidents told Millennials to accumulate as much human capital as we could, and we did, but the market hasn't held up its side of the bargain" (40).

Harris also reports the dramatic increase for the price of college tuition and the effect that has had on Millennials. "Between 1979 and 2014, the price of tuition and fees at four-year nonprofit US colleges, adjusted for inflation, has jumped 197 percent at private schools and 280 percent at public ones, accelerating faster than housing prices or the cost of medical care or really anything you could compare it to except maybe oil" (42). This has put Millennials at a disadvantage with the burden of massive student loan debt. The job market and wages has been unable to keep up with the increased cost of living.

In an article featuring a study of the generational differences for college, Twenge and Donnelly found that, compared to other generations, the primary reason for

millennials to go to college was "to make more money" (626). The second-largest

generational increase was in "to prepare myself for graduate or professional school" and

the second-largest decrease was in "to learn more about things that interest me" (626).

Since the 1990s, this has meant more "students focused on the end goal of a college

degree (such as making more money) and fewer focused on the learning process (gaining

an education and appreciation of ideas)" (628). Factors for this change could include

practical reasons such as rising living costs like housing, healthcare and education

making it necessary for millennials to make more money.

Another generational difference is that millennials are less engaged politically and

within their communities compared to previous generations. In a study on "Generational

Differences in Young Adults' Life Goals, Concern for Others, and Civic Orientation,

1966–2009" (Twenge, et al.), researchers concluded that the "popular view of millennials

as more caring, community oriented, and politically engaged than previous generations is

largely incorrect. Saving the environment, an area purported to be of particular concern to

young millennials, instead showed one of the largest declines" (1060). Compared to baby

boomers and generation x, civic engagement declined among millennials (1056), even

during the Barack Obama elections, millennials voted less than baby boomers when they

were the same age. Millennials reported thinking less about social problems, having less

interest in government and making less effort to conserve energy compared to previous

generations (1056). "Millennials were also less likely than Boomers and GenX to

participate in the political process through voting, writing to a public official,

participating in demonstrations or boycotts, or giving money to a political cause" (1056).

In the evocatively titled article, "Millennials: The Greatest Generation or the Most Narcissistic?", Jean Twenge seems to disagree with Neil Howe and William Strauss who predicted in their book, *Millennials Rising* (2000), that Millennials would resemble the greatest generation who fought in World War II. Millennials, who grew up in the self-esteem era, demonstrate greater levels of narcissism and individualism with less concern for the government and the environment. Furthermore, "Millennials were slightly less likely to say they wanted a job that was helpful to others or was worthwhile to society. This is directly counter to the Generation We view predicting that Millennials would be much more concerned for others" (Twenge par. 10).

Reflecting on millennials in the classroom, Lauren Cardon notes that thanks to technology, millennials are the most peer-to-peer connected generation in history. "They consider their smart phones lifelines to friends and family. When they cannot use them they feel cut off, antsy, and more inclined to think about what they're missing than to focus on information being presented to them" (35). Cardon also identifies an obsession with instant gratification among millennials. They want answers immediately and lack patience in doing the work of collecting information over time.

When it comes to the workplace, Molly Epstein and Andrea Hershatter underscore generational differences based on the relationship millennials have with technology. "By birth year, the Internet itself is a member of the Millennial generation. The TCP/IP suite that enables the Internet as we know it was established in 1982—the same year the first Millennials were born" (212). Cell phones and online social networks also grow up alongside millennials. The first iPhone came out in 2007, "Myspace was developed in 2003 and Facebook…was launched in 2004, as the first Millennial class

prepared to graduate from college" (212). In addition to technological differences, "millennials want to share their thoughts, collaboration and giving feedback are important" (214). Millennials have a strong desire to express their opinions, which is why so many engage in social media and blogs.

Discussing issues related to addiction and stress, Travis Stewart says millennials and gen xers report the highest levels of stress per generation. In his article titled, "Xanax and the Millennial Generations," Stewart cites several issues plaguing millennials. Millennials are the most likely of all generations to say their stress has increased in the past year. Millennials are more likely than any other generation to say they have felt a sense of loneliness or isolation due to stress in the past month. Millennials are more likely than other generations to say that stress has a very strong or strong impact on their physical and mental health. More than half of millennials say they have lain awake at night in the past month due to stress.

A Closer Look at Millennials and Religion

Regarding religious orientation, one study found that millennials are "significantly less religiously oriented, on average, than their boomer and generation x predecessors were at the same age" (Twenge et al., "Generation and Time" 10). This particular study also concluded that the idea that millennials are less religious but more spiritual is also false. Young Americans are less interested in prayer and not strong proponents of spirituality in general. "Overall, the results suggest a movement toward secularism among a rapidly growing minority" (10).

The cause behind the decrease in religiousness is most likely multifaceted. The rise in individualism characterized by more focus on the self and less on social rules

shows that "religious involvement was low when indicators of individualism (such as more positive self-views, materialism, individualistic language, and need for uniqueness) were high. Religious involvement was also low when social support was low, and low social support is linked to high individualism" (13). Being a part of a religious group often necessitates identifying with the group's beliefs which can create tension between the individual and the group. "These costs and compromises of group identification may be especially distasteful in a highly individualistic environment such as the modern-day U.S., which assigns high value to personal exploration, freedom of choice, and assertion of independent opinions" (13). Additionally, "religion often focuses on concerns outside of the self… Thus, when people become deeply involved in religious faith, they may be committing to a value system that may bring some costs to the self – albeit with the hope of benefiting others" (14). The tendency to resist social constraint could be especially difficult among those with higher levels of narcissistic traits.

Alex McFarland and Jason Jimenez recognize how millennials are famously being associated with the "none's" which are people who answer "none of the above" when asked to identify their religion. McFarland and Jimenez state that "millennials are leaving the church, abandoning Christian values, and increasingly living apart from any particular religious tradition. We've not only heard these views; we've also witnessed them firsthand over the past two decades of serving teenagers and young adults across America. The shift is real, growing, and disturbing in many ways" (34). McFarland and Jimenez cite a Fuller Youth Institute study that estimates "over half of high school graduates will leave the church and become disengaged in their faith. This is alarming because many emerging adults are making big decisions that affect more than just their

own lives—and they are making those decisions without faith in God" (10). McFarland

and Jimenez list three possible reasons why millennials might be leaving the church

> 1) greater levels of access to ideas and worldviews, particularly through the Internet; 2) intensified degree of alienation from institutions and relationships; and 3) more skepticism of authority, whether that is from the government, church or the Bible. These three conditions are creating the soil in which a more skeptical, post-Christian mind-set is taking root (27).

McFarland and Jimenez say that millennials are also engaging less with the Bible,

and many are looking at the Bible with greater suspicion. Twenty-five percent of

millennials consider themselves "Bible skeptics" (27). However, "Most millennials

believe the Bible to be the actual (21 percent) or inspired (44 percent) word of God" (27).

When it comes to views of the Bible from non-Christian Millennials, they believe it

"teaches forgiveness (70 percent), patience (62 percent), generosity (64 percent) and

social justice (41 percent)" (27).

Religion professor, Randall Reed, describes the new challenge of trying to teach

religion to millennial students saying they are increasingly disinterested. Reed notes the

new cultural landscape in which both liberal and conservative churches are losing

members, especially millennials. This has created a dramatic decrease in a certain

demographic: "the religiously invested student" (156). Reed says that, based on his work

with millennial students, he agrees with the finding from the Pew Research Center saying

that millennials perceive religious organizations as "too concerned with money and

power, overly focused on rules and too involved with politics" (Pew Research Center).

Reed notes that most students do not "take the Bible seriously on historical or

moral" grounds (156). Millennials believe "rightness or wrongness of issues is self-

evident. To that end, one can understand the diminishing moral value of the biblical text

– millennials honestly do not need it. Additionally, the Bible seems to contradict what they know to be right or wrong and thus is problematic" (157). An important example of this line of thinking is the millennial view on homosexuality. "One-third of millennials who become 'nones' do so because of the church's negative position on gays and lesbians or because of negative treatment of gays and lesbians" (157).

Not surprisingly, as Reed observes, millennials value tolerance and have a great respect for diversity. As noted earlier, Millennials are motivated by money, status and success. "In light of this, any teacher trying to reach millennials at the level of their identity must connect with their most salient identity" (161). Reed states his overarching point saying that "those of us who teach Bible must find new ways of confronting the contemporary world through the text, not as an eternal authority or guide, but rather as an example of human social construction, power, and rhetoric" (155). He believes that, even in today's changing world, biblical studies are not less important and "the study of the New Testament has its place within a global study of religion. With more than a billion Christians on the planet, even if a decreasing number come from the western world, global citizens and those who wish to work in the global marketplace must understand the basis of the faith of the people they encounter" (169).

Another study titled, "Differences in Religiosity and Spiritualy as a Result of Generation, Gender and Education," discovered a similar trend in millennials having fewer daily spiritual experiences. The study also found that millennial women "scored higher in only one dimension of spirituality and religiosity, daily spiritual experiences" (59). Although women tend to score higher in religious and spiritual practices, this is not the case with millennial women. The authors speculate that millennial women are

decreasing in religious and spiritual practices because they are competing more with men in the workplace and academic settings. Additionally, "the nature of interpersonal relationships among this digital generation appears to be less conducive to the transcendent, as well as to the aspects of trust, morality and forgiveness associated with intrinsic religiosity" (59).

Rachel Evans wrote a popular column for CNN called, "Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church." Evans provides an intriguing list of what millennials want out of faith that is consistent with previous research. Evans writes,

What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance. We want an end to the culture wars. We want a truce between science and faith. We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against. We want to ask questions that don't have predetermined answers. We want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or a single nation. We want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities. We want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not only when it comes to sex, but also when it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care and becoming peacemakers.

Evens notes that Millennials, who have been advertised to their whole lives and have "highly sensitive BS meters," are not looking for a change in style, but a change in substance. The key is not edgier music, more casual services, a coffee shop in the fellowship hall, a pastor who wears skinny jeans or an updated website. Evans writes, "we're not leaving the church because we don't find the cool factor there; we're leaving the church because we don't find Jesus there." Evans says many millennials, including herself, are leaving evangelicalism because they are drawn to high church traditions like Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the Episcopal Church.

Gracy Olmstead has noticed the movement of young people joining more traditional, liturgical denominations such as Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox

branches of faith. Olmstead says, "this trend is deeper than denominational waffling: it's a search for meaning that goes to the heart of our postmodern age" (7). Protestant churches have noticed this change and have adopted a more liturgical style to draw younger audiences. For example, in the book, *Gathering Together,* Christian theology professor Steve Harmon, describes a Baptist denominational move towards a greater liturgical focus. Olmstead believes the millennial generation is looking for a holistic, authentic, yet mysterious truth that evangelical churches are not providing. He writes, "where [millennials] search will have large implications for the future of Christianity. Protestant churches that want to preserve their youth membership may have to develop a greater openness toward the treasures of the past. One thing seems certain: this 'sacramental yearning' will not go away" (9).

Millennials and Story

Advertises have noticed that millennials particularly connect with stories. David Mills writes, "as we adapt our business and organizations to the emerging millennials generation – we don't want to miss the power of story to connect and build loyalty. The top brands have shifted to story-based marketing, and research tells us that millennials will connect with brands that feel authentic and real" (Mills). Millennials are not only distrustful of government and religious instructions, but also corporations. As a result, marketers are adapting and using the power of authentic stories to reach millennials. Mills says, "advertisements rarely look or feel authentic, unless they are a story told in a visual format. But content that has the feel of a story, especially if it includes the real journey of the business, its employees of customers, helps convey a sense of authenticity" (Mills). Advertising has shifted from being all about the company and product to the life

of the consumer because "stories that focus on the needs of millennials are what create

brand connection" (Mills). Marketing content needs to make a personal connection in

order to be considered valuable to a millennial; stories help create such bonds.

The amount of time millennials spend watching Netflix confirms the idea that

millennials connect strongly with stories. According to Trevor Wheelwright, a recent

study shows the average amount of time millennials will spend watching Netflix equates

to "roughly 13 years of the rest of their lives" (Wheelwright). He continues, "the average

millennial Netflix viewer said they watched 6.6 hours of Netflix a day, which works out

to be about 46.2 hours a week (that's almost two whole days)" (Wheelwright). Of course,

some viewers may just have Netflix playing on in the background to help combat feelings

of loneliness, while others might be binge watching their new favorite show.

Wheelwright says "it's a no-brainer as to why millennials love Netflix. As the cost of

living increases and wages stay stagnate, millennials need ways to spend their free time

without spending a fortune. And for the price of a single movie ticket every month,

Netflix provides endless hours of entertainment without needing to leave your home"

(Wheelwright). Watching Netflix also allows millennials to stay up to date on the various

pop-culture references they will see on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

Jeff Cloeter relays the significant impact stories have on Millennials within the

context of ministry. He writes, "Millennials are particularly quick to tell their story, and

in turn, they value the stories of others. Yet the church's default mode of witness has

typically been in statements rather than stories. Sterile formulae fail to offer an

appropriate response to a generation culturally attuned to communicating through the

means of shared experience" (48). Cloeter believes that the church must be able to tell a

compelling story in a world filled with competing narratives and sub-stories. He notices, however, that Christians have a lack of clarity and conviction regarding God's grand story. Additionally, "the average Christian struggles to identify how God's Story impacts his own personal story. Without the integration of God's Story into the life of the believer, Christian witness is relegated to formulaic statements of dogma with no context, a dissonant message difficult for a Millennial to hear" (49). If todays' church wants to engage millennials, then they need to become good storytellers.

Cloeter says millennials communicate through narrative, "valuing the exchange of shared experience" (49). In the midst of the noise, chaos, and confusion of today, which is especially amplified through the increasing influence of technology and media, millennials want to know the meaning and direction of their own story. The internet and technology has changed how we communicate, relate and tell stories. "What differentiates this age of information from others is that storytelling is done instantaneously, in real time. Storytelling is reduced to multitudes of spontaneous bursts: 140 character lines—impulsive posts— texting threads" (50). However, these changes are not helpful in providing time and space for thoughtful reflection and finding meaning. "Increasingly there is a deep need among Millennials to make sense of the random puzzle pieces. Such a generation is left with all the information at their fingertips, but a longing to know what it all means" (50).

Cloeter notes that Christians find purpose in God's larger story, which can also help Millennials find meaning. He writes, "western culture is standing among the ruins of modernity, an epoch in which reason was the dominant way of knowing truth. Out of these ruins, post- modernism has built its foundation on experience. Those in the

Millennial generation are particularly compelled by what they have genuinely felt, heard, and seen" (50). This does not mean that Millennials have completely "abandoned reason, they are more likely compelled by relationship. Millennials long to experience truth in shared stories" (50). The modern church attempted to "make the case" while millennials prefer to hear your story. Cloeter concludes that sharing stories, especially personal stories, is an effective way to communicate with this generation that highly values experience. But these stories must be enfolded "incarnationally" into God's larger story (53).

Neuroscience and Narrative

John Teske explains that narrative and mythology, especially in our postmodern age, play a central role to living meaningful lives because the way our brains are wired. Teske writes, "Neural structures and functions constantly are being shaped by their history of interactions with the outside environment" (176). The central nervous system is a huge mass of circuitry seeking to make connections for future learning and understanding. When we hear stories and learn something new, our brain is hardwired to make connections from past experiences and memories in order to understand. Furthermore, "the ventromedial connections between high-level executive function and the emotional systems are the means by which we prioritize, evaluate, and mark somatic significance" (181). Stories that connect with our emotions leave a lasting and meaningful mark and are more memorable. Interestingly, narratives that connect with our emotions can be "representations of one's own experience even when they are putatively accounts of external events" (181).

The input and content of stories provide a simulation of experience in the brain, which "include sensory-motor activity, our memories and images of perceptions and actions, and our memories and anticipations of both internal and external events. The subcortical mediation of motivational and emotional experience gives the stories we tell ourselves and others their felt significance, that move us" (180). Teske continues,

> This capacity to organize memory (and anticipation) into a serially ordered hierarchy of actions extending backward and forward in time also makes it possible to tell stories, organize more coherent and meaningful lives, connect our pasts with our futures, and, in all likelihood, draw on or integrate our own stories with the broader, perhaps more archetypal, ideological, and mythical narratives and metanarratives provided by our culture, our history, and our literature (182).

Not only do powerful stories help create identity and meaning, but good stories effect our brains in a deeper way. In other words, when tension or conflict develop in a story, our brains are further engaged. "The orbital prefrontal cortex (the area right above the eyes) is likely to be involved in error detection and alerting, in the mismatch of expectations that tell us everything is not quite right… It certainly would also have bearing on the 'conflict' or 'trouble' around which narrative plots are built" (179).

Teske understands that events in the world to not occur in story form, but the brain stores information and experiences as narratives. Stories provide structure that aids memory. Teske indicates that based on clinical and empirical research, there is evidence for the healing effects of narrative approaches to traumatic events (193). Teske suggests "that the dynamics of narrative plotting, and our capacity to encode our experiences in memorable terms, also requires that events be *framed as* conflicts, crises, and climaxes in order for them be remembered at all" (189).

In an article on "Mental Well-Being, Neuroscience, and Religion," Jamie Wright says, "human beings have no choice but to construct myths consisting of personalized

power sources to explain their world" and "to orient themselves within . . . [their] universe" (382). Due to causal and binary operations in the brain, humans create and maintain myths. "To the anxious mind, this resonant whole-brain agreement feels like a glimpse of ultimate truth. The mind seems to live this truth, not merely comprehend it, and it is this quality of visceral experience that turns ideas into myths" (383). Wright suggests that the brain utilizes myths as a primary mode of functioning that enables mental health, information processing and even self-understanding (383).

Another article titled, "Reading Stories Activates Neural Representations of Visual and Motor Experiences," argues that neuroimaging studies of single-word reading have "support for the hypothesis that readers' representations of word meaning are grounded in visual and motor representations" (Speer et al. 989). This is significant because the brain involves itself in the story being read or heard. Studies have shown that the brain "regions involved in reading action words are some of the same regions involved in performing analogous actions in the real world. For example, reading verbs such as 'run' or 'kick' activates brain regions that are selectively activated when moving one's foot" (989). When someone reads about a kicking a goal in soccer, the same regions of the brain that command a kick in real life are activated (989). "These results suggest that readers dynamically activate specific visual, motor, and conceptual features of activities while reading about analogous changes in activities in the context of a narrative" (995). The brain functions in such a way that it projects itself into the story.

Another study found that the brain has an empathetic connection with the characters of written narratives (Bruneau et al.). The study results "show that simply reading about another person's physical pain can produce activity in the 'Shared Pain

network'" (7). Verbal stories created significant responses in the right and left secondary sensory cortex. Different brain regions are connected with the amount of physical pain versus emotional suffering depicted in verbal stories (7). "In sum, using both whole brain and region of interest item- analyses, we found that the brain regions associated with the 'Shared Pain network' were recruited more for stories involving physical pain, while a distinct set of brain regions were recruited more for stories involving emotional suffering" (8).

In her book, *Wired for Story*, Lisa Cron writes "recent breakthroughs in neuroscience reveal that our brain is hardwired to respond to story; the pleasure we derive from a tale well told is nature's way of seducing us into paying attention to it" (1). Cron suggests that this why people easily connect with stories and often choose an exciting piece of non-fiction over a history book or would rather watch a movie instead of a documentary. She writes, "a recent brain-imaging study reported in *Psychological Science* reveals that the regions of the brain that process the sights, sounds, tastes, and movement of real life are activated when we're engrossed in a compelling narrative" (4).

As Cron notes, reading stories allows our brains to "simulate intense experiences without actually having to live through them" (9). She calls this a type of "dress rehearsal" for the future. Cron contends that early human society used storytelling in order to teach and pass on wisdom from previous generations. She says story is how we make "strategic sense of the otherwise overwhelming world around us…the brain constantly seeks meaning from all the input thrown at it, yanks out what's important for our survival on a need-to-know basis, and tells us a story about it, based on what it knows of our past experience with it, how we feel about it, and how it might affect us" (8).

In *The Story Telling Animal,* Jonathan Gottschall indicates that even thousands of years ago humans were telling stories to each other, something people continue to do today. He writes, "human minds yield helplessly to the suction of story. No matter how hard we concentrate, no matter how deep we dig in our heels, we just can't resist the gravity of alternate worlds" (3). Gottschall notes that even with the technological advances of society, publishing books is still lucrative business. Of course, Westerners read less these days, but they still consume stories through screens. Gottschall says, "according to a number of different surveys, the average American spends several hours each day watching television programs. By the time American children reach adulthood, they will have spent more time in TV land than anywhere else, including school" (9). Gottschall recognizes that even children are fascinated with stories and make-believe, "Children pretended in Auschwitz" (23).

Informed by neuroscientific studies, Gottschall says "because mirror neurons in our brains re-create for us the distress we see on the screen. We have empathy for the fictional characters—we know how they're feeling—because we literally experience the same feelings ourselves" (61). Additionally, "when we experience fiction, our minds are firing and wiring, honing the neural pathways that regulate our responses to real-life experiences" (66). Stories can also help people navigate through the difficulties of life because the brain has worked through the complexity of a theoretical situation created by a narrative. "Fiction allows our brains to practice reacting to the kinds of challenges that are, and always were, most crucial to our success as a species. And as we'll see, we don't stop simulating when the sun goes down" (67). Stories teach us truth about the world and therefore help prepare and mold our minds.

Delores Liston observes that storytelling and narrative are powerful mechanisms for learning and retention. The human brain is wired to make connections. "Neurons have a genetic imperative to form and move in and out of networks. In this way, most neurons do not function independently and randomly, but instead, form connections with other neurons, and thereby form and connect with neural networks" (6). The human brain is constantly seeking to "identify and classify connections between stimuli" (8). Thus, all learning builds on previous learning. Liston provides an example in how students learn better in geography when they hear stories from geographical locations. These are called "hooks" (10).

The Healing Power of Story: Learning from Narrative Therapy

Herbert and Irene Goldenberg define narrative therapists as those who "believe clients can be helped to liberate themselves from destructive or limiting or problem-saturated stories and to construct alternative stories that offer new options and possibilities for the future" (365). Narrative therapy revolves around the idea that "our sense of reality is organized and maintained through the stories by which we circulate knowledge about ourselves and the world we inhabit…certain dominant stories explain our current actions and impact our future lives" (365). Individuals and families often develop destructive narratives about their lives that are defeating and stifle flourishing. "To achieve change, they need to gain access to other stories, to learn to consider alternate ways of examining the values, assumptions, and meanings of their life experiences that dominate their views of themselves and their problems" (365).

Herbert and Irene Goldenberg suggest that narrative therapists seek to help people explore more beneficial plots for their lives. Of course, a family of origin is not the only

influence in developing a person's story. "Cultural stories help influence and shape these personal narratives" (370). Those receiving narrative therapy work with their therapist in identifying harmful personal stories, such as, "I always fail so why even try," and the create new narratives to help facilitate healing and growth. Put another way, "the therapist has helped build some scaffolding, helping people trapped in the basement of a multistory building gain access to the upper floors, with greater likelihood of enlarging their views and seeing the horizon that was denied to them in their previous location" (376).

Alfred Brunsdon believes those who work in pastoral care can use narrative therapy as a means of helping people discover healing and freedom. He says, "the lives of people can be interpreted as a story and that this story, or text analogy, can be utilized as a therapeutic tool" (5). A person can cling to a story based on a certain plot that develops because of linked or thematic events through time. People live their lives and are greatly influenced by these personal narratives. "Thus, it is evident that people's life-stories are a powerful influential force" (6). Brunsdon says that "problem-saturated stories inhibit life," (6) but narrative therapy, and the new stories co-authored, can provide people with an alternative direction filled with hope. Pastors, as well as therapists, can help co-author new, life-giving stories.

Lindsey Lawson and Cassidy Freitas look at narrative therapy from a medical perspective and note that "narrative therapy has been shown to be helpful with patients and families experiencing a variety of medical diagnoses" (417). According to Lawson and Freitas, narrative therapy is based on a postmodern ideology where "problems are conceptualized as separate from people and constructed of narrow, limiting stories of

clients' lives that do not fit with their preferred experiences of self" (417). Narrative

therapists help clients re-author stories to pursue a more desirable outcome of life.

Lawson and Cassidy found narrative therapy practices to be beneficial for their medical

patients in helping them "understand how their experiences of illness may be shaped by

larger social discourses, such as messages received from friends, family members, or

larger cultural meanings regarding illness, and how the patient may then choose which of

these messages about illness fit for them and which do not" (418).

Ken Land suggests merely sharing stories in therapy sessions can be a beneficial

practice for clients. Land identifies several motives for the counselor to share stories to

seed ideas and increase motivation, to redefine a problem, to decrease resistance, to

embed directives or to suggest solutions. However, "clients have to translate the stories

into their own language and for their situations, just as they have to heal in their own

way" (5). Land does not just share stories, but he also uses the narrative approach to

therapy because he sees that it can be "instrumental in helping people discover alternative

stories and helping them to re-tell the dominant stories in a way which is freeing and

liberating" (6). Land notes that "narratives develop in the lives of people as a result of

events that are linked in sequence across time according to a certain plot" (5). Land

believes the goal of narrative therapy is to author new and liberating stories that help

refocus and direct the client toward a better life.

How to Tell a Story

In *Made to Stick,* Chip Heath and Dan Heath highlight the effectiveness of the

restaurant Subway advertising, which focused on Jared, an obese man who lost 200

pounds by eating Subway sandwiches. The success of this campaign "started with a

single store owner who had the good sense to spot an amazing story" (16). Heath

provides six principles for communicating "sticky" ideas. First, they need to be relatively

simple or at least easy enough to follow. Second, there needs to be an element of

unexpectedness. "How do we get our audience to pay attention to our ideas, and how do

we maintain their interest when we need time to get the ideas across? We need to violate

people's expectations. We need to be counterintuitive…For our idea to endure, we must

generate interest and curiosity" (16). Third, ideas need to be communicated concretely or

clearly so a wide audience can follow and understand. Fourth, whatever is being

presented must come with credibility, "sticky ideas have to carry their own credentials"

(17). Fifth, and quite importantly, sticky ideas connect with people's emotions. "How do

we get people to care about our ideas? We make them feel something" (17). And sixth,

Heath and Heath say that sticky ideas come with stories. "How do we get people to act on

our ideas? We tell stories… hearing stories acts as a kind of mental flight simulator,

preparing us to respond more quickly and effectively" (18).

Heath and Heath believe that stories are magnets for bonding ideas to the mind.

Stories can powerfully influence people. They write, "stories are told and retold because

they contain wisdom. Stories are effective teaching tools…Stories illustrate causal

relationships that people hadn't recognized before and highlight unexpected, resourceful

ways in which people have solved problems" (205-206). Stories help transform abstract

ideas into concrete examples.

In his book, *The Art of Storytelling*, John Walsh notes that the majority of the

Bible comes in the form of story. People remember stories and are more willing to listen

if stories are told. He writes, "most people today receive information best if it is given to

them in the form of stories" (19). Walsh provides twelve steps for quality story telling. Notable steps include telling the story from the view of someone in the scene, establishing the central truth of the story, finding a memory hook (phase, song, concept, or attitude repeated throughout the story), planning your first words, adding description, and eliminating needless detail (16).

Walsh submits that when sharing a story, it's important for the storyteller not to ramble, especially at the introduction or conclusion. "The most common critique given to all storytellers is, 'You need to tighten it up.' Often a poor story would be excellent if told in half the time. This is especially true of personal stories" (60). Regarding the first few sentences and last few sentences, Walsh says, "These should occupy a huge amount of your preparation time. Once you have crafted those beginning and ending sentences, memorize them! Know exactly what your first and last words will be before you stand in front of an audience" (51). Walsh believes the best storytellers know how to draw an audience into the story within the first few sentences. He emphatically states the case when he says, "When you step up, you have the undivided attention of your audience … for a few seconds. This is because you are the most active thing in the room…If you don't seize this moment, their minds will conclude they have more important things to think about" (51-52).

In *The Story Factor*, Annette Simmons argues that sharing powerful stories is the way to get your audience "to reach the same conclusions you have reached and decide for themselves to believe what you say and do what you want them to do" (3). Simmons suggests that people prefer to make their own conclusions and stories can help make truth personal and real for the audience; it is a collaborative approach to teaching. Stories don't

tell people how to act, they simply and subtly influence people as the make their own

choices. She writes, "story is a form of mental imprint. A story can mold perceptions and

touch the unconscious mind" (34). Stories can help circumvent the traditional authority

one needs in order to connect, teach and influence people. Stories simplify the

complexity of our world into something we can comprehend. Simmons also notes that

sharing stories is as close "as you can get to programming someone else's brain. Once

installed, a good story continues to process new experiences through a story line that

channels future experiences according to lasting perceptions that frame their choices"

(49). Simmons concludes that stories can affect people emotionally in ways that go

beyond reason and logic.

In her book, *Resonate*, Nancy Duarte also argues that "stories are the most

powerful delivery tool for information, more powerful and enduring than any other art

form" (Loc. 625). Duarte suggests that the best story tellers understand their audience in

order to resonate. Duarte also stresses the importance of appealing to emotions. "Today

more than ever, communicating only the detailed specifications or functional overviews

of a product isn't enough. If two products have the same features, the one that appeals to

an emotional need will be chosen" (Loc. 598). Duarte also writes, "when we listen to a

story, the chemicals in our body change, and our mind becomes transfixed" (Loc. 625).

Stories help people engage more so with ideas. "Stories link one person's heart to

another. Values, beliefs, and norms become intertwined. When this happens, your idea

can more readily manifest as reality in their minds" (Loc. 639). However, when

presenting, the narrator must be clear because obscurity hinders persuasion. Stories, by

definition, must incorporate complication and resolution.

Building a Case for Narrative Preaching

In *Orality and Literacy* Walter Ong says "the spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word" (74). Indeed, oral culture produce "powerful and beautiful performances" (14). Ong also notes that stories have assisted humankind in memory and instruction for thousands of years. He writes, " in primary oral cultures, where there is no text, the narrative serves to bond thought more massively and permanently than other genres" (138). The preaching event is a unified experience bringing people together. "Sound unites groups of living beings as nothing else does" (42). Likewise, "The spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups. When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker" (73). Ong also suggests that the spoken word creates a joint participation with an "anticipated response" (173).

In his book, *The Witness of Preaching*, Thomas Long provides a foundational approach to exegesis and instruction on how to form and focus a sermon for the task of preaching. Long simply defines exegesis as a "systematic plan for coming to understand a biblical text" (69). Long's exegetical method consists of 5 phases: getting the text in view, getting introduced to the text, attending to the text, testing what is heard in the text, and moving toward the sermon. As the preacher moves toward the sermon she or he transitions from exegesis to discovering what the text wishes to say "on this occasion to our congregation" (97).

The task of preaching begins with encountering scripture, listening to it, chewing on it, and then turning toward the people. "The move from text to sermon is a move from

beholding to attesting, from seeing to saying, from listening to telling, from perceiving to testifying, from *being* a witness to *bearing* witness" (100). To help preachers develop a process for forming a sermon, Long suggests using a focus and function statement. This helps govern the preachers work. "What the sermon aims to say can be called its 'focus,' and what the sermon aims to do can be called its 'function'" (108). Both the focus and function statement should "grow directly from the exegesis of the biblical text" (109). The focus and function statements should be related to each other, clear, unified and relatively simple. As Long says, "the temptation facing the preacher is to attempt to bring everything heard and seen in the text into one sermon. If this temptation is not resisted, the sermon will almost inevitably end up accomplishing little because the preacher has tried to accomplish it all" (113). Learning the discipline of creating a function and focus statement will equip the preacher with a clear and potent message.

In his book, *Pastor as Minor Poet*, Craig Barnes presents the image of poet as an analogy for pastoral ministry. Barnes believes that the task of the pastor is to look to the text and congregation and search for a deeper understanding of what they see. He says that poets have been blessed with vision that "allows them to explore, and express, the truth behind the reality. Poets see the despair and heartache as well as the beauty and miracle that lie just beneath the thin veneer of the ordinary, and they describe this in ways that are recognized not only in the mind, but more profoundly in the soul" (17). Poet preachers understand how to translate truth into rhythmic relevance. They are constantly seeking for creative ways to encounter the depths of meaning and mystery. "They do this not only in their study of sacred texts but also in their study of the common events of the culture in which we live and in their pastoral conversations, always looking for the

mystery that lies just below surface" (22). The pastor poet knows the people of the

congregation which enhances her or his ability to relay truth.

In *Design for Preaching*, Grady Davis saw the importance of preachers

connecting with the human heart and keeping the human condition in mind. Grady also

identifies the importance of movement within a sermon, not unlike a good story. He

writes, "The proper design of a sermon is a movement in time…it begins at a given

moment, it ends at a given moment, and it moves through the intervening moments one

after another" (163). For Davis, sermons are not outlines or manuscripts but an oral

enactment of the gospel which occurs in time. He writes, "a sermon is like music, not

music in the score but in the live performance, where bar is heard after bar, theme after

theme, and never all at once" (163).

David Buttrick suggests that preaching forms identity because stories give

identity. He writes, "preaching alters identity by prefacing all our stories and setting them

in a larger story that stretches back to the dawn of God's creation" (11). By definition,

stories move and so should sermons. "The movement of a sermon in the reflective mode

of consciousness is movement around a structured field of meaning…a moving from one

contemporary meaning to another" (325). Buttrick believes preachers should not think in

terms of points but movement. Regarding the crafting of moves, Buttrick says, "Every

move in a sermon will require a thinking through of how we present material, what kinds

of material will be chosen, and how such material will be designed in view of theological

understandings and our common cultural mind." (34) Of course, such movement will

include images. "Homiletical thinking is always a thinking of theology toward images"

(29). Buttrick adds, "We know that in preaching any idea, we will have to image. Ideas

without depiction are apt to be abstract and, oddly, enough, unconvincing . . . we will have to find some way of picturing what it is we are talking about; we must turn to lived experience" (32).

Calvin Miller also sees the importance of movement within a sermon, although he uses language of flow. He writes, "In my preaching classes, I rate sermons on…flow. 'Flow' is how a sermon moves; if it does not move it will hold no interest. Streams are more interesting than ponds. Streams move. Ponds stagnate. Sermons also stagnate when they refuse to move. Illustrations put movement into more stolid precepts" (67). Miller also advocates for narrative exposition in preaching. Miller notes that some evangelicals downplay narrative exposition as an unauthentic form of preaching. Miller is quick to insert Jesus as a preacher who used stories and parables. Miller writes, "The nice thing about narrative exposition is that it—unlike precept-driven exposition—sticks itself in the mind and is remembered long after the sermon's outline" (68).

Rosemary King understands the power of storytelling in preaching, especially in getting a congregation's attention. "The trouble is that the attention so often lessens when the story comes to an end" (100). Rosemary believes one way of overcoming this issue is making the entire sermon a story, through first-person narrative preaching. She suggests an "Ignatian" technique as a way of stepping into a biblical scene and using your imagination to see through the eyes of someone within the story. One advantage to first person narrative preaching is that it "provides a way to fill people in on the necessary back-ground knowledge in a non-didactic, non- threatening, non-patronizing way" (103). King sees a significant difference in her presentation style when she preaches first-person narrative sermons.

In *Preaching the Story,* Jeffrey Frymire suggests that for too long preachers have been "wedded to the 'three points and a cloud of dust' scenario for the preaching event. Propositional truths remain the dominant process by which we deal with texts of Scripture" (6). However, Frymire notes that "we are a story-driven culture. Why, then, is our preaching not story-driven? If we have adapted other aspects of our daily lives and our worship experiences to changes in the culture, why does the style of our preaching remain mired in an old paradigm" (10)? Frymire believes that narrative preaching allows the listener to enter into the biblical story. He says that stories have more impact on the "mind than lists or statements of ideas…research has repeatedly confirmed that everyone from the buster generation to postmoderns learns better through narrative, whether told with sophisticated media technology or by a single storyteller, than they do through any other kind of medium" (44).

Frymire observes that young people are leaving the church. He writes, "The postmodern generation is staying away from church services in astounding numbers. We must open ourselves to the possibility that people learn today in ways that are different from the way they learned in the 1950s" (48). Frymire says that in propositional preaching, the preacher devotes 75 percent of the sermon to points of application while illustration and narrative is only 25 percent. "Narrative preaching reverses the figures… Why so little time for application? Because the story makes the application for you" (127). Frymire introduces the Disney concept of "imagineering" to encourage the preacher in story construction. He says, "scripture lends itself to imagineering in a variety of ways. When we use our imaginations to tell a story rather than reading it, we are imagineering, using creativity to narrate the story in our own way" (35).

Steven Shuster suggests that preachers can learn from artists by espousing a story form of preaching. Preachers often construct three-point propositional sermons. Artists facilitate a dialogue with their work "in a broader, more imaginative sense, causing persons to pause and listen creatively to their inner world and the external world around them, the appealing invitation that is issued by the artist addresses the whole person. Eyes are invited to see, ears to hear, and the imagination to creatively envision" (23). The preacher communicates truth through theological statements while the artist invites people to experience the mysterious and discover truth in a personal way. Story preaching can assist the listener in becoming an involved participate, a co-journeyman, in the preaching moment. Shuster says the artist "offers the preacher a communication model that skillfully prepares a listener for spiritual encounters by evoking the least amount of resistance… The preacher who skillfully invites the listener to adopt a posture of openness has taken the first important step toward effectively communicating the gospel" (25). Shuster believes that story preaching offers a less condescending tone as the listeners discover the truth themselves.

Renee Sauder observes that most of the biblical account is in the form of story and Jesus himself was a master storyteller. Sauder argues that narrative preaching can come in many different forms such as a first-person account, putting himself/herself in the "shoes of a biblical character and tell the story as that character would. Or one might retell a story recorded in the Old or New Testament, allowing the story itself to give the sermon its shape, movement, or content. Or one might tell a personal story, one that really took place as an event in time" (45). Sauder notes, as many others have, that people often remember the stories above all else from any given sermon. She also believes that

modern day stories can help illuminate the biblical text. Sauder writes, "narrative preaching is effective when we locate the intersection between our own lives and the lives of the actors in the biblical drama. To connect the biblical text with a story that will help explain it, lift it off the page, and give it another dimension is the creative and imaginative challenge of narrative preaching" (46).

Kent Edwards affirms that both children and adults love stories. Stories are not just for entertainment but are effective educational tools. Edwards also notes that the "growing respect for teaching adults through story can be seen in at least two areas: the business world and the counseling office" (51). Teachers often use case studies as a means of education and training. "The instructor uses narrative to describe an actual or true to life situation and encourages the students to identify the relevant issues and suggest a resolution to be applied to the problem" (53). Edwards sees that pastors should not preach first person sermons every Sunday, but he suggests an approach called "life shaping" (53). Life Shaping sermons flow like the plot of a story, or like the seasons of the year, beginning with summer and moving through winter until resolution occurs. "The vast majority of biblical narratives enjoy a sudden reversal—a surprising twist in the plot that starts to return life back to the bliss of summer. Stories do not have points. They make a single point. This point is revealed in the surprising twist—the moment of 'aha' when the solution to the problem is revealed" (54).

Fred Craddock discusses the inductive approach to preaching in his book, *As One Without Authority*. Craddock contends that the method of preaching is as important as the content. "In the case of inductive preaching, the structure must be subordinate to movement. In fact, this subordination means that in most cases the structure is not visible

to the congregation" (115). Craddock describes inductive preaching as "a sharing in the Word; a trip, not just a destination; an arriving at a point for drawing conclusions, not the handing over of a conclusion" (116). Craddock criticizes how preachers often disclose their main point too early. By doing this, "the conclusion precedes the development, a most unnatural mode of communication, unless, of course, one presupposes passive listeners who accept the right or authority of the speaker to state conclusions that he then applies to their faith and life" (46). He continues, "the conclusion does not come first any more than a trip starts at its destination, a story prematurely reveals its own climax, or a joke begins with the punch line. Perhaps it will not be taken as irreverent to say that the movement of a sermon is as the movement of a good story or a good joke" (52). Craddock wants preachers to craft the movement of the sermon in a way that creates and sustains interest and incorporates anticipation during the preaching moment.

Craddock believes that preaching, like art, should create a dialogue between the preacher and hearer. He writes, "a work of art does not exist totally of itself, but is completed by the viewer" (54). Craddock wants preaching to be a journey, a trip with preacher and congregation. When crafting the sermon, the preacher should start with the destination. "No preacher has the right to look for points until he has the point. And not think in terms of points at all, but of transitions, turns in the road, or of signs offering direction toward the destination" (85). This approach to preaching allows the hearer to participate and discover the central idea for themselves. Craddock writes, "the sole purpose is to engage the hearer in the pursuit of an issue or an idea so that he will think his own thoughts and experience his own feelings in the presence of Christ and in the light of the gospel" (124).

In his book, *Preaching*, Craddock writes that "the goal is not to get something said but to get something heard" (167). He asserts that "a sermon is not only to say something but to do something" (200). Craddock notes that "writing is for reading, and speaking is for listening" (192), and the preacher should be willing to work for the engagement of the hearer. In the preparation process, the preacher is misguided when she or he thinks the point is to get Sunday's sermon written. A sermon is for the ear, not eye. "To make writing the sermon the goal of the process is to cause one to think writing, rather than speaking, throughout the preparation" (190). Craddock reiterates the importance of creating anticipation in preaching. "The preacher understands the dynamic of anticipation, and therefore designs sermons which create expectation with their early promise, but which will delay the fulfillment of that promise until the listener is sufficiently engaged to own the message" (166). Ultimately, the goal of the preacher is for the hearer to respond with a transformation in attitude or behavior.

In his book, *The Homiletical Plot*, Eugene Lowry says, "Preaching is storytelling. A sermon is a narrative art form" (12). All good stories revolve around some kind of conflict met with resolution, or as Lowry says, an "itch" and a "scratch." He says, "One might say that any sermon involves both an 'itch' and a 'scratch' and sermons are born when at least implicitly in the preacher's mind the problematic itch intersects a solutional scratch—between the particulars of the human predicament and the particularity of the gospel" (19). Lowry's primary metaphor for preaching is a plot, or story that moves from conflict to resolution. Lowry's homiletical plot consists of five moves: 1) upsetting the equilibrium, 2) analyzing the discrepancy, 3) disclosing the clue to resolution, 4) experiencing the gospel, and 5) anticipating the consequences. Lowry's students helped

him condense these moves into five simple words: 1) Oops; 2) Ugh; 3) Aha; 4) Whee; and 5) Yeah.

Upsetting equilibrium catches the attention of the listeners, as conflict often does, by drawing their focus into the sermon theme. Similar to the beginning of a good movie, "the primary purpose of sermon introductions is to produce imbalance for the sake of engagement" (30). As an artistic storyteller, the preacher takes major responsibility for the congregation's engagement with the theme. "What has been our sermonic itch must become theirs—and within a matter of two or three minutes—else their attention will move to other matters" (29). Lowry suggests that perhaps the most important move in the sermon is the stage of analyzing the discrepancy. Sadly, this is often the weakest portion of the average sermon. Failure to effectively analyze the discrepancy will weaken the sermonic plot. "The purpose of the sermonic process of analysis is to uncover the areas of interior motivation where the problem is generated, and hence expose the motivational setting toward which any cure will need to be directed" (45).

Once the discrepancy or conflict has been sufficiently analyzed, we can then disclose the clue to resolution. Within the sermon this stage will feel revelatory for the congregation. The clue is not merely something that is known but experienced like an "aha" moment. This will prepare the congregation to experience the gospel. As in medicine, "once a physician is reasonably sure that matters have been probed underneath the symptomatic level to the causative base, it is a relatively simple matter both to predict prognosis and prescribe treatment that corresponds to the condition" (74). The gospel is the medicine for the congregation, the resolution to the conflict. Once the gospel is experienced, we then anticipate the consequences. "In the light of the revelatory moment

of intersection, both preacher and congregation consider what difference has been made for us" (80).

In *The Homiletical Beat*, Lowry emphasizes the preaching event as a movement of steps (not points) in time. Lowry contends that, in a way, all sermons are narrative. He writes, "the primary medium of preaching is time, moving moment-by-moment. Hence, narrative is its primary form. This is what I mean when I speak of the narrative principle of preaching" (4). He compares preaching to performing music, "as a musician plays notes into time—a sequenced narrative shape—so a preacher sends words into some kind of narratively principled sequence. We play the words into time, whispered into time, activating time, transforming time. Sunday after Sunday, time after time, beat after beat" (18). However, Lowry still defines the specific branch of narrative preaching as an "arrangement of ideas that takes the form of a homiletical plot" (17). An engaging sermon generates tension or conflict, similar to a story. When preaching, pastors need to delay resolution "to allow the handling of the text to probe the issue deeply enough that the power of the gospel can be proclaimed" (56). Sermons should move, beat by beat, creating suspense in preparation for receiving the Good News. As soon as the tension is gone, the sermon is over.

Bryan Chapell has a similar understanding of narrative preaching. He writes, "one of the key observations that has driven narrative theory is that oral communication is not usually heard as 'logical points' but rather as a flow of impressions that are built or turned through the various 'moves' of language" (24). The hope is, again, to help the listener understand truth on their own terms. For Chapell, though, narrative preaching is shallow when its primary focus is maintaining short attention spans. In fact, the Bible is

composed of propositions and narrative. "By providing narratives along with propositions the Bible asserts the value of both, and makes suspect any communication system that would deny the value of either" (36). Chapell continues, "a narrative without a propositional interpretation produced confused and conflicting meanings in the minds of readers… meaning dependent upon personal experience alone has no dependable meaning" (39).

In her book, *The Write Stuff*, Sondra Willobee talks about preaching as hook, book and stone. The hook creates a compelling opening that catches the attention of the congregation. "A hook dangles something that is important to the listener. A hook incites interest, establishes the speaker's credibility, sets the tone, and suggests something about the theme" (12). Similar to Lowry's "oops," Willobee suggests that introducing conflict is a great hook. Quoting an old Irish proverb, Willobee says, "if you want someone's attention, start a fight" (13). The "book" generates suspense through structure. "Sermons need to move as stories do. Whether or not they are 'story sermons,' they need to have a 'plot,' narrative movement, beginning to middle to end, a pulse that quickens as the sermon develops" (45). The "stone" is about arousing interest with vivid language. Like hook and book, this also takes creativity and imagination in our use of descriptive language. This helps congregants make concrete faith connections. "When we use incarnational language in our preaching, it helps close the gap many of our listeners perceive between faith and real life" (92).

In *Performing the Word*, Jana Childers stresses the importance of preaching with passion and vitality. Of course, this does not mean Childers believes content is irrelevant. "No matter how good a preacher is at embodying a sermon—giving it life and shape

through kinesthetic expression—a substanceless sermon cannot be disguised. Theology reminds preaching of matters of ultimate importance" (24). Yet, preaching is a creative event and the sermon must be embodied and enlivened. Interestingly, Childers notes that "preachers and actors have much in common…the question about what preachers may learn from actors is tantalizing" (37). Like it or not, the preacher performs the sermon. "The only question is, is it better to be aware of, and therefore able to exercise some control over the performance? The key to authentic preaching is found in the notion of honest performance" (48). Performance is not to be shunned but seen as a valuable tool. Childers links the performance of the Word with the conflict-resolution form of preaching. She writes, "The long reign of the 'three points and a poem' style of preaching has come to an end…Little movement is implied in such a format. No significant momentum may be gathered" (42). Both story and theater have much to teach the preacher.

Sam Wells sees narrative preaching as means of effectively engaging the congregation. "It creates a rhetorical device that lures in the curious, entertains the disinterested, and rewards the short concentration-spanned" (109). Wells cautions preachers not to over explain the story but he observes, like many others, that when the story is the main thrust of the sermon—and the story is often what is remembered most—the congregation has in effect recalled the sermon itself. This means that "it's absolutely vital that the drift of the story doesn't contradict the argument of the sermon—otherwise the effect is worse than useless" (109). Wells also introduces a technique he calls the "twist." The twist "allows the listener to think all is well and they're on top of all the

material, and then with a rush at the end reincorporates material from earlier in the piece

to suppose and thrill and delight and transform" (116).

African American preacher, Walter Thomas, says that stores are especially

important in the black tradition. He writes, "We are a people of stories. We know our

African American heritage from the storytellers of our childhood" (132). He also sees a

growing interest in stories in today's American culture. Like the effect of flight

simulators or case studies, the stories of scripture "are the launch pad into the situations

people are facing" (133). Thomas notes that his style of narrative preaching is not just

merely a telling of a story. "It is the nuances of the drama and the tensions within the

story that guide my preparation. I see myself as a movie director, determining where to

focus the camera and how it should be presented" (134). Thomas says that stories need to

contain three elements: character, setting and incident. The tension of the story revolves

some combination of the three elements. Thomas writes:

> The key to any great novel is the plot. The same is true for the sermon. There
> must be a plot. For me the plot is born out of the creative tensions in the text, but
> it must be presented with all the skill and craftsmanship that the preacher can
> muster. The story must be told in such a way that the hearers cannot totally
> anticipate the next move. There must be unanticipated suspense. The story must
> take some twists and turns; the truths must be deep below the surface of the text;
> and listeners must have an "aha" moment (136-137).

Advocate for the narrative approach, Glenn Watson, teaches his preaching

students principles of screenwriting. He notes that audiences have changed, and pithy

propositions no longer effectively serve proclamation. He writes "increasingly, we face

hearers predisposed against precept. The sword of our traditional rhetoric clinks

harmlessly against shields of a steely post-modernism" (55). Watson is careful to stress

that narrative preaching should not neglect delivering a biblical, Christ-centered

presentation of the gospel. Watson says that screenwriting "proves that it is possible to tell a story and persuade at the same time" (58).

Watson provides four elements screenwriting can teach preachers. First, there is a need for a controlling idea. He says, "in the climax and resolution, the question is answered, and the audience intuitively, inevitably and powerfully grasps the message, without the need to state it explicitly. The controlling idea is the rhetorical focal point of any film, and of any narrative sermon" (61). Second, there is conflict. "If a story were a dance, conflict would be the music. Without conflict, there is no story" (61). Conflict is essential for narrative preaching. Third, there is crisis. "This is the moment when the preacher culminates all the information, false solutions and fleeting glimpses of the truth that have been explored along the way, in a single moment of clarity for the hearers. The final crucial pieces of the exegetical puzzle are revealed…we must choose life or death" (66). Fourth and lastly, there is resolution. "The resolution provides this opportunity by briefly demonstrating the consequences of the change effected in the climax. In the narrative sermon, this is the moment for direct application. If we have done our work well, if God has spoken and if our hearers have chosen life.... the application need not be long" (67).

Of course, not everyone is an advocate for narrative preaching. In his 1984 article, Richard Lischer noted the limits of story believing that more is needed for understanding the gospel than merely telling a/the story. He identified four issues with narrative or story preaching, which are aesthetic, ontological, theological and sociopolitical (27). First, with an overemphasizing focus on the aesthetic, Lischer suggests that the preacher ignores the historical dimension of interpretation. It is wrong to assume the orthodox interpretation

detached from historical theology is self-evident. Secondly, Lischer notes that narrative preaching often overlooks the pain of those who reside on the margins of the story. The preacher decides what aspect or character to emphasize. Third, story's emphasis on the living out of faith neglects the catastrophic and eschatological in which faith was born. He writes, "Theology lives by story but without more precise modes of conceptualizing and interpreting theology is reduced to repetition or recital and loses its power and flexibility to address new situations" (34). And fourth, story cannot necessarily navigate moral and political decisions. Lischer says, "a socio-political critique of story exposes the ideological bent of our own sermons and invites preachers to take up all the rhetorical tools, and not just one aesthetic form, in service of social and personal transformation" (38).

In his article, "What Happened to Narrative Preaching," Tom Long wonders if narrative preaching, which was all the rage thirty or forty years ago, has lost its luster. "In fact, shots at story preaching are now flying fast and furiously from the right, the middle, and the left" (11). Critics call narrative preaching morally ambiguous, doctrinally vague, and timid with evangelism. Long notes that since the beginning, narrative preaching has had it critics, many calling it "sloppy, amateurish, undisciplined, and self- indulgent" (11). Long identifies the experimental season of the 1970s and 1980s in American preaching. There were "dialogue sermons, short-story sermons, first-person sermons, pantomime sermons, image-rich sermons, confessional sermons, and more - the varieties were endless, but all of them riffs on the notion that good preaching was somehow story-shaped, story-saturated, story-driven" (11).

Long concedes to much of the frustration and says, "I, myself, am chastened and instructed by all of these criticisms - from the left, the right, and the middle - but finally not fully persuaded by any of them" (13). Long provides his own criticism suggesting that "what has been for the last thirty years called 'narrative preaching' has too often devolved into a hodgepodge of sentimental pseudo-art, confused rhetorical strategies, and competing theological epistemologies" (13). Long believes that quality narrative preaching comes from a deep understanding and conviction for proclaiming the gospel and preaching the gospel will require narration. "If we are to be faithful to the biblical testimony, we will not always speak in a narrative voice - humanity does not live by narrative alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God - but finally we are compelled to tell the Story and the stories of the God…most profoundly in the raising of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead" (14).

Long is quite happy to see the end of various kinds of gimmicky narrative preaching. "The giddy season of "short stories for Christ," artsy "I am Lydia, the seller of purple" first-person sermons, and "three stories and a poem" preaching is coming to an end, and good riddance" (14). However, Long believes the time for a new generation of American preachers to rediscover the narrative form is on the horizon. "A chastened, revised, theologically more astute, and biblically engaged form of narrative preaching endures, and will continue to endure" (14).

Research Design Literature

The design for the research of this project is mixed method, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative element stems from the survey that was sent to self-identifying Christian millennials who reside in western Washington state and

provides concrete data of the generalized millennial perspective on preaching. The qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups designed to provide "culturally specific and contextually rich" (Sensing 58) information to flesh out how millennials understand and connect with the weekly sermon. As Tim Sensing notes, "qualitative research systematically seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative research is grounded in the social world of experience and seeks to make sense of lived experience" (57). Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative instruments creates a more robust understanding of the issue at hand. As John Creswell says, "more insight into a problem is to be gained from mixing or integration of the quantitative and qualitative data. This "mixing" or integrating of data, it can be argued, provides a stronger understanding of the problem or question than either by itself" (235).

Each research instrument was carefully chosen and crafted by the researcher for the purpose of analyzing the research questions from multiple angles. Focus groups were utilized because, "through group interaction, data and insights are generated that are related to a particular theme imposed by a researcher and enriched by the group's interactive discussion" (Sensing 120). Semi-structured interviews were used to provide qualitative information with more focus and depth then focus groups would allow because "fewer topics are possible in a group setting versus individual interviews, participants will not be able to explore any topic to the extent they could when being interviewed separately" (Sensing 121). As noted above, a survey was administered to provide a quantitative element for the mixed method approach in addition to gathering data from a larger millennial sample size.

The research conducted in this project was pre-intervention in nature. Typically, "DMin projects are a type of participatory action research that introduces an intervention in order to provide ministerial leadership for the transformation of the organization" (Sensing 58). A pre-intervention project entails researching an issue, in this case, what factors help/prevent self-identifying Christian millennials in Western Washington from understanding and engaging with the weekly sermon, in order to more fully grasp and describe the issue before intervention is implemented. The researcher chose pre-intervention for the purpose of gaining a fuller understanding of the millennial perspective on preaching in order to provide future suggestions for preachers.

Summary of Literature

The majority of the biblical content is in the form of narrative. The bible is in many ways a collection of stories centering around God and God's people and, when considered collectively, the Bible forms one grand narrative that climaxes in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The gospel itself is a story, as the apostle Paul once said, "when I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-2). The story of Jesus—and his crucifixion—is documented in narrative form in the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). The narrative shape of the biblical witness is unequivocally addressed in the famous "road to Emmaus" passage found in Luke 24 where Jesus explains to the disciples how the Old Testament or "Moses and all the prophets" was in fact about him. Theologically speaking, humanity's understanding of God and calling in this world is

shaped by the biblical narrative. Jesus himself taught through stories as an effective and authoritative means for transformative communication.

Today's preachers will note the growing influence of postmodernity in the minds of millennials. As proclaimers of truth, preachers should know that truth claims are under severe scrutiny with the rise of postmodernity. However, philosophers like James K.A. Smith say that Christians, in some sense, should welcome the influence of postmodernity. Smith has stated that the incredulity toward metanarratives in postmodern thought should not abolish the narrative backbone of Christianity but reinforce it. Additionally, the growing skepticism towards truth claims brought on by postmodernity should influence preachers away from strict adherence of propositional preaching or authoritative directives, and toward utilizing narrative preaching to help millennials comprehend and adopt gospel truth. As the work of Jean Twenge et al. suggests, millennials have different understandings of morality, are more individualistic and narcissistic, and overall are more suspicious towards religion.

Narrative preaching could help millennials better connect with sermons. Over the last several years advertisers have been utilizing stories to specifically connect with millennials. Millennials are especially drawn to stories as they spend more time on Netflix and other story-driven platforms. John Teske and other neuroscientists have discovered that narratives help brain retention in addition to helping people find meaning in life. In many ways, the human brain is wired for story and the brain helps humans empathize and identify with characters within a given narrative. Similar findings have been reported in the realm of narrative therapy, which has assisted people in psychological and relational healing.

Preaching experts like Jeffrey Frymire believe that narrative preaching is an especially effective means for communicating the gospel to millennials. The work of Fred Craddock and Eugene Lowry also make a compelling case for the importance of narrative preaching. For Lowry, narrative preaching hinges on utilizing conflict and resolution within the structure of the sermon along with a sermon's movement. This form of preaching could be a powerful weapon in the preacher's arsenal.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

This chapter explains the research methodology or "recipe" utilized in this

project, providing the steps taken in gathering and analyzing the quantitative and

qualitative data. The chapter begins with a brief review of the nature and purpose of the

project along with the stated research questions. The ministry context is described

followed by a detailed description of the participants of the project. A thorough account

of the research instruments is given, and the chapter concludes with the data analysis

process.

Nature and Purpose of the Project

As millennials and young people continue to leave the church at an alarming rate,

it is the duty and responsibly of church leadership to consider all creative and orthodox

approaches to ministering to the next generation. This of course includes prayerfully

reflecting on the weighty task of preaching. A reformation and revitalization of preaching

might not be the sole solution to the youth exodus, but it is a significant component to the

overall conversation.

When young people come to church, like anyone else, they interact with others.

They reside within a physical space, and they participate in the worship service, which

usually includes hearing a sermon. The sermon communicates a significant portion of the

overall message, mission, and identity of the church. Through the sermon, young people

hear what a church believes about God, how a church feels about people, and how God's

word should be applied to life. Thus, church leadership must thoroughly investigate the most effective ways to preach truth in the coming years. The purpose of this research was to identify the ways narrative preaching can help self-identifying Christian millennials in Marysville, Washington better understand and connect with the weekly sermon.

Research Questions

The following three research questions are specifically designed to gather data regarding how millennials relate to preaching and how narrative preaching can help millennials better connect with and understand the weekly sermon.

RQ #1. What about preaching hinders millennials in western Washington from understanding and connecting with the sermon?

To better understand how to preach to millennials, it is important to first establish the ways in which preaching today might need to change. Is there something about preaching that particularly makes millennials want to head for the door? To collect data for this question two focus groups and ten semi-structured interviews were conducted, and a survey was administered. Focus group questions two, four and five were designed to gather criticisms millennials have of preaching today along with semi-structured interview question two. Survey questions six, sixteen, and twenty-two through twenty-seven, gathered the general dislikes and frustrations millennials have toward preaching today.

RQ #2. What about preaching helps millennials in western Washington understand and connect with the sermon?

The purpose of this research question was to learn what millennials like about preaching. How can preachers craft their sermons with millennials in mind? To collect data for this question I conducted a focus group, interviewed millennials through a semi-structured format, and administered a survey. Focus group questions one and three were designed to obtain what millennials value and appreciate about preaching. Questions one and three in the Semi-Structured interviews took inventory of the millennial perspective on how preachers can better serve the next generation. Survey questions three, four, seven, nine, eleven, thirteen through fifteen, seventeen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-nine, thirty-one, and thirty-three gathered information on what millennials find engaging about preaching.

RQ #3. How can Narrative preaching help millennials in western Washington understand and connect with the sermon?

The overall purpose of this Ministry Transformation Project was to investigate the ways narrative preaching can help millennials better connect with and understand the sermon. I needed to ask specific questions regarding the relationship between preaching and story. I conducted semi-structured interviews with millennials to have the opportunity to not only hear from them, but also ask clarifying questions. Questions four through six were designed to learn more about how millennials relate to narrative preaching. Focus group question six also provided space to hear how millennials value the power of narrative. Survey questions one, two, five, eight, ten, twelve, eighteen, twenty-one, thirty-two, and thirty-four also gave quantitative date for narrative preaching for millennials.

Ministry Context

Mountain View Presbyterian Church is located in Marysville, Washington, 35 miles north of Seattle. Marysville is a small city with about 70,000 residents, nestled between the Cascade Mountains and the Puget Sound. The weather is usually mild with lots of grey clouds and rain. Hiking and camping are popular past times. Considered what many call a "bedroom community," many residents commute to Seattle for work, which makes evenings and weekends especially important for families. As is typical with the culture of the Pacific Northwest, most people in Marysville do not attend church. The Pacific Northwest and specifically the city of Seattle is known for being politically and socially liberal. In terms of voting, Marysville leans toward the democratic party but as a "blue color town" there are several conservatives as well.

MTVPC is what many call a "purple church" because it is made of people from all over the political spectrum. Mountain View has a membership of exactly 237 people. The vast majority of the congregation is white (84%), but there is a growing Pakistani population (currently 15%). Compared to many mainline churches, Mountain View is relatively "multi-generational" although millennials only make up approximately 15% of the congregation. As a presbyterian congregation, MTVPC values education and the democratic process. The church is led by elected elders who prayerfully govern the church. The two pastors do most of the preaching.

Participants

Criteria for Selection

Participants were chosen for this study based on the purpose statement and research questions, which stem from the greater problem of millennials leaving the

church at large. This research is designed to gather greater understanding on how our preaching can better connect with millennials. This required collecting information on the values, beliefs, feelings and perspectives millennials actually have toward the practice of preaching.

For the purpose of this research there were three requirements for participation: birthdate between the years 1980 and 1994 (be a millennial), live in Western Washington State (anywhere west of the Cascades), and be a "self-identifying" Christian. It was essential that the participants were not only millennials, but also reside within the unique cultural and social environment of the Pacific Northwest. For the participants to understand the questions being asked, they needed a basic, working knowledge of preaching. As such, all participants chosen were "self-identifying" Christians, although not all of them actively attend church. My first research instrument (survey) was sent to all millennials at MTVPC, sent to other pastors in the Northwest Coast Presbytery to forward to millennials in their respective congregations, and sent to several millennials the researcher knew while working at two Christian University's in the Pacific Northwest. I personally invited the participants for the other two research instruments (focus groups and semi-structured interviews).

Description of Participants

As stated above, participants were born between the years 1980 and 1994, live in Western Washington and are self-identifying Christians. Participants were a mix of men and women from all stations of life, some participants were married with children, and others were single or even divorced. A was a mix of "young" and "old" millennials participated. Some were in their mid-to-late twenties and others were in their thirties. Participants were

mostly white, and college educated. It was also essential to hear from both millennials who actively attend church and those who do not actively attend church.

Ethical Considerations

At the beginning of the research, all participants were given a letter of informed consent (see appendix D) to ensure their thorough understanding of the project. Additionally, all participants were notified that they can quit the study at any time.

The survey gathered quantitative data from anonymous participants, which ensured confidentiality. Privacy protocols were used in the online survey tool, SurveyMonkey. In addition to receiving the letter of informed consent, those who participated in the focus groups and semi-structured interviews, were told that all answers were confidential and only accessible to the researcher. All the research data was stored in a password-protected MacBook Pro and deleted at the completion of the project.

Instrumentation

The researcher used a mixed method approach gathering qualitative and quantitative data from three research instruments: survey, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. All three instruments were designed by the researcher.

The survey, which was composed of thirty-four questions with fixed choices, was selected in order to gather data on a large group of millennials. This instrument provided quantitative data on the millennial perspective on preaching. The survey was administered through SurveyMonkey.

I also conducted three focus groups for the second research instrument. Each focus group consisted of at least five millennials providing feedback on their

understanding of preaching. I asked each focus group was asked the same six questions in order to gather qualitative data.

I chose to use semi-structured interviews for my third research instrument so that I could have the opportunity for dialogue and space to ask clarifying questions. I conducted ten interviews asking the same six questions. These interviews took place at various locations such as coffee shops, my office, or through the online platform, Zoom.

Expert Review

Three expert assessors reviewed and edited the research instruments. Ellen Marmon provided initial feedback. Milton Lowe offered advice, and Bob Drovdahl, professor of ministry at Seattle Pacific University, served as the third expert reviewer.

Reliability & Validity of Project Design

This ministry transformation project centered around the general perspectives that millennials share regarding how they connect and engage with the weekly sermon. Each question asked on the survey, the semi-structured interviews, and the focus groups was categorized to fit within the overarching purpose statement and the three research questions. Research questions one and two address what helps or hinders millennials in engaging and connecting with preaching and research question three focuses on how narrative preaching might help millennials connect and engage with the weekly sermon. The research contained within this project is reliable and valid first because the participants were from the demographic of interest and second because each question asked clearly sought a straightforward answer regarding the millennial perspective on preaching. For example, question one for the focus group was, "what are the

characteristics of a good sermon?" The discussion that followed clearly measured what

millennials like about preaching, or what helps them pay attention.

I carefully chose my three research instruments and they were further reviewed by

experts to ensure accurate data collection and analysis. Each question for the survey,

semi-structured interviews, and focus groups were provided information for one of the

three research questions.

Data Collection

The research design for this project was pre-intervention. The research centered

around a specific but multifaced and complicated problem—the growing trend of

millennials disengaging from the church. The research looked into and addressed one

specific element of this problem—how narrative preaching can better connect with

millennials. As a pre-intervention project, I sought to better understand and analyze the

issue before intervention is implemented. The purpose of the pre-intervention research

was to better grasp the millennial perspective on preaching and offer possible

recommendations for preachers.

I gathered qualitative and quantitative data for a mixed method approach. As John

Creswell notes, "more insight into a problem is to be gained from mixing or integration

of the quantitative and qualitative data" (235). A quantitative survey was administered to

self-identifying Christian millennials in Western Washington state using a Likert scale to

provide what Creswell calls "closed-ended data" (235).

Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups to collect

qualitative data. Denzin and Lincoln state that "qualitative researchers study things in

their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, interpret, phenomena in terms of the

meaning people bring to them" (3). Likewise, Tim Sensing notes that "qualitative research produces culturally specific and contextually rich data critical for the design, evaluation, and ongoing health of institutions like churches" (58). Focus groups "allow respondents to give feedback more freely according to the communication patterns and perspectives unique to their generation (Sensing 76-77). Additionally, semi structured interviews allowed the millennial participants to go into further detail regarding their perspective on preaching. As Sensing says, "fewer topics are possible in a group setting versus individual interviews" (121).

I facilitated two focus groups with five to seven self-identifying Christian millennials asking questions on what helps or hurts their ability to connect with and engage with the weekly sermon. I also conducted ten semi-structured interviews asking similar questions but with an ability to go into further detail. Additionally, the questions asked during the two focus groups and ten semi-structured interviews were designed to collect data on how narrative preaching may help millennials connect and engage with the weekly sermon.

Data Analysis

I took field notes were taken throughout the entire research process, specifically to collect quotations and to note observations of the participants during the focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Additionally, I recorded and transcribed the two focus groups, and analyzed the data to identify repeated words and common themes. I sorted this data was sorted into various categories that I created based on the observed patterns from the research. I examined and arranged the data from the semi-structured interviews in a similar fashion.

I collected the quantitative data through an online survey through the platform SurveyMonkey, which was filled out by eighty-one self-identifying Christian millennials in western Washington state. I collected the data and recorded it onto Microsoft Excel. SurveyMonkey calculated the mean and standard deviation of each survey.

CHAPTER 4

EVIDENCE FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

As millennials continue to leave the church and abandon faith in troublingly high numbers, especially in unchurched areas like the Pacific Northwest, it is essential that Christian leaders evaluate, study, and strategize all possible avenues to better connect with and minister to this lost generation. Preaching is and will continue to hold an indispensable place in the ministry of the church and needs to faithfully speak to the next generation. This project looks at how narrative preaching can help self-identifying Christians in western Washington better connect and engage with the ministry of preaching.

This chapter describes the various participants in this study while providing the relevant demographic information. It then provides the quantitative data from the survey and the qualitative data from the ten semi-structured interviews and two focus groups. This chapter concludes with five major findings from the evidence.

Participants

The participants in this study were self-identifying Christian millennials (born between 1980 and 1994) who live in western Washington. Although all the participants self-identify as Christian, they did not have to actively attend a church to qualify for the study. I thought it was important to hear from millennials who do not currently attend church because the problem being addressed in this project revolved around better understanding why millennials are leaving the church and how preaching can help remedy this issue.

In June of 2021 the survey was sent to 150 millennials and 81 people filled it out. I conducted ten semi-structured interviews starting in July of 2021 and finishing the last interview on November 18th, 2021. Interviews were occurred over coffee or meals. The researcher facilitated two focus groups. The first one was held in-person with seven participants on October 28th, 2021 and the second was over zoom with six participants on November 13th, 2021. See figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 below for the demographic profiles for the participants in the survey, the ten semi-structured interviews and the two focus groups.
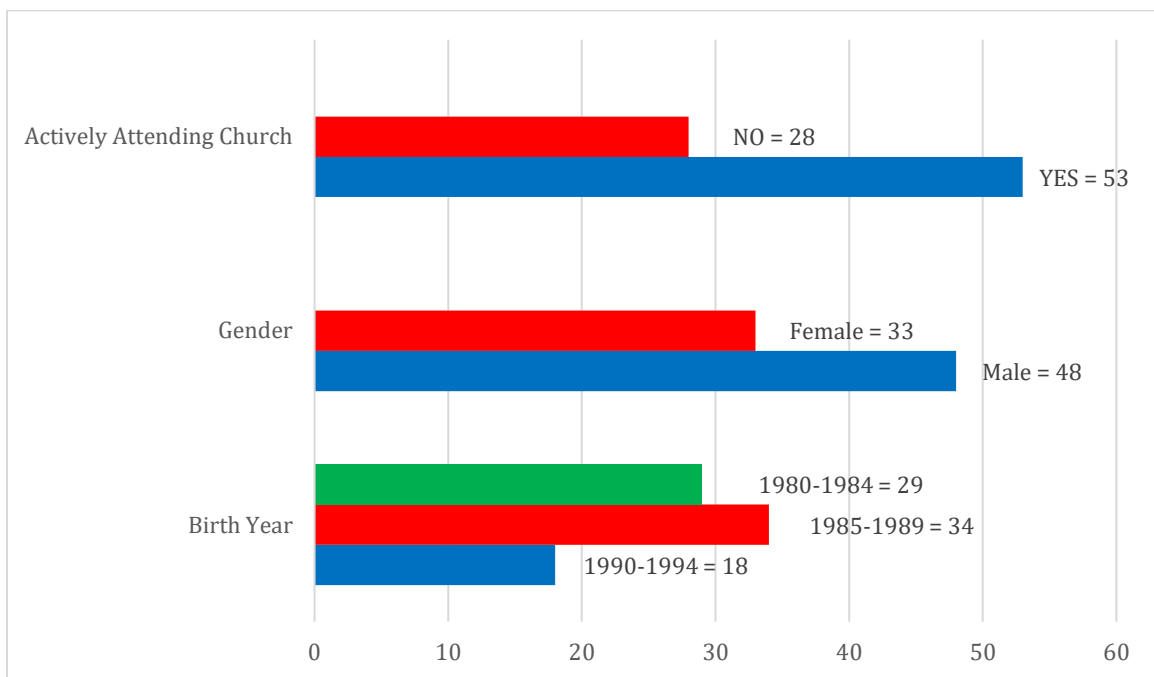
Figure 4.1. Demographics of survey participants (n$_1$=81).

Figure 4.2 Particpants of Semi-Structured Interviews (n_2=10)

Actively Attending Church: Yes = 10

Gender: Female = 4, Male = 6

Birth Year: 1980-1984 = 4, 1985-1989 = 1, 1990-1994 = 5
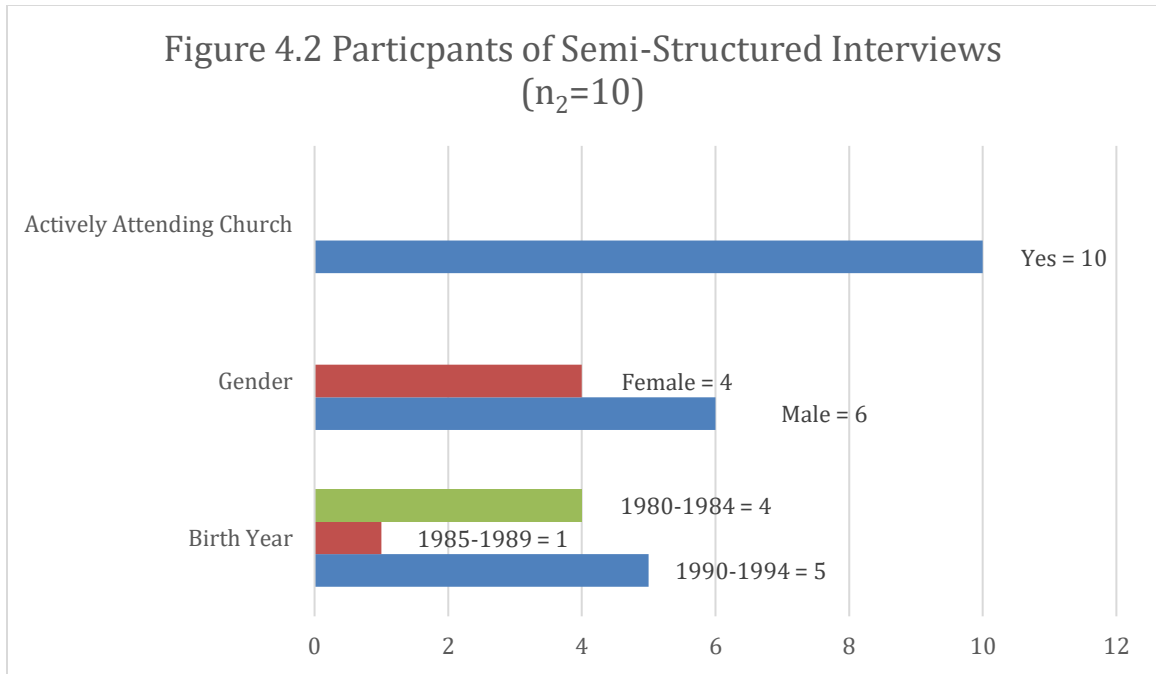
Figure 4.2. Participants of semi-structured interviews (n_2=10).

Figure 4.3 Particpants Of The Two Focus Groups (n_3=13)

Actively Attending Church: Y = 13

Gender: Female = 8, Male = 5

Birth Year: 1980-1984 = 10, 1985-1989 = 2, 1990-1994 = 1
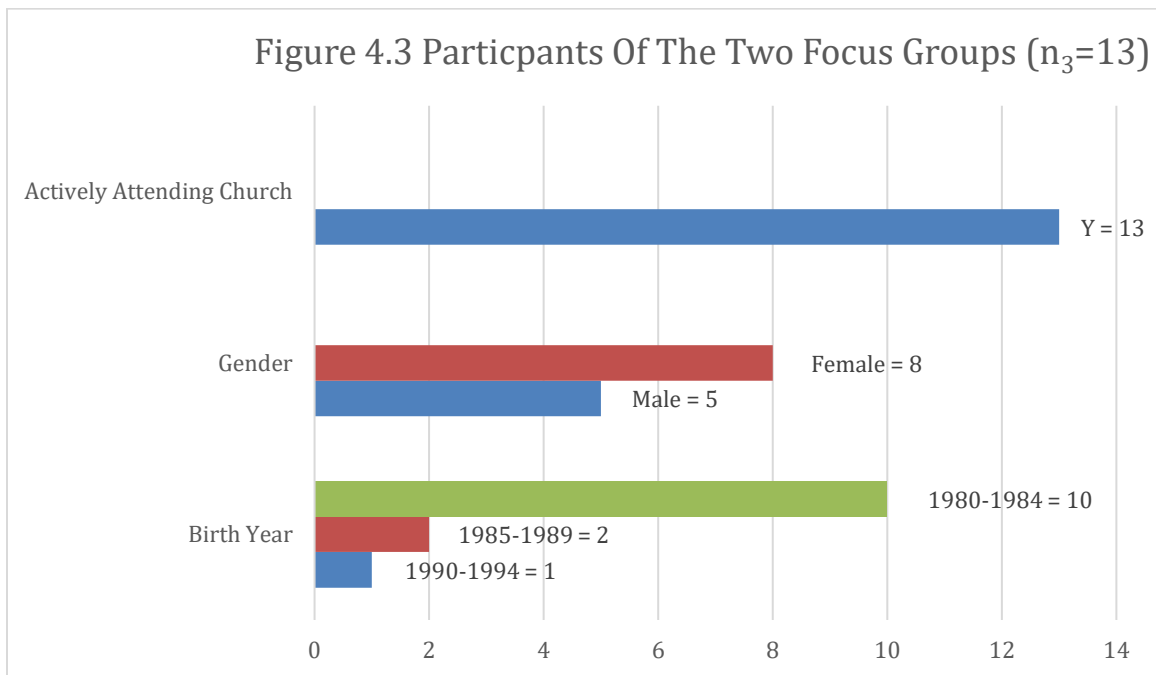
Figure 4.3. Participants of the two focus groups (n_3=13).

Research Question #1: Description of Evidence

What about preaching prevents Christian millennials in western Washington

from understanding and connecting with the sermon?

The survey included ten questions to provide quantitative data regarding the elements of preaching that prevent millennials from understanding and connecting with the sermon. Question 25, which states, "I think preachers should talk more about issues around race and inequality," provided the highest standard deviation of 1.25. The participants clearly felt strongly that sermons should not be boring with 44.3% saying they "strongly agree" and 37.97% saying they "agree." Participants also indicated a desire to see preachers address controversial issues more often with 50.63% marking "agree" and 15.19% saying they "strongly agree."

The question with the highest level of "neutral" or "undecided" responses was question 27, "preachers should take a hard stance on controversial issues," with almost half the participants marking "undecided." Most participants also indicated in question 28 that they think "preachers need to move away from former tones of judgment and condemnation and focus more so on telling the stories of scripture and preaching good news," with 43.03% saying they "agree" and 16.46% saying they "strongly agree." The responses of question 27 and 28 may suggest a general desire to see more humility in the pulpit. See table 4.1 for exact results.

Table 4.1 Factors that prevent millennials from understanding and engaging with the sermon (n₁=81)

Questions	Mean	SD	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
6. A sermon should be like a classroom lecture	2.48	0.95	13.92%	41.77%	27.85%	15.19%	1.27%
16. A sermon should not be boring	4.24	.80	0%	2.53%	15.19%	37.97%	44.3%
22. I think preachers should preach on controversial subjects more often	3.77	0.75	0%	3.8%	30.38%	50.63%	15.19%
23. I would rather the preacher spend more time talking about practical living for today and less time making us familiar with the stories of the bible	2.59	0.89	5.06%	49.37%	30.38%	11.39%	3.8%
24. When thinking about a sermon series, I would rather a preacher go through a book of the bible from beginning to end instead of doing a topical sermon series	3.32	1.04	1.27%	22.78%	35.44%	24.05%	16.46%
25. I think preachers should talk more about issues around race and inequality	3.59	1.25	10.13%	6.33%	26.58%	27.85%	29.11%
26. I think preachers should talk more about issues around gender and sexuality	3.72	0.94	0%	12.66%	24.05%	41.77%	21.52%
27. Preachers should take a hard stance on controversial issues	2.92	0.85	2.53%	27.85%	49.37%	15.19%	5.06%
28. Preachers need to move away from former tones of judgment and condemnation and focus more so on telling the stories of scripture and preaching "good news"	3.61	0.97	3.8%	7.59%	29.11%	43.04%	16.46%
30. I find PowerPoint and other media distracting in sermons	2.80	0.91	3.8%	29.24%	32.91%	21.52%	2.53%

The ten semi-structured interviews included one direct question to help identify the aspects of preaching that prevent millennials from engaging and understanding the weekly sermon. Question 2 simply asked, "what makes you disengage from a sermon." Four participants talked about poor presentation. DW said "I check-out when a sermon is

simply read word for word." BV and TB both commented on how uncomfortable it is when a preacher is overly nervous or "too tied to his notes." Three participants said they don't like it when a sermon "feels like a history lesson." Two participants said they hate overly repetitive sermons or sermons that lack depth. Two participants stated that they don't appreciate sermons that are overtly political. Three participants indicated that they want a preacher who is well-researched and clearly prepared. BV said, "if a preacher says something clearly wrong or heretical, I immediately lose trust and check-out." AT said he doesn't "want cheap tricks or information found on Wikipedia. Preach the real meat of scripture."

The two focus groups asked three questions on what makes millennials disengage from a sermon. Question 2 asked, "what are the characteristics of a bad sermon?" In focus group 1, participants spoke at length about presentation and length. KH, JJ and AJ all expressed frustration with sermons that feel too long or too repetitive. JJ said, "don't make me feel stupid." AJ said, "don't try and make a 15-minute sermon 30 minutes." Focus group 1 also expressed frustration around preachers who seem inauthentic or "too polished." BJ said that if a pastor seems "too put-together or unrelatable than I don't want to listen." KH said "I can tell if a preacher is being fake or is manufacturing emotion. Just be real." AJ agreed, "I'm not interested in a performance, make it feel like a conversation."

In focus group 2, EM immediately spoke up saying "sermons that are overly judgmental or don't do a good job considering other points of view are problematic." Multiple participants nodded in agreement when EM mentioned "overly judgmental." AS said in agreement, "judgmental and condescending or when sermons aren't clearly

tailored for everyone." MC continued on a similar theme saying, "I find it frustrating when a preacher shows a lack of empathy or understanding to the human condition. Don't stand up there and just tell me to stop doing something without empathy." MG added, "and I don't appreciate a preacher who shouts or yells at me." Multiple participants said they don't want to be guilted into something. Participants in focus group 2 also said they don't like it when preachers preach too long. MC added that he doesn't appreciate overly political sermons or when "non-core truths, non-biblical truths, are being pushed on me."

The second question designed to identify what prevents millennials from understanding and engaging in preaching was question 4, "how does preaching need to improve to meet the needs of your generation?" Both focus groups stressed the importance of relevance and cultural engagement. EM, from focus group 2, said, "some preachers are too shy about talking about cultural issues. Don't be afraid to engage in hard topics." MC agreed but added, "pull scripture into the conversation and allow it to speak to the counter-cultural ways of God." BJ, from focus group 1, said, "I think it's so important to weigh-in on cultural issues. You don't even need to come down on either side of an issue but be willing to thoughtfully engage." KJ agreed and said, "if you ignore an issue that we are all already thinking about then you are taking a stand in a way."

The third question to help detect millennial frustrations with preaching was question 5, "Do you think there is something about preaching that is contributing to millennials leaving the church? If so, what?" Both focus groups highlighted the character flaws of preachers and the hypocrisy in the church. Multiple participants talked about the misuse of power in church leadership. SG, from focus group 1, said, "you see and hear

about a lot of scandals with church leadership. When a pastor does something terrible people will often leave the church for good." EM, from focus group 2, said, "it's the way pastors act after the sermon that we really care about." AS agreed, and said, "we want to see you model the faith in your own life. There seems to be a lack of authenticity in church leadership." MC, from focus group 2, said another issue is a lack of awareness and what's going on in people's lives. He said, "we don't want a pastor who is out of touch." RC agreed and said, "we want to feel connected to our pastor and sense that he really cares about us."

Research Question #2: Description of Evidence

What about preaching helps millennials in western Washington understand and connect with the sermon?

The survey included 12 Likert scale questions and 2 multiple choice questions to help identify the elements of preaching that help millennials understand and connect with preaching. The question with the highest standard deviation was question 20, "I prefer a preacher who gives straightforward moral and theological absolutes instead of a preacher who embraces mystery and leaves some questions unanswered." The question with the highest mean, was question 29, "preachers need to be willing to talk about sin." This reveals that most of the participants believe preachers need to address sin. Notably, millennials seem to connect with modern day stories and real-life examples, as question 15 indicates. Additionally, the results of question 7 clearly suggest that millennials want preachers who are willing to engage in weighty and controversial topics. See table 4.2 for exact results.

Table 4.2 Factors that help millennials understand and engage with the sermon ($n_1= 81$)

Questions	Mean	SD	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
3. When hearing a sermon, I want to be told what a sermon means	3.92	0.96	2.53%	5.59%	12.66%	49.37%	27.85%
4. I would rather draw my own conclusion rather than given an answer	2.99	0.82	1.27%	27.85%	44.3%	24.05%	2.53%
7. I like it when a preacher talks about weighty or even controversial topics	4.22	0.65	0%	2.53%	5.06%	60.76%	31.65%
9. I love it when a preacher uses humor	4.38	0.81	0%	3.8%	11.39%	37.97%	46.84%
11. I find it easier to pay attention in a sermon if there is an outline or fill-in-the-blank	2.44	0.94	11.39%	51.9%	18.99%	16.46%	1.27%
13. I pay more attention throughout the sermon if a preacher begins with an exciting story or evocative question	3.96	0.82	1.27%	3.8%	16.46%	54.43%	24.05%
14. When listening to a sermon it's important for me to hear how the bible passage relates to my life	3.8	0.85	0%	8.86%	21.52%	50.63%	18.99%
15. When I listen to a sermon, modern day stories and real-life examples help me to connect with and understand the sermon	3.97	0.80	0%	5.6%	17.72%	51.9%	25.32%
17. I like it when preachers use PowerPoint of other media in their sermons	2.91	0.87	5.06%	24.05%	49.37%	17.72%	3.8%
19. When I listen to a sermon, I care more about sound, orthodox doctrine more than engaging storytelling	3.52	1.13	3.8%	18.99%	20.25%	35.44%	21.52%
20. I prefer a preacher who gives straightforward moral and theological absolutes instead of a preacher who embraces mystery and leaves some questions unanswered	2.56	1.24	22.78%	31.65%	21.52%	15.19%	8.86%

The two multiple choice questions from the survey on what helps millennials connect with and understand the sermon were questions thirty-one and thirty-three. Question thirty-one indicated that a higher percentage of millennials thought that learning the stories of scripture was of greater importance than listening to practical teaching, hearing about issues related to social justice, and listening to non-judgmental preaching. Question thirty-three indicated that a higher percentage of millennials thought that hearing the gospel and good news of God's love was more important than receiving clear teaching that is systemically presented, being challenged to make a personal change or issues around race, climate change, immigration, and sexuality. See figure 4.4 and 4.5 for specific results.

When it comes to preaching, which of the following is most important to you (pick one)

- Receiving simple, practical teaching that I can apply to my daily life 31.65%
- Becoming better acquainted with the stories of the Bible and their possible meaning 58.23%
- Talking about issues related to social justice 7.59%
- Hearing sermons that are always accepting, kind, and non-judgmental 2.53%

Figure 4.4. Survey question 31.

When it comes to preaching, which of the following is
MOST important? (pick one)

- Clear teaching that is systemactically presented 15.19%
- Hearing the gospel and the good news of God's love 56.96%
- Being challenges to make a change in my life 21.52%
- Discussion about important issues such as race, climate change, immigration, and sexuality 6.33%
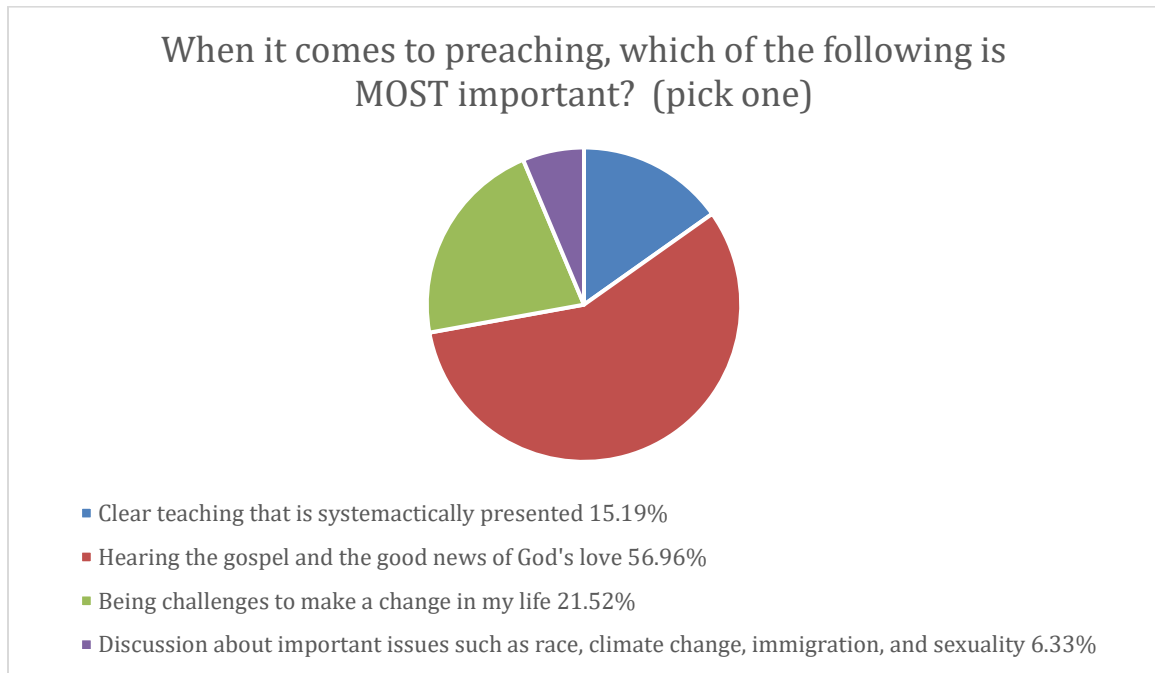
Figure 4.5. Survey question 33.

The ten semi-structured interviews featured two questions identifying the aspects

of preaching that help millennials better understand and connect with the sermon. The

first question was "what makes a sermon engaging for you?" Four participants talked

about the sermon being relatable or relevant. RF said, "the sermon needs to something I

can connect with on a personal level." AK said, "it has to apply to my life; it has to be

something that I clearly care about." Another prominent theme that arose was around the

importance of the sermon being intellectually engaging. Four participants highlighted

their desire to see preachers bring intellectual depth to preaching. JK said the sermon

"should really get you thinking. I also want a preacher who is clearly well-researched.

Show facts, cite sources and use the original languages." AS and AT both expressed a

desire to hear more about the historical context of the Bible. CY said "theological depth

is very important to me. I want to learn and trust that the preacher knows what he is talking about." AT said bluntly, "feed us meat."

The most prominent theme discussed in the semi-structured interviews was around storytelling. Five out of the ten participants emphasized the effectiveness of storytelling for engagement and understanding. RF said, "I have a short attention span and stories help me pay attention. They are so important, especially when the sermon starts with a story. I want to hear relatable stories and stories I can see myself in." Two participants noted that it's not just biblical stories that are important, but modern-day stories that help make the sermon relevant. AS said, "I want to hear modern-day examples of how a biblical truth has come to life." Additionally, four participants highlighted the importance of the Bible in preaching. CY said, "tell us the story of the Bible" and AS said "a good sermon retells the biblical story in a new light." DW said "good preaching is always biblically based."

Another important theme from the first question revolved around emotional authenticity. Four participants specifically mentioned emotion as a means for connection with the sermon. DW said, "a good sermon should touch on a wide range of emotions. It's not all serious and it's not all a comedy show." BV said, "good preaching has emotional depth. It connects with the heart." AT stressed the importance of emotions saying, "weep with those who weep and don't shy away from suffering. I've been at churches where we don't talk about pain and suffering, and it feels inauthentic to me."

The second question on what helps millennials connect with the sermon was "how do you think sermons could better connect with and engage your generation?" The themes discussed in question two were very similar to question one. Four of the partisans

discussed relance and relatability. DW said, "the sermon needs to speak to things that millennials care about." CY said, "we want application, and we want it to be relatable." Three participants also highlighted the importance of intellectual depth. AK said, "millennials value research and knowledge. A preacher needs to demonstrate they know what they are talking about, and that they know the Bible text well." JK said, "we want to be challenged. Don't tell us what to think but challenge us to think." The most discussed theme in question two was authenticity and integrity from the preacher. AT said, "there seems to be a growing distrust of religion and authority. Whiffs of hypocrisy will turn my generation away quickly." Three participants independently noted that millennials are skeptical, and the church is seen as hypocritical. "We can spot a fake and we know BS when we see it," said AK. JK said "we want honesty, humility and authenticity from our preachers."

The two focus groups had two questions designed to gather data on what helps millennials better understand and engage with preaching. The first question was "what are the characteristics of a good sermon." Both focus groups began by talking about the importance of the Bible. AJ, from FG1, said, "it needs to be from the Bible. Not just topical but really look into the passage." AM agreed and added, "it needs to be biblically based for it to be a good sermon." AK, from FG2, said, "a good sermon is biblical. You need to reference the Bible." Other group members noticeably nodded in agreement. MG said, "there needs to be a mix of Bible stories and modern-day stories to help me connect with it."

Another theme that came up in both groups was the importance of intellectual engagement. SJ, from FG1, said, "it needs to be scriptural, but I also want to know my

pastor is well-read. It needs to be intellectually stimulating." JJ agreed and added, "I want

a preacher who makes me think. Help me to see a passage or story from a new

perspective." SM, from FG2, said, "it's important that you bring in the perspective of

experts. I want to know the preacher is doing his or her research." AS, from FG2, said,

"hearing more about the historical and social context of scripture is very important to

me." Additionally, both focus groups discussed the desire for sermons to be relevant. BJ,

from FG1, said, "I want to hear personal application in the sermon. It needs to challenge

me in my life." TA, from FG1, said in agreement, "when I listen to a sermon, I am

always asking myself how it applies to me. How can this sermon help me grow? What do

I need to work on?" TA later added, "the sermon also needs to address current issues and

events. Don't be afraid to talk about what's going on in the world but preach the truth."

MG, from FG2, also stressed the importance of relevance saying, "I want clear

application. I want to know what a passage means and how it applies to my life." AK

spoke after MG and said, "I also want a call to action. I want to be challenged."

  The last theme that came out in both focus groups revolved around authenticity

from the preacher. AM, from FG1, said. "I want to see the personal factor. I want to

understand how the sermon impacts the preacher's life." KJ agreed and said, "I want the

personal touch from the pastor too. How does the sermon impact them?" BJ added, "and

emotion is important too. Passion. I want to see the preacher really care about what he is

preaching about." RC, from FG2, said, "vulnerability and authenticity from the preacher

is very important. I also want to know that the preacher is not above everyone else but is

also human and struggles. Be humble and honest."

The second question on what helps millennials engage and understand the sermon was "think about a sermon that had a positive spiritual impact on you, what was it about that sermon that impacted you?" Participants from focus group 1 discussed specific sermons that "brought the Bible to life" or provided a "new perspective" on a passage. BJ also emphasized the importance of wrestling with challenging topics when he brought up a sermon he heard on homosexuality. Focus group 2 talked about sermons that helped them connect with the stories and characters of the Bible. MC said, "it really helps me connect with a passage and bring the Bible to life in the day to day when scripture is told with a story from real life. It helps me apply the Bible to my own life." Additionally, FG2 also talked about the importance of intellectual engagement. EM brought up a sermon she heard from her former pastor, "I loved it when he quoted CS Lewis and other scholars." AS talked about a sermon she heard where the pastor gave historical and social context, "it brought a new understanding to the prodigal son," she said.

Research Question #3: Description of Evidence

How can Narrative preaching help millennials in western Washington understand and connect with the sermon?

The survey included eight Likert scale questions and two multiple choice questions designed to help identify how narrative preaching can help millennials better understand and connect with preaching. The question with the highest mean was question 12, "I appreciate it when a preacher helps me see a biblical story in a new light." The question with the highest standard deviation was question 8, "I'm comfortable with a level of ambiguity and mystery when hearing a sermon." Question 1 provided the highest percentage answer in the affirmative (both agree and strongly agree). A total of 92.4% of

participants indicated that they either agree or strongly agree with Question 1 that said, "I believe preaching should make us more familiar with the stories of the Bible." See table 4.3 for exact results.

Table 4.3 How narrative preaching can help millennials connect with and understand the sermon (n₁=81)

Questions	Mean	SD	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.I believe preaching should make us more familiar with the stories of the Bible	4.33	0.94	5.06%	0%	2.53%	41.77%	50.63%
2. I would rather spend my free time reading a novel or watching a show/movie instead of listening to a speech or lecture	3.34	1.05	5.06%	15.19%	34.18%	31.65%	13.92%
5. I enjoy an element of surprise or suspense when listening to a sermon	3.82	0.82	0%	7.59%	21.52%	51.90%	18.99%
8. I'm comfortable with a level of ambiguity and mystery when hearing a sermon	3.75	1.13	2.53%	17.72%	11.39%	39.24%	29.11%
10. I would rather explore a biblical narrative in depth instead of hearing a 3-point sermon	3.90	0.94	0%	8.86%	22.78%	37.97%	20.38%
12. I appreciate when a preacher helps me see a biblical story in a new light	4.38	0.64	0%	1.27%	5.06%	48.1%	45.57%
18. It's important for preacher to be good storytellers	4.23	0.67	0%	0%	13.92%	49.37%	36.71%
21. When I think about my own Bible knowledge, I am more familiar with the stories found in scripture than I am with Old Testament Law (Leviticus, Deuteronomy, etc.) or poetry (Psalms, Proverbs, etc.)	3.37	1.01	2.53%	22.78%	18.99%	46.84%	8.86%

The two multiple choice questions from the survey that were designed to provide qualitative data on how narrative preaching might help millennials connect with and understand the sermon were questions 32 and 34. Question 32 indicates that the highest percentage of millennial participants overwhelmingly believe preaching should be "an invitation to learn about and live into God's redemptive story" more so than a politically charged call to action, filled with interesting facts and statistics, or a presentation on good Christian living. Question 35 indicated that the highest percentage of millennial participants want practical, clear, and direct preaching.

32. I believe preaching should:

- Be a politically charged "call to action" 1.27%
- Be filled with interesting facts, quotes and statistics 0%
- A presentation on good Christian living 2.53%
- An invitation to learn about and live into God's redemptive story 96.2%
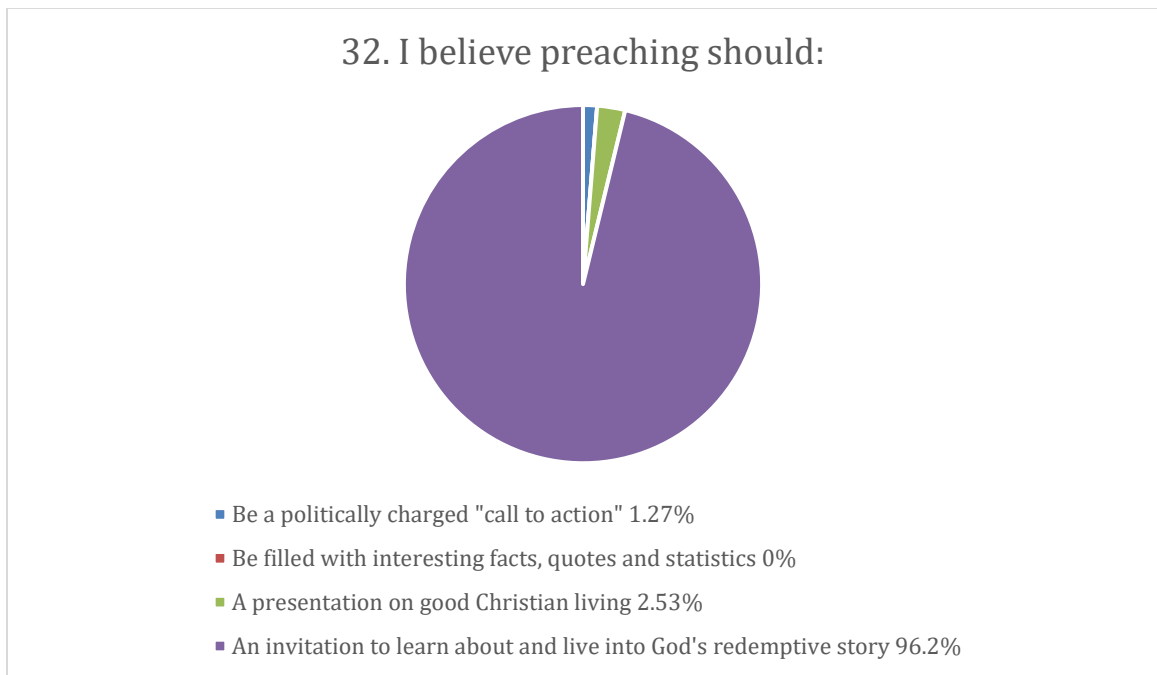
Figure 4.6. Multiple choice survey question 32.

34. Please select three words that best describe your favorite kind of preaching:

- Mystery, Suspense, Story 28.21% ■ Practical, Clear, Direct 53.21%
- New, Media, Technolgical 0% ■ Justice, Action, Change 17.95%
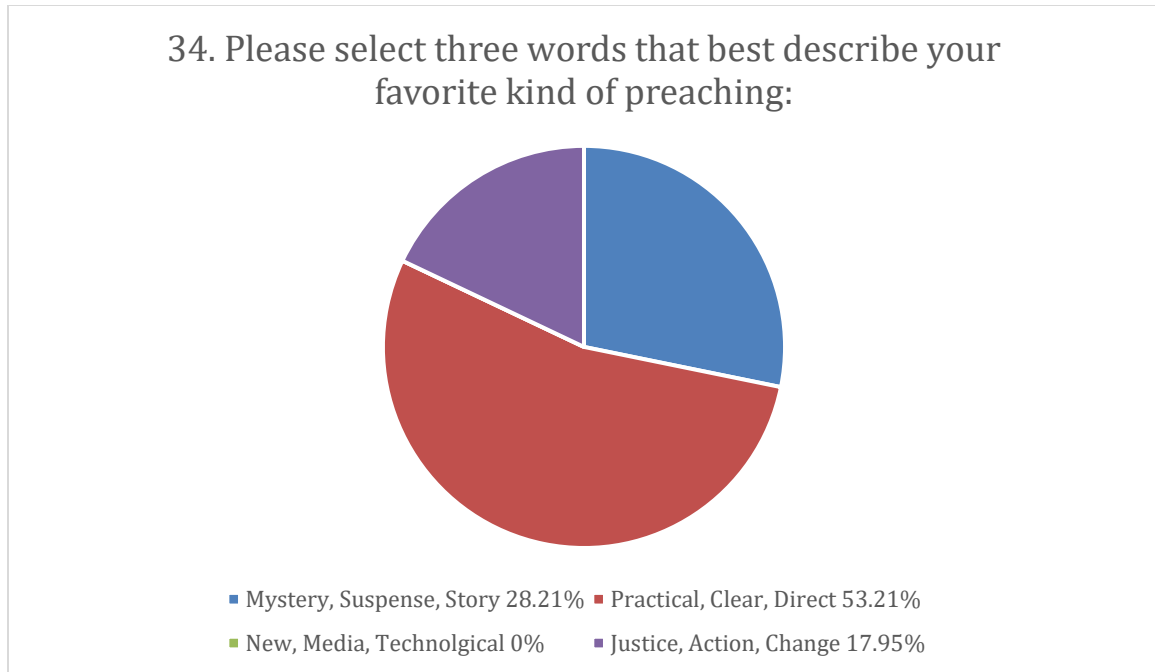
Figure 4.7. Multiple choice survey question 34.

The ten semi-structured interviews included three questions to help provide qualitative data on how narrative preaching can help millennials better engage with and understand preaching. The first question was question 4, "would you rather be directly told right from wrong or hear a story that illustrates right from wrong? Why?" Six of the participants said they would rather hear a story and four of the participants said they would appreciate both. No one indicated that they would prefer being directly told right from wrong instead of hearing a story. DW said, "we are a story generation. We grew up on stories and stories shape our moral compass." TB said, "stories feel less like finger pointing." AS said, "stories are the humbler approach to sharing right from wrong. They create a sense of empathy." CY said that stories "help us understand the why behind right from wrong." The participants who indicated the desire to hear both expressed concern with being overly ambiguous if only stories are used to convey right from wrong. JK

said, "there is danger in leaving things too open ended, there needs to be clarity and balance." BV also said he needs both, but it is more effective when the story comes before the clear explanation.

The second question designed to provide information on the importance of narrative was question 5, "would you rather hear a story or a lecture? Why?" Nine out of ten participants said they would rather hear a story instead of a lecture. AK, the one participant who said she would rather hear a lecture, did say that "great lectures have elements of story." Most of the participants indicated they prefer stories because they are more engaging, less boring, and more memorable. CY said that "stories can connect with the brain and the heart." RF said, "I don't want to feel like I'm back at school or at work. I want to be captivating and great stories do that."

The third and final question from the semi-structured interviews that focused on narrative and preaching was question 6, "what makes a good story? Do you think this should be applied to preaching?" Numerous themes came up on quality storytelling. Multiple participants discussed the importance of conflict, suspense, and character development. AS, BK, and DW said that great stories effect your emotions. AS said, "stories should give you empathy for the characters and make you feel something real and powerful." RF and TB talked about the importance of humor in great storytelling. AS, BV and BK all talked about the importance of transformation and redemption in great storytelling. BK said, "good stories produce life and hope and so should good sermons." BV said, "characters change through the conflict of a great story, but a great story will also challenge and change the listener." AK said, "great stories explore the depth of human experience and great preachers do the same. Preachers should know their

congregation, know their struggles and speak to the human experience." AS said, "a great

story will challenge how you see the world, how you think. A great sermon should do the

same." Multiple participants talked about how great sermons are like great stories in that

they are captivating and hold your attention. BV said,

> "You don't look at your watch when you're hearing a great story. And you
> shouldn't be looking at your watch when you're hearing a great sermon. You lose
> yourself in a great story and you should lose yourself a little bit in a great sermon.
> You want to see yourself in the middle of all it. I think the elements of great
> storytelling should always be applied to preaching: great characters, conflict,
> resolution, and transformation."

All the participants said there is clear overlap between great storytelling and great

preaching. CY said, "the elements of great storytelling must be applied to preaching." JK

said, "a good story is put together well. It moves and flows in a way that allows you to

follow and pay attention. A great story will engage you and so will a great sermon." JK

and AT talked about how great storytelling requires skill and practice. AT said, "a great

story is made with complexity and intentionality, and it should be the same with

preaching."

The two focus groups included one question on the connection between

storytelling and preaching, "what are the elements of a great story? How can that be

applied to preaching?" Both groups talked about the elements of suspense and conflict in

great storytelling. MG, from FG2 said, "a great story includes conflict and it's

unpredictable; there's a little bit of surprise and a twist." JJ, from FG1, compared great

storytelling to a magic trick, "there is an ah-ha moment where something happens that

was unexpected." KJ, from FG1, said, "with a good story there should be an element of

not knowing, suspense." Both groups also talked about the importance of emotion in

great storytelling and great preaching. RC, from FG2, said, "a great story and a great sermon should touch on a wide range of emotions; sad, happy, fear, joy." EM and AK agreed with RC. EM said, "it doesn't always have to be a happy ending" and AK said, "preaching and stories should deal with real life issues."

Another theme that was discussed by both groups was character development. AM, from FG1 said, "a good story has character development with interesting and relatable characters." AS, from FG2, said, "I want to see a character be challenged and grow. The character has a new insight which is shared with the audience." Relevance was also important to good story telling and preaching for the focus groups. AK, from FG2, said, "I want to see myself in the story." JJ, from FG1, said, "a good story or a good sermon is applicable. You can relate to it." Both groups admittingly agreed that the elements of great storytelling must be applied to preaching. AM, from FG1, said, "great storytelling has to be applied to preaching. There is so much overlap." MG, from FG2, said, "a good story and a good sermon should challenge you. Both should make you wrestle with grace and truth."

Summary of Major Findings

The data analysis and research tools yielded several significant findings on how preachers can better engage with and connect with millennials and the ways in which narrative preaching specifically can help millennials connect with the sermon. These major findings will be further discussed in chapter 5.

1) Millennials connect with stories and appreciate the characteristics of great storytelling when listening to sermons.

2) Millennials want relevant preaching that speaks to the realities of their lives and the issues they care about.

3) Millennials value education and expertise and expect preachers to be well-informed and intellectually engaging.

4) Millennials are suspicious of authority figures and want preachers who preach with humility and live with integrity.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING REPORT FOR THE PROJECT

Overview of the Chapter

As young people continue to leave the church in unprecedented numbers, this

research project explored how preaching needs to improve to help millennials better

connect with and understand the weekly sermon. The research investigated the elements

of preaching that prevent millennials from connecting with and understanding the sermon

as well as the elements of preaching that help millennials connect with and understand

the sermon. Additionally, I examined the ways narrative preaching can assist preachers in

better connecting with and engaging millennials.

This chapter highlights four key findings from this research project and how they

correspond to personal observations, the literature survey (chapter 2), and the biblical

framework of the project. Ministry implications for the findings are then discussed

followed by limitations of the research study, unexpected observations, and

recommendations for further study are identified.

Major Findings

Millennials connect with stories and appreciate the characteristics of great

storytelling when listening to sermons

As a millennial, I have always loved storytelling, whether it is from film, books,

or oral stories. I see a similar love for stories from the vast majority of my generation. We

tell stories to each other, we suggest shows and movies to one another, and we find

common ground through stories. In college, we spent many evenings gathered together

telling "life stories." The stories we tell about ourselves help others understand who we

are and empathize with us. Additionally, as a preacher, I sense a greater level of connection with the congregation in the narrative portions of my sermons. I have noticed that people are often more likely to remember the stories from a sermon more than any propositional statement. A great story has the power to leave a lasting imprint on the mind and heart of the hearer.

During my research with millennials, I observed a deep appreciation for stories and a desire for great storytelling within preaching. Millennials overwhelmingly saw storytelling as a powerful tool for proclaiming truth and forming morality. They appreciated the humble approach storytelling brings in persuasion. In the interviews and focus groups, millennials talked about how storytelling engages them on an emotional level while challenging them to think critically. They saw storytelling as a means for creating and maintaining interest in the sermon. Millennials also indicated that they think preachers should be good storytellers. Additionally, the millennials who participated in this study, emphasized that preaching should help make the congregation more familiar with the stories found in scripture. This suggests that millennials are not only interested modern day stories and illustrations but want to see biblical stories come to life in preaching. Interestingly, every millennial who participated in a focus group or semi-structured interview expressed clear affirmation that preaching must include the characteristics of great storytelling.

The literature review supports the use of narrative preaching for connecting with and engaging millennials. Lisa Cron and others highlighted how the brain is hardwired to respond to story. Extensive research in the field neuroscience indicates the dramatic impact stories have on the brain. Chip Heath and Dan Heath noted how stories leave a

lasting impression with memory. Annette Simmons discussed how powerful stories can influence others by circumventing the traditional authority figure by allowing the hearers to draw similar conclusions. This thinking is especially interesting considering the suspicion millennials have toward authority figures. David Mills and Trevor Wheelwright both make a compelling case regarding how millennials are especially interested in stories based on current marketing trends and the shocking amount of time millennials spend watching stories through online streaming services such as Netflix. Jeff Cloeter noted how the church must do better at incorporating storytelling in ministry if pastors want to connect with millennials.

Experts in homiletics also emphasize the power of narrative preaching. Steven Shuster and Jeffrey Frymire are both critical of the dated forms of propositional preaching, such as the traditional "3-point sermon." Frymire noted how research indicated that "postmoderns" learn better through narrative. Fred Craddock, Bryan Chapell, and other prominent preachers, talk about the importance of movement in preaching, like going on a journey. A destination that needs to be reached like arriving at the conclusion of a story. Eugene Lowry is emphatic about preaching sharing the characteristics of storytelling. Stories have conflict and resolution and so should sermons.

The biblical and theological framework for this project highlighted the narrative nature of Christianity. The Bible, although composed of several books and letters of varying genre's, comes to us as a narrative. There is a beginning, middle and end. There is suspense, drama, conflict, and resolution with compelling characters. Most notably, Jesus himself was a storyteller. The primary means of how he conveyed truth was through the telling of parables. When we communicate the gospel, we often tell the story

of Jesus. We talk about his life, his ministry, the stories of how he healed people, calmed

storms, walked on a water, confronted corrupt religious authorities, and we tell the story

of his passion. We talk about how he died on a cross for the sins of humanity and how he

defeated evil and death through his resurrection. As the apostle Paul once told the

Corinthian church, "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming

the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing

among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:1-2). Paul told the

simple story of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the same story that has been told

again and again.

Millennials want relevant preaching that speaks to the realities of their lives and the

issues they care about

Many of the millennials I know are hardworking, educated, and desire to succeed

according to their standards. They are focused on advancing themselves in their

respective careers while maintaining healthy families. They are painfully aware of the

shortcomings they perceive in their parents, such as high divorce rates, a seeming lack of

concern for the environment, and "old-fashioned" views on marriage or politics. Many of

the millennials who attend church are deeply interested in community. I have observed a

willingness from millennials to join community groups because they see it as a benefit to

their lives.

In my research, the word that came up most during the semi-structured interviews

and focus groups was "relevant." Millennials want preaching to be relevant to their lives.

As educated and hardworking individuals, they are constantly looking for ways to

improve and better themselves. Many participants talked about the importance of being

able to apply what they are hearing in the sermon to their lives. When they hear stories in the sermon, they want to be able to see themselves in the story. Additionally, many participants talked about wanting preachers to be willing to discuss hard or even controversial topics. They want a biblical framework to engage in the issues of the day. They may not want sermons to be overtly political, or have an apparent "agenda," as many of them put it, but they do not want the issues they care about to be ignored.

The literature review introduced several real-life issues millennials are facing, which provides the potential reasoning for their desire to have relevant and practical preaching. For example, Malcolm Harris reports the increase of college tuition and the implications this has had on millennials. Millennials are the most educated generation in history, but they are also the most in debt. In addition to education costs, housing and living costs are more expensive than they were for the previous generation. Millennials have to work harder. Harris also noted that millennials think they will only get married once and believe they have the capacity to be great. Preaching that is relevant to their lives and goals would obviously be more engaging for them. Travis Stewart reported that millennials are more stressed and isolated than previous generations. Jean Twenge observes how millennials are also more narcissistic and individualistic than previous generations. As such, preaching that is relevant to them and the issues they care about is of greater importance to them.

The biblical and theological framework for this study explores the reality of God's story and how all people are invited to live into his story. The new covenant Christ inaugurated at the last supper, which is emphasized in the story of the Emmaus encounter in Luke 24, is a covenant that applies to us. Whenever we drink the cup and eat the bread

at communion, we participate in this grand story. Additionally, we are called by Christ to go into the world and make disciples of all nations. In other words, we are continuing the story of God. As Joel Green says, a door has been opened "to the adventure of living in this narrative" (28). Narrative preaching is both biblical and personally relevant because it is an invitation to connect the whole of our lives to the story of God.

Millennials value education and expertise and expect preachers to be well-informed and intellectually engaging

Most of the millennials I know have at least some education beyond high school. Many millennials are politically informed and ready to engage in a wide range of topics and discussions. When it comes to preaching and theology, I have noticed that millennials are opinionated and eager to share their thoughts. During my research it became evident that millennials want to be challenged to think. They want to see old stories in a new light. They want to hear from experts, and they want the preacher to be well-read. As educated people, they can detect when a preacher is ill-informed. If they hear something that does not sound accurate, they can google it for themselves. Millennials want sermons to be well-crafted and expect excellence. Part of this expectation comes with the advent of social media and online platforms, where celebrity pastors and excellent preaching are readily available. In many ways, local preachers are being compared to the widely viewed internet preachers.

The literature review highlights the educational level of millennials. Rainer and Rainer along with Twenge and Donnelly note that millennials are the most educated generation in history. Rainer and Rainer say that four out of every five older millennials received an education beyond high school (Loc. 539). As an educated demographic,

Hershatter and Epstein said that millennials want to share their thoughts, collaborate, and express their opinions. Rachel Evans stressed that millennials want greater substance in their faith, and they do not want easy, predetermined answers. Gracy Olmstead sees a trend in young people joining liturgical denominations because they provide connection to the tradition of the past and spiritual depth. Millennials clearly reject cliché answers and sloppy preaching.

The biblical and theological framework for this study placed special emphasis on informed storytelling. As Jesus walked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, he began to teach them. He said, "'Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:25-26). Jesus is saying that his suffering as the Messiah was prophesied by the Old Testament. Indeed, Jesus "opened" the scriptures to the two disciples (v. 24:32). Jesus is clearly the expert storyteller, and the disciples will later be commissioned to go forth and share his story. As Jesus tells the disciples in Acts 1:8, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The disciples were the first preachers, and their witness revolved around telling Jesus' story. Peter displays excellent and informed storytelling in Acts 2, when he draws from Psalm 18 and connects it with the story of Jesus.

Millennials are suspicious of authority figures and want preachers who preach with humility and live with integrity

One does not have to look too closely at the research to know that millennials are suspicious of authority figures and more skeptical of religion than previous generations. I

have had numerous conversations with millennials who are very critical of church and clergy. In my private conversations with young people, they often bring up examples of scandal, such as the pedophile crisis in the Catholic church or stories of moral failures with protestant pastors. Young people often bring up how the church in general is hypocritical and judgmental. It makes sense that preachers are often depicted negatively in media and film.

As I conducted semi-structured interviews and facilitated focus groups, it became apparent that although the participants in this study were not overly skeptical of the church, they believe millennials are generally very critical of organized religion. Participants emphasized the importance of Christian character and humility for preachers. They want to see pastors who practice what they preach. They do not expect perfection by any means, the importance of humility and authenticity were brought up often. In fact, they want to know their pastors are real people with real struggles. However, they think that one of the greatest threats to the future of the church is dishonest and dysfunction leadership.

Skepticism of religion and suspicion of clergy came up again and again in the literature review of this study. A significant factor in the growing skepticism can be linked to the influence of postmodern thought. Mark Wedig makes this point painfully clear when he says, "postmoderns are skeptical and mistrustful and can tend to believe that politicians are corrupt, lawyers are crooks, and priests are child molesters. One is not only to question authority but to deconstruct authoritative institutions, people, ideas, and texts" (34). Christopher Butler and Mark Chan stress that postmodern thought claims that there is no absolute truth, and all such truth claims are to be scrutinized. Bruce Drake

notes that millennials are less trusting of others compared to older generations. Rachel

Evans indicated the millennials are not looking for a cool and trendy experience but want

authentic leadership and they want to see Jesus in the midst of the community.

The biblical and theological framework for this study revolves around the story of

Jesus Christ, "who was, and is, and is to come" (Revelation 4:8). The story of Jesus is

compelling because he has modeled perfect humility and integrity for us. As Philippians

2 says, Jesus emptied himself and humbled himself. People may be skeptical of religion,

but they are still fascinated by the love, teaching, and life of Jesus Christ. The story of

Jesus becomes even more gripping and alive when it is lived out in the church. Indeed,

the skepticism we see from millennials today grows when they see a lack of Christ in the

church. Paul speaks to the power of our witness when he says, "God chose to make

known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is

Christ in you, the hope of Glory" (Col. 1:27). The biblical and theological framework for

this study suggests that the story of Christianity brings forth hope and transformation not

only when it is preached, but also when it is lived. We see it in the example of the

disciples who go through a process of radical transformation of faith and character as

they are forged more so into the likeness of Jesus Christ. When others saw the love and

Spirit of Jesus Christ present in community, the church grew exponentially (Acts 2:43-

47).

Ministry Implications of the Findings

The first implication of this study concerns pastors, especially in the United

States, who are interested in being more effective preachers for millennials. This study

surveyed the general characteristics and values of millennials and the various challenges

their generation is facing. Great preachers are informed of the experience of their congregation and the greater community, and this study can assist in helping pastors be more informed on the mind and life of millennials. Special attention was given to studying millennials living in Washington state and investigating the characteristics of preaching that either help or hinder how they connect with and understanding sermons. Preachers who are willing to adjust and cater their craft for millennials will find this study especially helpful in the practice of ministry.

Second, the evidence from this study also suggests that narrative preaching is an effective approach in helping millennials connect with and understand the sermon. This finding informs both preachers and those who educate and train preachers. The study and instruction of homiletics should include a wide range of theories and methods in preaching but should not neglect the importance of narrative preaching. Seminaries, divinity schools, and training institutions should develop ways of instructing and preparing students in the theory and practice of narrative preaching. Seminars and conferences should emphasize the narrative approach so pastors who are currently engaged in ministry and are seeking to better connect with millennials can find the training they need.

Third, the implication of this study for preachers further emphasizes the importance of character formation and spiritual discipline for preachers. As millennials are already suspicious of clergy and desire to see authentic faith lived out in church leadership, the character and conduct of preachers has become essential in the practice of ministry. The content or structure of the sermon matters little if the preacher is not following Christ in his or her personal life. Extra attention must be given to the formation

of preachers through spiritual disciplines, prayer, spiritual direction, therapy, and other practices designed to help preachers life faithful and healthy lives. Seminaries, denominations, and various para-ministry organizations need to develop programming and initiatives that cater to the development of the pastor even more than ministry skills and technological knowledge.

Limitations of the Study

The greatest limitation in my research was that all the millennials that participated in the two focus groups and the ten semi-structured interviews actively attend church. This project investigated how preaching, and specifically narrative preaching, might better serve millennials who are leaving the church in record numbers. It would have been especially insightful to hear directly from millennials who have already left the church and why. However, the survey did include a mix of participants who actively attend church and those who no longer attend church, which provided helpful insight in hearing from millennials who have left the church.

One minor limitation was that the second focus group had to be conducted on Zoom due to scheduling issues with the participants. I do not believe that this limitation impacted the generalization of the study findings, but in-person group discussion usually has numerous benefits, such as more visual body language and a more conversational feel to the group dynamic. It appeared that the in-person focus group sparked more excitement and discussion.

Unexpected Observations

One unexpected observation I had was how much emphasis the millennial participants placed on the importance of preaching that is clear and practical. For

example, I was surprised with the results of survey question 34, which asked the participants to choose three words that best describe their favorite kind of preaching. More participants chose the words "clear, direct, and practical" instead of "suspense, story, and mystery," which is the answer I thought most participants would choose. I expected millennials would be more comfortable with ambiguity, mystery and leaving some questions unanswered. It is evident that many millennials want clear and practical teaching and answers. However, I do not think an appreciation for both narrative preaching and clear preaching are necessarily exclusive.

Another unexpected observation I had was that millennials did not stress the importance of social justice and LGBTQ issues in preaching as much as I thought they would. Indeed, they want preachers who are willing to engage in controversial issues, but they do not want overly politicized sermons with a radical agenda.

Recommendations

Although this study yielded important information for the practice of preaching ministry, here are three recommendations for changes in ministry and areas of further study.

First, preachers should concentrate significant effort in studying the art of storytelling. Preachers should watch award winning films, read classic novels, take courses on creative writing, and learn from expert storytellers. Preachers are communicators and storytellers who have regular access to the lives of men and women and the more they develop and master the craft of storytelling the more effective they will be in reaching future generations. Narrative theory and understanding the elements of

compelling storytelling can help preachers become more engaging and convey truth that resonates with younger audiences.

Second, millennials are not the only demographic to benefit from narrative preaching. How can narrative preaching connect with and engage the generations coming after millennials? As culture continue to change at an alarming rate, it is essential for preachers to be students of people and society. How does generation z see the world?

Third, character formation is clearly an important aspect to the ministry of preachers. Another important addition to this story would be to investigate the correlation between habits such as spiritual disciplines and choosing healthy coping mechanisms in relation to preaching. If millennials want preachers who are authentic, humble, honest, and healthy, then what kind of practices can nurture these characteristics in preachers?

Postscript

My journey through this research project has been rich and rewarding. Every book, article, and interview provided helpful insight. I wanted to spend my time studying and learning about something that really interested me. I am a preaching pastor, I am a millennial, and I love stories. I especially love the grand story of Jesus Christ and the offer of salvation he brings us. To me, the story of Jesus is the greatest story worth telling, and I believe it is a worthy endeavor for preachers everywhere to learn how to tell it well.

APPENDIX A – Survey

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I believe preaching should make us more familiar with the stories of the bible					
2. I would rather spend my free time reading a novel or watching a show/movie instead of reading a self-help book/listening to a podcast					
3. When hearing a sermon, I want to be told what the scripture clearly means					
4. I would rather draw my own conclusion rather than be given an answer					
5. I enjoy an element of surprise or suspense when listening to a sermon					
6. A sermon should be like a classroom lecture					
7. I like it when a preacher talks about weighty or even controversial topics					
8. I'm comfortable with a level of ambiguity and mystery when hearing a sermon					
9. I love it when a preacher uses humor					
10. I would rather explore a biblical narrative in-depth instead of hearing a "3-point" sermon					
11. I find it easier to pay attention in a sermon if there is an outline or a fill-in-the blank handout					
12. I appreciate it when a preacher helps me see a biblical story in a new light					

13. I pay more attention throughout a sermon when a preacher begins with an exciting story or evocative question					
14. When listening to a sermon, it's important to me to hear how the biblical passage relates to my life					
15. When I listen to a sermon, modern say stories and real-life examples help me connect with and understand the sermon					
16. A sermon should not be boring					
17. I like it when a preacher uses PowerPoint and other media in their sermons					
18. I think it's important for preachers to be good storytellers					
19. When I listen to a sermon, I care more about sound, orthodox doctrine more than engaging storytelling					
20. I prefer a preacher who gives straightforward moral and theological absolutes instead of a preacher who embraces mystery and leaves some questions unanswered					
21. When I think about my own bible knowledge, I am more familiar with the stories found in scripture than I am with Old Testament Law (Leviticus, Deuteronomy, etc.) or poetry (Psalms, Proverbs, etc.)					

22. I think preachers should preach on controversial subjects more often					
23. Preachers should spend more time talking about practical living for today and less time making us familiar with the stories of the bible					
24. When thinking about a sermon series, I would rather a preacher go through a book of the bible from beginning to end instead of doing a topical sermon series					
25. I think preachers should talk more often about issues around race and inequality					
26. I think preachers should talk more about issues around gender and sexuality					
27. Preacher should take a hard stance on controversial issues					
28. I think preachers need to move away from former tones of judgment and condemnation and focus more so on telling the stories of scripture and preaching "Good News."					
29. Preachers need to be willing to talk about sin					
30. I find PowerPoint and other media distracting in sermons					

Question	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4
31. When it comes to preaching, which of the following is most important to you?	Receiving simple, practical teaching that I can apply to my daily life	Becoming better acquainted with the stories of the Bible and their possible meaning	Talking about issues related to social justice	Hearing sermons that are always accepting, kind, and non-judgmental
32. I believe Preaching should: (pick one)	Be a politically charged "call to action"	Be filled with interesting facts, quotes, and statistics	A presentation on good Christian living	An invitation to learn about and live into God's redemptive story
33. When it comes to preaching, which of the following is MOST important? (pick one)	Clear teaching that is systematically presented	Hearing the gospel and good news of God's love	Being Challenged to make a change in my life	Discussion about important issues such as race, climate change, immigration, and sexuality
34. Please select three words that best describe your favorite kind of preaching	Mystery Suspense Story	Practical Clear Direct	New Media Technological	Justice Action Change

APPENDEX B – Semi Structured Interview Questions

1) What makes a sermon engaging for you?

2) What makes you disengage from a sermon?

3) How do you think sermons could better connect with and engage your generation?

4) Would you rather be directly told right from wrong or hear a story that illustrates right from wrong? Why?

5) Would you rather hear a story or a lecture? Why?

6) What makes a good story? Do you think this should be applied to preaching?

APPENDEX C – Focus Group Questions

1) What are the characteristics of a good sermon?

2) What are the characteristics of a bad sermon?

3) Think back to a sermon that had a positive spiritual impact on you, what was it about that sermon that impacted you?

4) How does preaching need to improve to meet the needs of your generation?

5) Do you think there is something about preaching that is contributing to millennials leaving the church? If so, what?

6) What are the elements of a great story? How can that be applied to preaching?

APPENDEX D – Informed Consent Letter

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

Narrative Preaching for Millennials: Inviting the Next Generation into God's Story
You are invited to be in a research study being done by ***Daniel J Jones* a doctoral student** from Asbury Theological Seminary. You are invited because ***you are a millennial living in Western Washington State, who presently attends church or who has attended church in the past.***

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to **participate in a 60-minute focus group held at Mountain View Presbyterian Church or a 30-minute interview conducted on a recorded, private zoom call.**

If anyone is given information about you, they will not know your name. A number or initials will be used instead of your name.

The audio content of the focus group will be recorded and stored on Daniel J Jones' password protected iPhone. The interviews will be recorded on a private zoom call and stored on Daniel J Jones' password protected MacBook pro. Daniel J Jones will be the only person with access to the audio and video recordings, which will be deleted by June 1, 2023. Multiple participants will be present in each focus group and confidentiality will be encouraged but cannot be guaranteed due to the presence of the other participants.

If something makes you feel uncomfortable in any way while you are in the study, please tell ***Daniel J Jones*** who can be reached at **dan@mtvpc.org.** You can refuse to respond to any or all of the questions, and you will be able to withdraw from the process at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact **Daniel J Jones** at **dan@mtvpc.org.**

Signing this paper means that you have read this or had it read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign the paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be upset if you do not sign this paper or even if you change your mind later. You agree that you have been told about this study and why it is being done and what to do.

_____   ___   _____

Signature of Person Agreeing to be in the Study   Date Signed

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