

# MISSIO APOSTOLICA

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## Editor's Note

For over twenty years, the LSFM has been bringing together mission theorists and practitioners. Our journal, *Missio Apostolica*, is still the only Lutheran mission journal in English being published today, and since May 2011, it has been available online ([www.lsfmissiology.org](http://www.lsfmissiology.org)) for free.

*Missio Apostolica* continues to strive publishing articles exploring various aspects of missiology. Current issues have been a compilation of articles on a single theme to further and promote Lutheran reflections on missiology. The editorial committee will continue to select a theme, on which contributors may write. However, the readers should also know that scholars and practitioners are still encouraged to submit articles on any missiological topic from a Lutheran perspective. The editorial committee will review all articles received for each issue putting the best articles into the official journal, and with the blessing of an electronic platform, publish the rest through our web site. Authors desiring to know in advance if their articles will be in the official journal are encouraged to submit their ideas to the Editor for advanced approval.

Authors will receive two copies of the issue, in which their article appears, and the editorial board's appreciation as compliments.

V.R.



Here are Dr. Won Yong Ji, Dr. Paul and Mrs. Alleen Heerboth, Rev. Edwin and Mrs. Joan Dubberke, and Rev. Tony Boos at the May 2005 LSFM Annual Banquet.

## **Rev. Dr. Won Yong Ji 1924–2013**

Rev. Dr. Won Yong Ji was born in a small mountain village of Ga-Rae-Gol in what is presently North Korea. Having read at age 16 a Korean translation of *Luther: the Leader* by John L. Nuelson, he was baptized at the age of 17 at a Presbyterian church. After Korea was divided at the end of World War II, he left his family and home and fled to Seoul in the South. In 1948, he arrived in the United States to study at San Jose Bible College, thanks to U.S. military personnel who collected money and arranged for him to study in the United States. Upon arrival, he met Rev. Ernest R. Drews, a Lutheran pastor who introduced him to the Lutheran church and became his legal sponsor, mentor, and friend. Pastor Drews was instrumental in Ji's becoming a Lutheran and in studying at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, from which he received the B.A. and B.D. degrees in 1952, the S.T.M. in 1954, and the Th.D. in 1957. During this time, Ji also studied at Washington University, Valparaiso University, and the University of Heidelberg. In 1957, Ji married Aei-Kyong (Kay). They would become the parents of five children (one died in early childhood) and would be blessed with a long life together.

After completing his doctoral studies, Dr. Ji was called as assistant pastor of Jehovah Evangelical Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1958 he returned to Korea as a missionary and joined L. Paul Bartling, Maynard W. Dorow, and Kurt E.

Voss in the Korea Lutheran Mission (KLM). He was pivotal to the KLM's pioneering efforts in mass media and education in Korea and became the pastor of Korea's first Lutheran congregation.

In 1968 Dr. Ji was appointed Asia Secretary for the Department of World Mission of the Lutheran World Federation. From 1975–1978, he served as the Consultant to the *Missionswerk* of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria.

In 1978 Dr. Ji returned to Concordia Seminary. After serving for a year as a visiting instructor, he was called to the faculty in the Department of Systematic Theology. Later, under a "Professor Exchange Program," he also served as a professor at Luther Seminary in Korea.

Dr. Ji authored books and articles in German, Korean, and English, and he translated and edited many other works, the Korean Edition of *Luther's Works* being his foremost accomplishment. During his career, he was also active in broadcasting and publishing. Among his many activities, he was the first editor of *Missio Apostolica*.

## Remembering Won Yong Ji

### Joel Okamoto

Won Yong Ji left his mark in several ways. As a scholar, he wrote books in three languages, published many articles, and was the editor for the twelve-volume Korean edition of *Luther's Works*. As an educator, he became the first director of the Lutheran Theological Academy in Korea and also a professor at Yonsei University. Later he taught for many years both at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and at Luther Seminary near Seoul. And throughout his career, he often lectured, participated in seminars, and mentored others. As a churchman, in addition to his many years of service in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, he was involved with the YMCA in Korea and the chaplaincy of the Korean armed services. He participated not only in the Korea Lutheran Hour but also assisted in Korea's national radio broadcasting, and he was the Korea correspondent for *The Christian Century*. Later he served with the Lutheran World Federation as Secretary for Asia and as theological consultant for the journal, *Missionswerk*, of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Bavaria. As a missionary and mission thinker, he worked diligently and imaginatively for the spread of the gospel. From the Korea Lutheran Mission (KLM) to the Lutheran World Federation to *Missionswerk* to the World Mission Institute at Concordia Seminary and his editorship of *Missio Apostolica*, he was deeply involved in the mission of the Lord.

When remembering Won Yong Ji and mission, I think first of the title of chapter 12 in his autobiography, *By the Grace of God I Am What I Am*: "Mission through Communication and Education." The KLM stressed the use of mass media in evangelism and became a Christian pioneer in the use of radio, television, and print in Korea. Dr. Ji was a pivotal figure in such efforts as the Korea Lutheran Hour, "Christian Correspondence Courses," and Concordia-Sa (the KLM's publishing

arm). He was no “early adopter” or “geek” (he was, in fact, always proud of his old manual typewriter). But he appreciated that mission *communicates* a message and, therefore, that Christians should always seek to use appropriately the whole range of communication *media*.

Dr. Ji also recognized that the Christian message can be learned in a variety of ways. He especially appreciated that scholarship and formal education can be vehicles for the Christian faith. I have a poster from the Deutsche Demokratische Republik’s celebration of the 500th anniversary of Luther’s birth, and it reminds me of Dr. Ji. I asked him once about translating Luther into Chinese. Instead of directly answering me, he told me that he had once proposed a scholarly Chinese edition of Luther, but that it had gotten nowhere. This, in his view, was a big mistake. The Communists, he explained, would not let our missionaries in, but they would accept an academically credible set of Luther’s works—and study them! Of course, he had done just this with Luther for his Korean homeland. And it was his continuing advocacy that Luther should speak Chinese that led Concordia Seminary and LCMS World Mission to participate in the Chinese Luther project that published the first two volumes of Luther’s Works in Chinese in mainland China in 2003 and 2004.

“Mission through Communication and Education” not only helps us to remember Won Yong Ji as missionary and mission thinker but also stands as a timely suggestion for us.

For a complete list of Dr. Ji’s publications, see pages 151–155 of this journal.

## Inside this Issue

How do the Millennials belong in this Community of God's people is the question this issue of *Missio Apostolica* has attempted to address. This question literally is a two-edged sword. It is, in fact, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing through the soul and the spirit of the Millennials as well as those who gave birth to them. It is our prayer that the conversations we are presenting here will enable everyone to discern the hearts and intentions of all generations, as we, together, are the called and the redeemed of God, intergenerationally.

The median age of the contributors to this issue is approximately 36. What they present for our consideration is what they live daily, centering their lives in the One Lord. The phrases they use such as "Going to Church without Going to Church," "a Lost Generation," and "the Third Place" reflect what is really going on in the hearts of all of us concerning this new generation. "Working the Harvest in the *Digital* Fields" shows that the harvest for the Lord is plentiful even in the new generation, and how it *works* today. We are reminded repeatedly that communicators of the Gospel regardless of their age must be very conversant with the culture in which they serve. Writers who are themselves Millennials are demonstrating that Lutheran theology is an effective apologetic to their generation, unapologetically! The Millennials may be texting, linkin-ning, facebook-ing, and blogging. They may not have a Bible or a hymnal or sheet music as the older generation might be familiar with, but they access all of that and more in a fraction of a second in a device they have with them all the time. They, too, read, mark, and inwardly digest. They also like to gather together incarnationally, as one pastor write in these pages, to hear the story—God's story—in story style. The Church is where God's people belong. God would have it no other way. Here we read numerous accounts of how it happens before our eyes with the emerging new generation.

V.R.

## *Editorial*

# **Faith Communities**

**Victor Raj**

The apostle Paul has judiciously exhorted the followers of Jesus of the first century congregating in the city of Ephesus and its suburbs to live a life worthy of the calling they have received in Christ. Writing from within the walls of a Roman prison, Paul was encouraging his Ephesian readers that Christians must give expression to their faith in Christ boldly, albeit with gentleness, patience, and forbearance for one another solely on account of Christ. They must make every effort at preserving oneness in their life together as Christians, keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Christians are a community called and gathered to live under the Lordship of Christ. The people of God are His baptized, the body of believers who confess the faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Eph 4:1–6). Christians live their best as they live in communities.

Paul composed his Ephesian correspondence after having lived in Ephesus for three years as a missionary of Christ, making that city a major hub of his missionary activities (Acts 19:10; 20:31). In Ephesus, Paul was constantly dialoging with the leadership of the synagogue leaders and speaking persuasively with them concerning the kingdom of God in Christ. In this major metropolitan commercial center and gateway to foreigners, Paul had access to a lecture hall where for two consecutive years he delivered public lectures on Christian theology, reasoning with Jews and Gentiles the truth the followers of Jesus believe, teach, and confess. A cursory reading of Acts 19 shows that the challenges Christians face in the twenty-first century are not radically different from those that the first witnesses of the Lord faced, including the apostles and the earliest Christians.

It is said that the United States of America has become the third largest mission field of the new millennium, next only to China and India. The American religious landscape was once a medley of various Christian denominations.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, however, alongside Christianity, America has become a kaleidoscope of religious traditions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and New Age spiritualities, offering innumerable choices for people to make. Church steeples no longer monopolize even rural America's horizon. Pluralism has become normative in the typical American neighborhoods and households. Americans practice coexistence, mixing and matching diverse religious beliefs as their circles of families and friends have expanded far beyond their own personal religious traditions and convictions. Americans live in a world of secularism, pluralism, and inclusivism. In the neighborhood and workplace, they share space with friends and compatriots who embrace worldviews, spiritualities, and religions that may not match their own. Furthermore, as the Barna research shows, ten percent of today's American adults

are no longer aligned with any religion, claiming themselves as atheists and agnostics.<sup>2</sup>

The most recent Barna study conducted among Christians shows that practically one of every four American adults remains *unattached* to any religious organization. Not even once a year do they interact personally with any organic faith communities, a third of them having never attended church in their lifetime, although 17 percent of these unattached adults claim to be “born-again” Christians.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, only 17 percent of Americans believe that their faith in God “is meant to be developed primarily through involvement in a local church.”<sup>4</sup> And 20 percent of Americans are “notional Christians” who, although holding on to their evangelical traditions, do not think that their faith is “dependent on church attendance, the denominational affiliation of the church attended, or calling oneself an evangelical.”<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, most American Christians crave the experience of being in communities in their own ways. They experiment with new forms of faith communities, where they experience a greater sense of being together and belonging than in traditional church settings. These Christians come together regularly as house churches, believers gathering in homes for group Bible study and corporate worship. A good 13 percent of adults are involved in “marketplace ministries” as they meet in their workplace or at an athletic event for a religious experience. A stunning 28 percent of Americans satisfy their desire to be in worship by attending a special community service event or a worship concert, watching religious television, or listening to Christian radio programs. Fifteen percent of American Christians network as cyber-churches, connecting through a faith-oriented website and participating in real-time events on the Internet. Arguably, several of these activities overlap in many respects, as people get involved in multiple faith communities—attending a conventional church one week, a house church the next, and interacting with an online faith community in between. American Christians are trying hard to bring religion to bear on their daily lives increasingly outside the walls of a church building.<sup>6</sup> Barna is of the opinion that the Church needs to refresh some of its traditional measures of church health, seeing them as outdated for the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup>

In *American Grace*, authors Putnam and Campbell point out that people who have kept high standards for their spiritual life also maintain “a dense religious social network.” Furthermore, many people who care the least for their own religious and spiritual life preserve “a religiocentric web of friends.”<sup>8</sup> In sharp contrast, many people who are highly religious in personal terms have relatively few social connections in their local congregation. Many people connect with places of worship for the sake of expanding their friendship circles, and not necessarily for spiritual reasons.

Putnam observes that especially since the 1990s, America is facing a steady increase of “Nones.” Among those who came of age in the 1990s and 2000s, 20–30 percent claim to be nones.<sup>9</sup> When asked, Nones say that they have no religious preference, nor are they predisposed to secularism or atheism. Putnam classifies the vast majority of them as “liminal nones,” that is, “people who switch back and forth between calling themselves a ‘something’ and calling themselves a ‘none.’ Like a light bulb loosely fitting in its socket, they flicker in their religious affiliation,

sometimes on and sometimes off. The liminal ones reflect a slackening of commitment to any religious tradition...”<sup>10</sup> Little more evidence is needed to support the claim that today’s America is a mission field ripe for the Lord’s harvest and to urge the Christian community to reach out to the lost, the least, and the never-reached in their own neighborhoods and friendship circles.

The scientific study of generations developed as a major discipline perhaps in the latter half of the twentieth century. Foundationally, a generation refers to those who are within a certain age span, who cherish shared values, and who aspire to build a common character for their life together. On the basis of escalating advancements in technology, some students are noticing a generational change every seven to ten years, especially since the 1980s. Allen and Ross<sup>11</sup> classify the twentieth-century America into five major units: the GI (Builder) Generation (1901–1924) of team players that built America in the wake of the two World Wars; the Silent Generation (1925–1942) of artists, listeners, and peacemakers; the Boomers (1943–1960), who on the one hand put man on the moon, and on the other, became introspective and experimented with non-Western spiritualities such as Yoga and New Age beliefs; the Generation Xers (1961–1981), who have dealt with issues such as the depletion of the ozone layer, communicable diseases, skepticism of leaders, and the realism of life; and the Millennials (1982–2003), skeptical of parents, yet caring for relationships by making friends their family. The Millennials are still a generation in the making, building on Generation X and exploring new ways of maximizing technology for building healthy and vibrant relationships. Allen and Ross see them as team-builders, craving for community, anxious to serve locally and globally, and ready to change the world for the better, better than the generations that preceded them. Even if to the dismay of the previous generations, the lifestyle of Millennials is largely defined by technology and the interconnectivity that this aspect of human ingenuity has contributed to our world. The Christian Church of today has the privilege of connecting our world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Paul did orally and in writing for the Ephesians, so do we, orally, in writing, and by making the best use of technology in the present generation.

Undeniably, the Christian life is lived at its best in communities. Christians are a community, called, gathered, and enlightened by the gospel. Thus did Dr. Luther teach in his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed. Just as God the Holy Spirit calls each person by the gospel and enlightens with His gifts, sanctifies and keeps each one in the true faith, “so also He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ.”<sup>12</sup> The holy Christian Church is the gathering of God’s people called by the gospel. The images Scripture presents for the community of believers are relational. Whether it is members knit together as one body, living stones built together as a spiritual house, or wild olive branches grafted into a cultivated olive tree, the people of God of all races and all generations are interconnected. In Christ they belong together. One generation tells another what God has done in Christ for all.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The statistical information for this narrative is owed primarily to three volumes that appeared in the last two years: George Barna, *Futurecast: What Today's Trends Mean for Tomorrow's World* (Austin, TX: Tyndale House Publishers, 2011). Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2012). Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Barna, *Futurecast*, 126.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 146, 161.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 123–145.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>8</sup> Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 437.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 565.

<sup>11</sup> Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 144–155.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1986).

## Editorial

# On Means, Ends, and Millennials

David O. Berger

The current issue of *Missio Apostolica* provides much food for thought regarding Millennials (born ca. 1980–2000) and their connection with Christ’s church, or, as we regretfully acknowledge, the lack of same. Statistics vary, but it seems clear that a connection with “formal religion,” whatever that may mean to a Millennial, is not a high priority for many in this age demographic. Characteristics of the generation include immersion in the most current communication technologies and a general aversion to institutions (including the church). Values include meaningful work, collaboration and participation, freedom of choice, diversity, and having fun.

Despite an aversion to the institutional church, Millennials have not necessarily abandoned “spirituality.” That is, many would claim to be religious in a general sense: believing in a higher power, cultivating loving relationships, being involved in good works in a social/civic context, trying to be eco-friendly. While agnostics and atheists may be part of the Millennial picture, as for any other age group, they are not typical. All the above is, to be sure, shorthand for a large demographic. Despite a number of identifiable common characteristics, we’re not looking at a homogeneous, undifferentiated mass of humanity. Consider this excerpt from a Web page entitled “GrapeThinking”:

The millennial generation is becoming a force for the new earth. The more people I meet my age the more hope I gain for our world. Millennial buddhists, jews, christians, muslims, hindus, and all other religions alike are letting go of extremism and fundamental views, realizing the teachings are one in [sic] the same[:] How to live an open connected spiritual life that cultivates love.

Religion is losing us because it invokes disagreement and violence, and encourages negative characteristics such as laziness, procrastination, and moral confusion. We have a more unified understanding of the world around us with both scientific and artistic ways of thinking and being. We understand Einstein’s theories, we live for music, we are bio-inspired... we are a very intelligent generation and we love life. And with this one life we’ve been blessed with, why not use it connecting with each other and making positive change? This is the essence of the millennial generation spirituality.<sup>1</sup>

One might note more than a modicum of hubris in this self-description, but it is a generation, at least in the U. S., that has grown to adulthood in a public education system that nurtures a sense of self-esteem.

Bruce Horovitz provides another perspective in a recent article in *USA Today* (March 26, 2013): “Millennials spur capitalism with a conscience.”<sup>2</sup> It focuses on the social conscience of Millennials, which may lead them to patronize companies that reflect their values by, for example, providing free food and affordable clothing for the needy or by being eco-friendly.

As one reads and considers the observations and recommendations in this issue relative to the “Millennial challenge” to the church, it is important to bear in mind the crucial distinction between means and ends. If means lack a clear end, they easily become ends in themselves. Common means themes in the articles include reaching out to people (Millennials) “where they are,” mingling with them in various contexts, as Jesus did in His ministry, and “being all things to all people,” as the Apostle Paul described his ministry in 1 Corinthians 9:19. That is, before baptizing and teaching, a meaningful relationship must be established, most likely on Millennial terms. The means may be many, as Jesus and Paul illustrate, but the end remains one—a living saving faith created by the Holy Spirit through Baptism and the Word (teaching). The multiplicity of means dare neither obscure the message nor lead to ambiguous or unclear teaching, or to little or no teaching. Even as we overcome barriers and relate to Millennials in a variety of ways, our means must be consonant in substance with and keep an intentional focus on the end—a challenge, to be sure, and one that can be met only with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sinners are sinners. Christians (saints and sinners) find ways to rationalize, to explain away, to excuse their sins. Millennials, spiritual or not, find ways to rationalize, to explain, to excuse their rejecting the institutional church (a community of believers) and avoiding commitment to creed or confession. We Christians need to listen to their stories, to be ready to tell our story—as several writers put it—to live our faith in our vocation, and to be patient as the Holy Spirit does His work His way.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Mu, “Millennial Generation Spirituality,” *GrapeThinking*, January 9, 2009.

<http://grapethinking.com/millennial-generation-spirituality/>.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Horovitz, “Millennials spur capitalism with a conscience,” *USA Today*, March 26, 2013.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2013/03/25/kindness-panera-bread-nordstrom-starbucks/1965183/>.

## Articles

# Candy Machine God, or, Going to Church without Going to Church: Millennials and the Future of the Christian Faith

Chad Lakies

**Abstract:** In this article, I try to give background to some of the sociological data that describes the relationship between Millennials and the church. Since the modern American religious context has for some time been described as therapeutic, I explore this to help explain recent work which characterizes Millennials as embodying and desiring this form of religion. The result is that the problem lies not so much with Millennials but the church itself. From there, I try briefly to suggest how the church became merely therapeutic and what the church might do to recover faithfulness.

### I Am One of Them

I am one of them. By all rights, I should still be “out there” and not “in here.” But somehow I managed to get in here and I still cannot quite explain “why” other than to credit all things to God—as it should be. I’m a Millennial. I’m a Christian. I go to church every Sunday. In fact, I’ve even started a church. And after that, I started a collective for young adults within the confines of a very large church. And now I’m writing from my office as a professor of theology at a private Christian university. I’ve worked with Millennials now for more than a decade. And I still don’t know what I’m doing. I still can’t quite explain how I got here.

But I know where I am. I am in the midst of a church that is desperate to reach others like me. This is a colossal challenge that the church faces. And I know that as a writer, my audience is full of people looking for the magic answer. I don’t have it. I hope, however, that what I will say is helpful. But what I promise is that I will indeed complicate the issue before I offer anything helpful. I need my readers to “see” the present situation concerning Millennials with different eyes. I am someone who was on the outside but is now on the inside reflecting back on the outside trying

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*Chad Lakies is Assistant Professor of Theology at Concordia University in Portland, OR. He stumbled into starting a church in midtown St. Louis that came to be known as CRAVE, a ministry that also operates a coffeeshop by the same name. Later on he co-founded a collective for young adults called theOpen within the confines of a much larger congregation—Concordia Lutheran Church in Kirkwood, MO. Chad plays drums, love reading, and has recently become a father. He and his wife Bethany live with their daughter Anabel in Vancouver, WA.*

to help others look at their situation with a sensitivity that is honest about where we stand and about what the future might really hold. There are no slick strategies here; perhaps only a painfully candid account of our present condition with some constructive thoughts of how to move forward with the help of God.

### **Millennials and the Church: Where Are We?**

There are two ways that we can talk about the relationship between Millennials and the church. One is simple; the other is more complicated. On the one hand, we can simply say that Millennials are simply *not* in the church. They have left. They have abandoned the church. It seems the church has lost them. David Kinnaman's work in *You Lost Me* suggests the problem lies with the church and its failure to make disciples.<sup>1</sup> But the descriptions he gives for those who have left the church perhaps betrays that disciple making is probably not quite the whole of the problem.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Kinnaman offers various reasons Millennials feel the church has lost a connection with them: they feel the church is repressive, anti-science, shallow, and closed off to those who might have doubts and questions.<sup>3</sup> Dan Kimball has similarly characterized Millennials in *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, noting reasons that echo Kinnaman's as well as additional ones for why Millennials are not participating in the life of the church.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, however, there are plenty of Millennials still in the church—well, sort of. Aside from those who faithfully go every Sunday (perhaps they deserve an article since they might be an anomaly) there are those who are in church every now and again getting some form of religion. But their relationship with the church has already been conceived of provocatively as tenuous.

In a landmark longitudinal investigation which probed the religious life, attitudes, and practices of American young people, Christian Smith, the lead researcher behind the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) has produced three substantial volumes that tell us a great deal about the spiritual lives of young Americans.<sup>5</sup> His first volume, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, gave us a stark and surprising look at the shape of their faith.<sup>6</sup> Through interviews and critical reflection, Smith derived what he saw as a new kind of faith emerging in their lives. This new faith saw God as distant but benevolent. Ultimately, God was interested in helping humanity but he was not busy interfering with things. God was understood to be there when we needed Him, ready to help whenever we called upon Him. This distant God reflected a kind of deistic faith.

Furthermore, in this new faith, the goal of life was to be happy. Happiness was attained by following the rules, being a good person (keeping the peace, being amiable and kind, not judging others, perhaps helping others out occasionally), and not getting in trouble or being a bad person. This kind of rule-following structure exhibited a familiar moralism present within American culture.

And one further notion emerged as characteristic of this new way of faith of American young people. Since the goal of life is happiness, God is called upon when there is trouble or a need. In such moments, God is required to intervene. God is expected to meet our needs and take care of us. The idea of the therapeutic enters in at this juncture concerning just what God is for. And thus religion takes on a character that is rather utilitarian or instrumental. Smith went on to call this new faith

of modern American teenagers “moralistic therapeutic deism.”<sup>7</sup> Describing this new faith, Smith writes, “what appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.”<sup>8</sup> Moralism, then, is the assumed means for attaining the happiness that is life’s goal—being a good person, it is believed, has positive consequences.

Smith’s work ought to be rather disturbing for those in the church who are concerned with engaging Millennials. Already the faith of Millennials, at least for those who are connected with the church—even if only marginally—looks like something other than the biblical faith. Yet Smith adds a twist to the issue that demands our close attention. Smith goes on to observe the new faith that America’s young people are now practicing is actually being handed down by their parents. “Our religiously conventional adolescents seem to be merely absorbing and reflecting religiously what the adult world is routinely modeling for and inculcating in its youth.”<sup>9</sup> This is a remarkable point. Smith implies that the faith of America’s adults is nothing other than moralistic therapeutic deism.<sup>10</sup> How else could it be the tradition that is now being inculcated into America’s youth? However, that is just what he and his research partners were told by those they interviewed: what they believed came from their parents. “The vast majority of the teenagers we interviewed, of whatever religion, said very plainly that they simply believe what they were raised to believe; they are merely following in their family’s footsteps and that is perfectly fine with them.”<sup>11</sup>

How then do we account for the fact that the faith of those in American churches is supposed to be “Christian,” yet Smith is arguing that it is somehow not Christian at all, but rather moralistic therapeutic deism? A closer look reveals Smith’s argument is more nuanced than that, as one might expect from a sociologist. He argues that we ought to understand moralistic therapeutic deism as “parasitic” upon the more substantial faith traditions we find in American religion. Thus, we will find Christian moralistic therapeutic deists, Jewish moralistic therapeutic deists, Mormon moralistic therapeutic deists, and even nonreligious moralistic therapeutic deists.<sup>12</sup> This helps us understand at least how moralistic therapeutic deism is sustained but not much regarding where it comes from. I will say more about this below. For now, I want to press further regarding the consequences of what this means for how we think about the relationship of Millennials and the church.

If moralistic therapeutic deism is being sustained by the more established religious traditions in American—and one must include here, as Smith does, Christianity—then as a phenomenon, this situation ought to be quite unsettling. As reflective practitioners, we ought to ask some questions about ourselves and our own ministries—in fact, it should cause us to ask questions about the church itself. For it seems that moralistic therapeutic deism can be understood to be utilizing the tradition of Christianity passed down in and by the practices of the church to perpetuate itself instead. If this is the case, are we unwittingly aiding and abetting the invasion of this parasitic new faith within American culture? Kenda Creasy Dean, one of the researchers involved in the NSYR sharply articulates the issue for us. Based on the evidence from the NSYR, she is able to conclude that American young

people indeed have a faith and that, contrary to what seems to be popular opinion, they do not have much of a problem with faith or the church. “We have successfully convinced teenagers,” she writes, “that religious participation is important for moral formation and making nice people, which may explain why American adolescents harbor no ill will toward religion.”<sup>13</sup> This may seem all well and good. Young people are in church. Is that not where we want them? But Dean raises a further point, causing us to reflect on just what difference it makes that they are in church. Following from Smith’s point that moralistic therapeutic deism is parasitic on traditional religions and thus can be said to be “supplanting Christianity as the dominant religion in American churches.”<sup>14</sup> Dean recognizes that we face a paradox. “For most of the twentieth century,” she notes, “we studied the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents in order to answer the question, ‘How can we keep young people in church?’ Today, our question is more pressing: ‘Does the church *matter*?’”<sup>15</sup> We might frame this point differently by asking, “Are our young people, when they show up to church, actually coming to ‘church’ at all?” Smith and Dean paint a picture of a church that reveals a church that no longer looks like the church. Dean goes on to frame the issue more concretely.

The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people focused primarily on “folks like us”—which, of course, begs the question of whether we are really the church at all.<sup>16</sup>

### **Millennials and the Church: How Did We Get Here?**

If Dean’s indictment is not depressing enough, the reader will not be glad to know that the church has been accused of embodying a ministry of mere therapy for some time now. But it gets worse—it was foreseen that the church would become a merely therapeutic institution as early as the middle of the twentieth century. With such forethought, one might think the church could have done something to stop it. And yet here we are. Let us explore how we arrived here and some of the critiques of the church as a therapeutic institution.<sup>17</sup>

A prophetic voice came to us through the late sociologist Philip Rieff in the mid-1960s proclaiming that the future of religion would not be one of decline as many “secularization” thinkers had supposed. Rather, it would be a future in which religion would take on a different form. Far from fading away into a pure secularity, Rieff predicted religion would more and more take on the character of therapy. It was only a matter of time, Rieff posited, for the age was already ripe for the emergence of religion as therapy.<sup>18</sup>

Assuming the disenchanting worldview of the fact/value distinction<sup>19</sup> and its governing social stratification of a public and private realm, Rieff pointed up two characters who iconically represented those two realms: the bureaucrat and the therapist, respectively.<sup>20</sup> The bureaucrat is that engineer of processes, as well as persons, who stands under the authority of some bureaucratically organized sociality and who is responsible for using his skills to produce what the bureaucracy demands. The public lives of all individuals, Rieff suggests, are characterized by their

participation in some form, either under the authority or in the role of, a bureaucrat. With this life comes the demands and pressures on everyone to fit in, meet a quota, and measure up. In order to cope with such demands and pressures of life in the public realm, there is the therapist, whose realm is the private. The therapist is the one to help us overcome our sense of guilt and failure, to release us from the pressures and demands of the public realm by helping us to see that such demands are illusory, thus leaving no reason for guilt or sense of failure. The therapist is to make us all feel better again, to breathe a sigh of relief, to strengthen us—if only temporarily—to face our public responsibilities again.<sup>21</sup>

Rieff's final conclusion about how the church should respond to this change in the social landscape is what hits home for us. "What, then, should churchmen do?" Rieff asks. It seems the answer is quite clear: "[B]ecome, avowedly, therapists, administrating a therapeutic institution—under the justificatory mandate that Jesus himself was the first therapeutic."<sup>22</sup>

Following Rieff, contemporary sociologists of religion, as well as theologians, have characterized American religion, and Christianity in particular, as characteristically therapeutic. In the year after Rieff's bombshell was published, the classic work by the eminent sociologist of religion Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, was released. Berger further cemented the perception that religion had become therapeutic, saying that in order for religion to be considered "relevant" to individual lives (as a matter of religion's maintaining a plausibility structure), it must be acknowledged as useful. Thus, he argued,

the religious institutions have accommodated themselves to the moral and therapeutic "needs" of the individual in his private life. This manifests itself in the prominence given to private problems in the activity and promotion of contemporary religious institutions—the emphasis on family and neighborhood as well as on the psychological "needs" of the private individual.<sup>23</sup>

In the late twentieth century, as the spiritual marketplace expanded at a frenzied pace, Wade Clark Roof also observed this same sort of instrumental approach to religion. "[W]hat was once accepted simply as latent benefits of religion, for example, personal happiness and spiritual well-being," Roof tells us, "we now look upon more as manifest and, therefore, to be sought after and judged on the basis of what they do for us."<sup>24</sup>

One might say that Protestant Christianity has been guilty of this sort of therapeutic religion for more than a century. In his account of the rise of pietism, D. G. Hart concentrates on how Protestant Christians fashioned the faith to serve practical concerns. "Even since the First Great Awakening, in fact, American Protestants had been eagerly downplaying the mysterious and ceremonial aspects of Christian devotion in order to make the gospel relevant to individuals, families, and society."<sup>25</sup> In part, Hart is giving us a history lesson, telling us something about how churches were winning adherents after disestablishment and also about the rise of the historically "interesting" mainline and evangelical distinction which has defined so much of American religious history for much of the last half of the twentieth century. His effort is not so much to trace how Protestantism became therapeutic. Yet his work does give us some insights. Since he is investigating what he calls "the lost

soul of American Protestantism,” which he identifies in the rise of pietism through the movement of revivalism into the rootedness of pietism in both mainline liberalism *and* conservative evangelicalism, Hart’s argument makes a substantial point about just how extensive the influence of pietism and its effects are within American Christianity, even into the present. And those effects are of interest when tracing the therapeutic. For example, reflecting on the influence of Billy Sunday and those like him, Hart notes, “the overriding importance of figures like Billy Sunday and his forebears was to make Christianity so practical that any hint of religion’s irrelevance was proof at best of its inferiority, if not a sign of infidelity.” Hart continues, “Protestantism had rid itself of most of Christianity’s theoretical obstacles to be the practical solution to the everyday problems of average Americans.”<sup>26</sup> Sunday and his forebears were the beginnings of mainline Christianity. Evangelicalism was equally interested in practical concerns Hart tells us.<sup>27</sup> While their focus and application of these concerns went in a different direction<sup>28</sup>, the door was open to the immanent frame in which theology was set to work and within which a therapeutic application of the Gospel would be made, heard, and embodied.

L. Gregory Jones takes notice of this lack of an eschatological perspective, which renders the life of the church and its message as concerned with only the here-and-now. He is critical of the great weakness this brings to the church’s proclamation, making the church susceptible to the invading cancer that is the therapeutic culture in which the church finds itself—one concerned only with finding ways to cope, “get through” life, be happy, get along amiably, live peacefully, etc. Without an eschatological perspective, the church’s immune system to a therapeutic perspective which subversively creeps in from the outside, the church will unwittingly adopt such a message and begin to proclaim it as its own, supplanting the Gospel with worldly therapy, just as Rieff predicted. And in fact, Jones says, this is exactly what has happened. Thus Jones writes of the psychological captivity of the church.<sup>29</sup> Describing this captivity he observes, “Protestant liberals evacuated the gospel of eschatological content, deprived it of its ability to interrogate us, and transmuted it into (at most) banal truisms such as ‘God loves you.’”<sup>30</sup> But we should not reserve this critique for liberals alone, lest conservatives think they are safe. Let Jones’s analysis be an equal-opportunity criticism. Consider the regular Lutheran proclamation heard in sermons or in the liturgical rite of Absolution. In order to communicate forgiveness, it is thought sufficient to offer this truism: “It’s okay. Jesus died for your sins.” With the church trafficking in such banalities, no longer is the word of God able to confront us. It is just used to make us feel better. And thus the imagination of hearers is shaped to understand that God is just the kind of God who only wants our happiness, our well-being, our flourishing—and, of course, the way that those concepts are defined is just the way we would define them as moralistic therapeutic deists, or better put, Americans.

The result of this psychological captivity, Jones tells us, shows up clearly in a description of American religion in a 1993 *Time Magazine* article: “Some of today’s most influential religious leaders are no longer theologians but therapists.” Jones proceeds to highlight how this is visible in the church.

Such a diagnosis is stunningly accurate. Even so, the therapeutic shaping of the church in the United States is both more pervasive and more pernicious

than we have wanted to admit. The church's captivity to therapy is not just a reflection of the influence of James Dobson or of M. Scott Peck or of any version of the self-help/codependent/twelve-step recovery programs. Our deeper problem is that psychological language and practices have become more powerful than the language and practices of the gospel, not only in the culture but within the church. As a result, we have translated and reduced the gospel into psychological categories. Such reduction has altered it to be captive to psychology and psychological accounts of God, the world, and the nature and purpose of human life.<sup>31</sup>

It is one thing to critique the church as therapeutic however. It is another to show concretely how this is taking shape in the church's life.

In a confession that ought to be imitated by many of us church leaders, the preacher and homiletician John W. Wright wonders why his own preaching does not seem to be connecting with his hearers. After all, his only intention was, like most preachers, to preach faithfully. What Wright quickly came to realize was that his hearers' ears and imaginations had been tuned to perceive, desire, and expect something else from him than what he was delivering. Formed in the crucible of American religion—the immanent and practical sort which we have been describing—his hearers had learned to desire a particular kind of religion when they went to church: therapy.<sup>32</sup>

The key idea for Wright—and this should apply to the rest of us—is that he *believed* he was delivering the goods, proclaiming the grace and forgiveness of God. And indeed, many of us believe we are delivering the goods, while unwittingly we are captive to the very therapeutic culture within which our churches and our congregations exist. We're captive to finding ways to make the Gospel message relevant to the lives of hearers in various manners—preaching and otherwise. If we were to examine delivery of the message and its packaging (think context, that is, the worship service), these are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of revealing our captivity in this regard. But the consequences are monumental. Wright describes our social context as providing something of an imperative for preaching in a manner that is therapeutic (which our other church practices simply support), thus resulting in a sense of obligation or a response to “demand.”<sup>33</sup> Wright thus describes therapeutic preaching—a practice that embodies therapeutic religion in general—as comedic. Comedies, as we all know, are stories that everyone likes. They are feel-good narratives meant to evoke humor and release in the soul. For Wright, comedic preaching has a task. It is meant to ensure “relevance by translating the biblical text into the [interpretive] horizon, convictions and experiences that each member possesses.” Wright continues,

The end result is to provide a biblically based answer to the questions and needs that an individual brings into the sanctuary/auditorium through fusing the biblical text into the experience of the hearer...Preaching to fuse the horizon of the text within the horizon of the hearers addresses tensions that already exist in life but works through them. The tension-release allows people to feel challenged from the fact that the tension was addressed, but confident that it can be surmounted. The sermon successfully seals the text as an answer to the question that already exists in the horizon of the hearer.

Hearers come away energized, fed from the preached Word, soothed and ready to come back again next Sunday to consume more of the product that the Scriptures have to offer...[T]he comedic hermeneutic of preaching leads to believers who share the identical convictions of the society but possess a value-added dimension—Jesus in one’s heart or a personal relationship with God or some other life-enriching experience that helps one to exist as a member of the society as it is.<sup>34</sup>

Therapeutic preaching, the best exhibit of the church’s captivity to and embodiment of therapeutic culture that we noted above, is being fostered in Millennials by the church itself. In fact, it is practices like these that cause reflective practitioners like Kenda Creasy Dean to ask confrontational questions that wonder if the church is even the church anymore, or if, in light of its therapeutic (or psychological) captivity, it is something else.

Wright is helpful for reiterating just how the church came to be the kind of institution that it is, fostering the kind of people that it makes. “American Christianity has provided a resource for the development of such a therapeutic homiletical rhetoric. The Puritans built their regular sermon around the covenant of grace, in which an individual moves from a negative state (sin) to a positive state (salvation) by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.” He observes further,

This narrative can undergo simple modification without disturbing its fundamental structure. All that needs to be done is to translate the terms of these states into contemporary therapeutic language. The negative state (sin) can easily become individual feelings of alienation, and the positive state (salvation) translates easily into an expressivist language of self-fulfillment. Rather than grace as the forgiveness of sin, God’s grace becomes God’s empowering presence in a personal relationship that helps individuals overcome the experiences of disquiet that come from living in the culture.<sup>35</sup>

The language of forgiveness of sins, which constitutes much of the content of preaching, is still very present in the church. It is indeed theologically appropriate and orthodox language. And yet this very language still plays the part that Wright is pointing out in his argument—that the biblical message is meant to help satisfy the personal needs of those who come to church. Preaching to forgive sins then really amounts to preaching a soteriology of self-fulfillment. The gospel becomes a message that is meant to help hearers cope with the stresses of their life, to offer strength in hard times, to help them feel better about their lot in life. This is, in the end, the message that Millennials are receiving from the church. No wonder they imagine God to be what Peter Steinke calls a “giant Prozac or sweetener” or a “candy machine God” in the sky who is only interested in helping us, making us feel better, and ensuring our happiness.<sup>36</sup> For that is, in fact, what we in the church have taught them.

### **Millennials and the Church: Passing on a Therapeutic Faith**

But how exactly can we say that the church has effectively taught this to Millennials? Granted, we have already construed American culture as therapeutic. Furthermore, we have already noted, following Christian Smith that moralistic therapeutic deism is “parasitic,” unable to survive on its own, and so it leeches life

off of established religious traditions like Christianity. Yet, it *is* passed on via these traditions. How does this *passing on* work? One word: liturgy.

In order to account for the formation of Millennials (and their parents, since Millennials learned much of their faith from their parents, both inside and outside the church), it is important to account for that passing on in terms of liturgy. Liturgy, however, has normally been reserved for an understanding of social rites that are strictly “religious.” However, in what follows, I will use the term more broadly in order to account for the formation of Millennials both inside and outside of the church to show how the “tradition” of the therapeutic is passed on.

To do this, I borrow from the insightful and creative work of James K. A. Smith. He has helpfully and suggestively broadened the use of the term “liturgy” to account for formative phenomena in the secular sphere. But let me start at the beginning of his argument.

Smith wants to us to pay greater attention to the *formative* aspects of liturgy. He does this for numerous reasons. First, he wants to point out that in many spheres of our lives we are engaged in activities that we would most likely describe as informative or educational (like going to school) but that he would argue also inevitably have a formative aspect to them.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Smith will argue that these formative aspects are primary. While we are indeed being *informed*, there is a great deal more *formation* happening.<sup>38</sup> So if you’re attending a college that is known to be a “degree mill,” you’re not only getting *information*, but also a certain kind of *formation* such that your participation in the life of the institution is shaping you to embody certain values oriented around a market economy driven by movements of production and consumption.

To get at this sense of how *formation* is happening more often than we realize, Smith proposes an anthropology that conceives of human beings as *homo liturgicus*. That is, human beings are liturgical animals.<sup>39</sup> What Smith means by this is not something that is radically new. Rather, he is merely drawing on the wisdom of the church to remember that we are creatures of habit, desire, and love. We are formed through means, rituals, rites, ceremonies.

For Smith, it is important to understand human beings as being oriented by a kind of ultimate love. Another way of saying this is to describe human beings as, in a way, fundamentally religious. Everyone has a god. Our ultimate love (or god) is “that to which we are fundamentally oriented, what ultimately governs our vision of the good life, what shapes and molds our being-in-the-world—in other words, what we desire above all else, the ultimate desire that shapes and positions and makes sense of all our penultimate desires and actions.”<sup>40</sup> There is a story involved here that sets out for us what we should construe as the good life. And in our world, there is a plurality of competing stories in this regard. For the purposes of this paper, the primary story we are taking note of is that of moralistic therapeutic deism for Millennials, which construes the “good life” as being happy, living at peace, getting along amiably, and so on. This story is, of course, in competition with the story of the biblical narrative, which construes things differently.

Smith pushes further, pointing out that stories that set forth a vision of the good life become operative in us by creating dispositions and motivating actions. These emerge as efforts to reach that desired end.<sup>41</sup> Most of this simply happens

automatically, as a matter of our biology. Smith points this out by recognizing research in the cognitive and neurological sciences, but also notes that these findings are only corroborating what has been known by the church and philosophers for millennia.<sup>42</sup> In other words, it is simply normal for us actively to pursue visions of the good life. Exercise might be an example. But shopping might be another. And the more we do this, the more these actions become ingrained in us as dispositions to the extent that we are habituated toward certain ends rather than others. We are aimed and directed in the world in certain ways rather than others. Our imaginations and perceptions of the world—that is, how we see things and the way we *think about* the world—are contingent upon the liturgies within which we participate. For the liturgies in which we participate are always upheld by a community—another way of saying that community is “institution.” The community embodies a tradition in its life through practices that carry its story, through which is known the “good life.”<sup>43</sup> One might think specifically here of the church as just the sort of community to which Smith is referring, and that would be correct. He is using the term “liturgy” after all.

But a central notion in Smith’s argument is that we should take notice that the church is *not* the only place where such activities take place. Rather, Smith argues, they are taking place all around us. Or rather, *we are engaged in them always, already*. And thus, we are constantly being formed. As liturgical creatures we are being habituated into certain ways of being-in-the-world. One example would be, for our purposes, a therapeutic way of being-in-the-world.

Liturgies, for Smith, shape us because all liturgies are constellations of rituals and practices that are meant to aim us toward some ultimate end or *telos*.<sup>44</sup> They operate according to a story. And as humans participate in them, that story becomes implicit in their lives. It functions as something other than what we think *about*, but more like what we think *with*. It gives us an identity and orients our living and doing. Thus, as we noted above regarding the church’s captivity to therapeutic culture and specifically the felt obligation of a preacher to address felt needs, we see an example of how the story that is implicit in the therapeutic is operative in the embodied practices of the church without the church being explicitly aware of it. The preacher *believes* he is delivering the goods. The preacher *desires* to preach faithfully. Simultaneously, the preacher *feels* obligated to preach a sermon that will speak directly to the felt needs of his hearers and bring people back next week. This felt obligation is the implicit story of the therapeutic at work in the life of the church due to the effects of the “secular” liturgy of therapy at work in the world outside the church. To the extent that all us of who participate in the life of the church also live and breathe in the world, we have comingled the two worlds and unwittingly the “secular” liturgy has infected the “sacred.”<sup>45</sup>

Thus, the therapeutic has become parasitic on the sacred liturgy of the church and by means of the church’s practice is passed down and perpetuated. Millennials who confess that they have received their faith of moralistic therapeutic deism from their parents are indeed telling the truth, for the church embodies that faith within its own life. The example of preaching above provides a strong example of how this is the case.

## Millennials and the Church: What to Do

In the years that I have been working with college students and young adults, I have heard older adults say regularly that they are confused about why there is a great deal of current attention given to the “problem” of Millennials and their circumstances. Some ask me when Millennials are going to grow up and just join with the rest of the church in “grown-up” worship. Other older adults simply think that there is something wrong with young people altogether and that any problems they seem to have—with the church or otherwise—cannot be blamed on anyone but them and them alone.<sup>46</sup> Each of these instances denotes the vast discontinuity between Millennials and those who have come before them. Millennials are difficult to understand, and yet the issues that they face, like the ones I am trying to raise here in terms of their relationship with the church—while complicated and, indeed, indicting the church at large—are not beyond our grasp. I am thankful for some who are trying to show older adults that Millennials are worth our time and concern.<sup>47</sup> Neither should we simply dismiss them and their problems, assuming that they are just going to grow up and join us (clearly we should now be aware that something is wrong with “us” too!); nor should we assume that their problems are somehow only their fault and leave them to handle things on their own. If we do that, they might simply be looking for help from the candy machine god.

Nevertheless, I see hope in my work with Millennials. At the same time, I harbor some trepidation about the future of the church. Let me express that hope and trepidation in the form of a few questions to try to pique your imagination, and then suggest some ways we might foster better ministry in, with, and amongst them.

What if Millennials intuitively sense that the church is just another therapeutic institution, thus leading them to wonder what difference the church makes over and against the plethora of other similar institutions that presumably do therapy better? Why should they feel that they need to go to church? What if Millennials intuitively sense the discontinuity between the story we think we—as the church—are telling and the story they know we are *actually* telling (that is, the therapeutic story)? What if, for the Millennials who still find themselves in church, we are fostering in them the therapeutic faith that I have been describing here without knowing it? What if all that I have said is true and we are terribly afraid to admit it? And if it’s true, what do we do?

I mentioned in the first section that Kinnaman suggests the church’s inability successfully to connect with and maintain a connection with Millennials has to do with a problem in its ability to make disciples. But he suggests in his first chapter that there is something more to this issue. He alludes to relationships, and I think he is right. Particularly important, he notes, are intergenerational relationships. This should not come as a surprise. The church really does not have a problem making disciples at all, however. It is making faithful disciples. It is just not making the kind of disciples it wants to make. This is the issue we have been dealing with throughout most of this article. The church has been making disciples of moralistic therapeutic deism. *But it wants to make faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.* And in some sense, the church really does not have a problem with intergenerational relationships, at least to the extent that moralistic therapeutic deist disciples are being

made. That is, in fact, what Millennials seem to say has happened. They confess that they received their faith from their parents, the *older* generation.

So it seems that what necessarily needs to happen is a recovery of faithfulness that permeates the entire body of Christ. And it must work like a leaven within the whole loaf. Such is the effect of moralistic therapeutic deism; so must be the effect of the true and faithful teachings and proclamation of the biblical narrative. To the extent that such a recovery of faithfulness can happen, intergenerational relationships will be rightly ordered to the extent that they pass on the tradition of the church and engender its life in those who are younger.

Here are some brief suggestions. I have explained the problem, which is big enough and was necessary for us to “see” in order to grasp the full depth and breadth of our situation. The point was to show that we are not just trying to understand some set of features of “what it’s like” to be a Millennial so that we can cast our ministry endeavors and packaging in a way that would attract them. That would only be to play into another form of cultural captivity, and we have clearly shown that we have a big enough problem on our hands that there is no need to add another.

First, in order to recover the biblical narrative, we must resist the image of Christ as the quintessential “nice guy” and “buddy” and “friend.” Rather, drawing from the richness of our own Reformation tradition and the narrative of Scripture itself, we must allow once again the Word of God in Christ and the proclamation of Him in its various means to confront us. It is not a means of making us feel better. God does not particularly care whether or not we are “happy.” Luther captures it best when describing the kind of effect that the word of God ought to regularly have upon us: “[I]n reality, the Word of God comes, when it comes, in opposition to our thinking and wishing. It does not let our thinking prevail, even in what is most sacred to us, but it destroys and uproots and scatters everything.”<sup>48</sup>

What this will do is allow us to move forward operating with a counter-narrative in play that orients us toward “goods” that will instill within us different dispositions. Let me say this another way. In the liturgy of the Christian church, a great deal of formative work is *supposed* to be happening that aims us toward the life that God desires for us. This life is not oriented around our own needs and happiness; rather, it is oriented toward our neighbor, as God in His care for humanity reaches down through us to enact the work of Christ in the body of Christ, the church—that is, *us*. And so, in and through the church, God is caring for creation, and our works are put to work for the service of neighbor and care for creation. But what is *actually* happening, as we have observed, is that we are being shaped according to the parasitic narrative of the therapeutic, in part, perhaps, because the members of the church who participate in its liturgies are utterly unaware what the meaning of those liturgies ought to be. Toward what should they actually aim us? How is the narrative communicated? Is it communicated at all? Or has the church become so concerned with getting the cognitive-propositional aspects of our confessional and doctrinal positions correct that we have lost touch with the narrative that our liturgical practices (even the didactic ones) are supposed to engender in us?

We are supposed to be made a particular kind of people. And, in fact, that is happening. But again, we are not being made the *right* kind of people. If for example, your congregation does not know what the *nunc dimittis* is, this is a

catechetical problem that is to be laid at the feet of pastors. For this liturgical element is utterly narrative in nature—as is the *Te Deum*.<sup>49</sup> As is the entire liturgy itself! Yet if this narrative is not living, if it is not somehow apparent, if there is just a *blind* going through the motions (for sometimes going through the motions is good—think habituation), then the effect is up for grabs. If you're not telling the story, your liturgy is probably *doing something else*. Context is necessary. And it is up to the shepherd to actually be doing the shepherding in this regard. We are storytellers. So tell the story. Provide the counter-narrative. Narrate your people through the story. Take advantage of your captive audience when God gathers His people for worship and uses your voice to proclaim His story over them to make them His people. Be clear about what you are up to as a people. For it is the community's collective story that gives the church its unique identity. And it is that story that God works in His people through His chosen liturgical means—which His people passively suffer<sup>50</sup>—that they come to embody collectively in the world as a way of being in contradistinction to the therapeutic narrative which we have critiqued above.

Second, regarding intergenerational relationships, it is important to encourage and foster these at every level. As a Millennial myself, I wish I had more of these. Strangely, on the one hand, I have found myself in too many relationships where older adults—particularly Christian leaders (pastors even)—are asking *me* for direction. While in a certain way I feel privileged to be listened to, the relationships have not been the sort where I am simply consulted, but leaned upon, burdened even, by an adult leader who carries a responsibility of leadership in the church but is not personally equipped to fulfill the role in which he or she is serving. This makes me feel awkwardly out of place as I serve alongside those whom I consider to be veterans in the church. On the other hand, my wife and I certainly feel blessed in the relationships that we have with younger people where we enjoy mentoring them, embodying for them a vision of what a life of service in the kingdom might look like and helping them to imagine what their own future might be. On the one hand, I certainly feel *called* to serve where I am with young adults and college students. But I am really unsure if there is anyone in my life that I could call a true mentor, someone to whom I am apprenticed, someone who has selflessly invested in me as a young person. At one time, I had this, to be sure. I would not be who I am without the influence of some very key people. Their investment in my life is invaluable and I thank God for them. Nevertheless, my current experience seems somewhat out of order. And it often seems the same for the young people I serve.

Intergenerational relationships are lacking. David Kinnaman notes this as he brings *You Lost Me* to a close.<sup>51</sup> Richard Dunn and Jana Sundene have written a remarkably helpful text that offers good, practical advice on what being a mentor to a young adult looks like.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, intergenerational discipleship is necessary. How else can we foster a way of being-in-the-world where *faithful* Christian discipleship can be demonstrated, embodied, set forth as the “good life,” and fostered in the lives of younger Christians such that they, at later points in their own lives, might also pass it on to younger Christians? This is the only way we can perpetuate a healthy and faithful Christian faith for the future, especially in a world that threatens to constantly compete for our allegiance.

Third, do not—and I cannot say this strongly enough within our culture of fast food drive-throughs and instant gratification—DO NOT expect to see much fruit from your labor any time soon. You might see glimpses here and there. But understand that the story I told above about how we arrived in our present state was not a story about a phenomenon that took place overnight. It was a cultural shift that we can look back upon and perhaps understand with some sense of clarity today, but it crept up upon us and it happened over a period of generations. As James Davison Hunter has noted, cultural change is a slow accretion.<sup>53</sup> What is inevitable for all of us as we serve God in seeking to reach all people with the Gospel, including Millennials, is that we remain faithful, regardless of whether or not we see some kind of “evidence” of “success.” In the case of the kind of faithfulness we have been discussing, a faithfulness which will indeed entail confrontation because it entails a counter-narrative to the therapeutic, we may very well experience the opposite of what we have envisioned as success—a vision by which we have been captivated. Rather, we must ultimately be prepared for people to turn away. And just as the faithful disciples of Jesus were instructed to do, in such times we do best to move on to those who will hear. What we ought to do is envision an eschatologically oriented sense of success that will be measured according to a logic of faithfulness to the biblical narrative and the ecclesial practices that foster the Christian life and nurture it in a scope as broadly understood as spanning the formative moments that run between cradle and grave.

## Conclusion

I have tried here to offer a perspective on the relationship between Millennials and the church that I have not found in my own reading in the literature. I have also tried to expand the vision of what reflective practitioners are exposed to in the literature on Millennials. There is not much help for getting a grasp on how the church and Millennials have come to have such a complicated and tenuous relationship. But then again, there is not much of an indication that the church itself is in trouble, except for the hints offered by those who have worked with the National Study on Youth and Religion. Still, the hints are only hints. I have also tried to provide the background to give teeth to some of their suggestive statements. Furthermore, I have tried to construe the phenomenological means by which we are formed to be the kinds of religious people studies like the NSYR say we are, and how we perpetuate those problems into later generations. Following from all of this, I have tried to offer some ameliorative suggestions for how the church might learn from all this how to move forward in its relationship with Millennials (and with anyone). It is my desire never simply to be critical, but also constructive. I have tried in this final section, however briefly, to be that.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 28–31.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in the section where he discusses the gaps in disciple-making, he names “relationships” as one of those gaps. See Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 28–29. I will suggest later on that relationships might be the central issue. And without the connections that are necessarily derived from relationships, the formative energies by which disciple making happens will never take hold.

<sup>3</sup> See Part II of *You Lost Me*. Unsurprisingly, this view from *inside* the church resonates from the view offered by those *outside* the church which Kinnaman captures in his previous work, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> The three which emerged from the NSYR include: Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005); Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009); and Christian Smith, et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford: Oxford University: 2011). The first two volumes are most congenial to our concerns here.

While this research focused on the lives of American teenagers, those teenagers are now today's young adults. Even though this paper is focused on Millennials and generally is concerned with young adults when using that term, sociologically, we should not be opposed to considering these teenagers of the NSYR as a part of what we mean when we think of Millennials. Millennials (or Gen Xers or Gen Yers—whichever you prefer, it seems), as Robert Wuthnow suggests, are the 20- and 30-somethings of our world. See Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2007), 2, 6. Having been conducted (at least the first wave) in 2001–2003, the teenagers of the NSYR are rightly considered Millennials today. And what can be known about them ought to stand for us as representative of a larger population than just teenagers, as the researchers of the NSYR will go on to suggest, and which I explore below.

As I continue, my assumption is that the teenagers who were the focus of the NSYR are still representative of the young adults that are the concern of this paper. The information that emerges about their lives and their faith is thus presently valuable for understanding young adults and their relationship to the Christian faith and the church. The authors of *Souls in Transition* work with the same assumption and their finding are beneficial. See particularly chap. 7 of that volume.

<sup>6</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 164. See also Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 148.

<sup>9</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 166.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, this seems to be one of the implications that has not yet produced much reflection from those within the church. I hope to offer a bit of that below.

<sup>11</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 120.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>13</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 171.

<sup>15</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 9. Emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> I transition here to focus more strictly on the “therapeutic” as a problem in the church in general. Indeed, this is a larger problem from which a phenomenon like moralistic therapeutic deism can gain some social traction. While moralistic therapeutic deism was noted by Smith and his researchers to be a problem amongst American young people, they also note that as those individuals get older there *may* be some dilution of moralistic therapeutic deism. Yet it is not clear what is replacing it. See Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 155–56. Nevertheless, as my argument proceeds, we will see that the presence of a distinctly therapeutic church still remains, thus fostering a faith which might not quite be moralistic therapeutic deism, but a faith which is essentially therapeutic nevertheless.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (1966, repr., Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> The late missiologist Lesslie Newbigin helpfully pictures for us the consequences of the fact/value distinction: “First, it created the dichotomy between ‘fact’ and ‘value’ which underlines the division of our society into a public world of facts which we know and a private world of values in which some people are free to believe. Cultural anthropologists, looking at our ‘modern’ culture and comparing it with other human cultures, tell us that this public/private dichotomy is unique to our culture. Its heart is the separation of ‘facts’ which are true for everyone and form the substance of public truth which every child is expected to understand and accept as a condition for living in society, and a private world of personally

chosen values. In this society, therefore, there is no logical possibility of moving from a factual statement 'this is the case' to a value judgment 'this is good.' For if purpose is rejected as a category of explanation, this gap must be unbridgeable, for we do not know whether a thing is good or bad unless we know the purpose for which it exists. It may be good for one purpose but bad for others. 'Good' and 'bad' can only be expressions of personal opinion." Lesslie Newbigin, "The Bible: Good News for Secularised People," (lecture, Europe/Middle East Bible Societies Regional Conference, Eisenach, Germany, April 1991), [www.newbigin.net/assets/pdf/91bgn.pdf](http://www.newbigin.net/assets/pdf/91bgn.pdf) (accessed September 28, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, xxvii–xxviii.

<sup>21</sup> Others make use of these same characters. See also Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1985); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984). The character of the bureaucrat is changed in these authors, who prefer to use the term "manager."

<sup>22</sup> Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 215.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967; repr. New York: Anchor, 1969), 147.

<sup>24</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1999), 78.

<sup>25</sup> D. G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> It is well known that one of the distinguishing differences between mainline Christianity and evangelicalism is in their application of the Gospel. Mainliners in general aligned with the Social Gospel. Evangelicals in general aligned with a personal application exhibited in a "born again" Christianity.

<sup>29</sup> L. Gregory Jones, "The Psychological Captivity of the Church in the United States," in *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neo-Paganism*, ed. Karl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 97–112. See also, Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 35–69.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 65.

<sup>31</sup> Jones, "The Psychological Captivity of the Church in the United States," 97–98.

<sup>32</sup> John W. Wright, *Telling God's Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 9–12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 128–31. Wright refers to the division between the public and private realms that I mentioned above, noting the disjunctions and discontinuities these produce within the individual. He is following the work of Robert Bellah and Alasdair MacIntyre (see footnote 21). In the end, he traces the same story of the apparent necessity of religion becoming a therapeutic institution to solve the existential imbalances within individual lives.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 37, 38.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 135–36.

<sup>36</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010), 16. Steinke writes, "[T]he new god is like a giant Prozac or a sweetener. God will help you improve yourself, give you tips on reducing stress in your life, and offer a Scripture-based set of coping skills with satisfaction guaranteed.

Satisfaction as redemption is what theologian Shirley Guthrie had in mind in his critique of the 'candy machine God.' God has become a dispenser of goodies to indulge our appetites, champion our causes, or steady our nerves. But Guthrie believed that the Holy One had more important things to do that spend time doting on our transient happiness. Guthrie announced frankly, the candy machine doesn't exist."

<sup>37</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2009), 17–19.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 56–62.

<sup>43</sup> Smith is indeed borrowing from Alasdair MacIntyre here. See his *After Virtue*, 2nd ed.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 86.

<sup>45</sup> This phenomenon happens passively. The church has become infected from the outside. For example,

drawing from L. Gregory Jones's work in his article, "The Psychological Captivity of the Church," he notes that psychological language has become so circumscribed in its meaningfulness in American culture that we are quite unable to hear words like "help" or "comfort" in ways other than therapeutically. Thus when they are read in church (like in Bible studies, and subsequently people are asked how such texts "make them *feel*") or preached in sermons, inevitably our consciousness has already been attuned to "hear" such terms and interpret them psychologically. Wright's own reflection on the reception of his preaching corroborates this phenomenon. His hearers were expecting to hear a particular kind of sermon, anticipating the delivery of a particular kind of religion.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 11.

<sup>47</sup> See David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, chap 2; Chuck Bomar, *Worlds Apart: Understanding the Mindset and Values of 18–25 Year Olds* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> *Luther: Lectures on Romans* (Library of Christian Classics), ed. Wilhelm Pauck (1961: repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 298.

<sup>49</sup> By making reference to traditional liturgical elements here, I do not count out my readers who might be employing more contemporary or modern elements. However, on all accounts—or better, to be an equal-opportunity critic again—what counts more crucially in all the practices in which the church engages is the contextual connection of those communal practices to the biblical narrative from which they should emerge and into which they should immerse the congregation as participants. If liturgical practices (of whatever sort: traditional, contemporary, modern, etc.) are not doing this, then they are failing at their primary task.

<sup>50</sup> Luther described the Christian life as a *vita passiva* wherein Christians suffer or undergo God's work. As the distinguished Luther scholar Oswald Bayer puts it, "when Luther says that the Christian life is 'passive' (*vita passiva*) he means that God is the active subject and that the Christian is the object of God's action. The Christian life therefore is *passive* in the sense that it *suffers*, it *undergoes* God's work and so passively receives it." Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 22.

<sup>51</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 202–05.

<sup>52</sup> Richard R. Dunn and Jana L. Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adult: Life-Giving Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012).

<sup>53</sup> James Davison Hunter, *To Change The World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), 33.

# WORKING THE HARVEST IN DIGITAL FIELDS

Joel C. Oesch

**Abstract:** Reaching the Millennial generation with the message of Jesus Christ is a particularly unique and challenging enterprise. They simultaneously exist in two worlds: The Real and the Virtual. Online social networks have become an intriguing medium for identity formation, yet they subtly reinforce a mind-body dualism that is potentially destructive. The essay seeks to identify the theological issues in Web sites like Facebook and offer direction for ongoing missiological efforts to Millennials.

The growth of the early Christian Church relied to a great extent on the leadership of the apostles. Their mission was to bring the gospel to both Jew and Gentile, man and woman, slave and free. Aided by the Holy Spirit, these efforts communicated the narratives that “were handed down...by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.”<sup>1</sup> As the gospel spread following Stephen’s martyrdom, the apostles became associated (in truth or legend) with distinct areas of the world where their influence was most sharply felt. St. Andrew is commonly associated with his mission efforts in the Black Sea region. Tradition holds that St. Thomas spent a great deal of time in India bearing witness to the gospel amidst the Hindus. In these and many other cases, particular people are associated with particular places.

When speaking of mission work today, we also tend to think in concrete, geographical locations. A missionary, after all, does not serve in a theoretical environment but in a very physical and material space. This view of the *Missio Dei* is grounded in the earliest call to bring Christ to the nations in Acts 1, where the apostles were given the mandate to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>2</sup> Christ’s command is directly linked to the location where it is to be carried out. The modern understanding of location, however, is much more complex. A person can be physically present in one place, yet exist virtually in a multitude of other “worlds” simultaneously. As the work of mission evolves in the twenty-first century, technological achievements like social networking have forced the Church to confront new questions: Do the “ends of the earth” include cyberspace? How does one communicate the value of Christ’s bodily life, death, and resurrection in a time when physicality is an optional form of human

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identity?

For the Millennial generation, living in physical space is being complemented, if not supplanted, by this alternate reality: Life in the digital realm.<sup>3</sup> Sociologist Sherry Turkle describes this dual existence in terms formerly reserved for science fiction films. She argues that this generation lives in a “multiplicity of worlds” where one can be ever-present in both real and virtual environments. “This is the experience of living full-time on the Net, newly free in some ways, newly yoked in others. We are all cyborgs now.”<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, this is a reality that must be reckoned with, as only a cynic would venture that the next century would be marked by technological *decline*. Online social networks, picture-sharing sites, and gaming communities force us to reconsider what it means to reach the lost with the love of Christ. How does one penetrate the ethereal world of the computer network with any significant message at all? This essay will seek to describe the online social network phenomenon on theological terms, explore a possible Lutheran response to the anthropological challenges found there, and offer a way forward that includes an appropriate ordering of technology within the broader understanding of being Christian.<sup>5</sup>

### ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

If the terrain of the mission field is changing as dramatically as I imply, the Church must confront these challenges with creative solutions. The priesthood of all believers may need to acquire new grammars with which to speak to the “Gentiles.” Seeking to fulfill the Great Commission, the Church must ask itself two essential questions whenever it attempts to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ to non-believers: First, what is the contextual reality of the harvest field? This is a simple, yet crucial, question to ask. More than ever, Christian mission organizations are doing the necessary work of “exegeting” their target environments.<sup>6</sup> This interpretive exercise requires intensive demographic research, local knowledge, resource-gathering, and training. Like a fisherman who must acquire the skills to “read the water” in order to be successful, a missionary must devote himself to the craft of reading a culture.

Once this question has been adequately answered, a second question emerges. What is the nature of the mission task within this particular context? This suggests that the Church’s *modus operandi* may be subject to local transformation—a suggestion that will need further elaboration below. Both questions are vital. If the Church fails to give proper attention to the physical and social settings of its mission field, it risks presenting a message that is, at best, difficult to comprehend. At worst, it risks long-term offense to the population it seeks to win, potentially setting back generations of future mission efforts. Conversely, if the Church respects its proper mission field but has no clear understanding of its role in the *Missio Dei*, it becomes an entity removed from its purpose—the “making disciples” clause of the Great Commission. The ongoing task of the evangelist is to answer both of these questions with clarity. The presence of online social networks makes this a difficult yet compelling task.

What, then, is the cultural context for the Church's mission to the Millennials? How should the Church decipher the demographic changes that are currently happening in America?

### **THE FIRST QUESTION: HOW DOES ONE EXEGETE THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE?**

Online social networks (OSNs) began their meteoric rise in 2004 when a young Harvard student named Mark Zuckerberg created the now-ubiquitous website, Facebook. While MySpace was already on the digital social scene, Facebook soon blew by its competition with its clever combination of quick clicks, friend searches, and easy-to-create identity fields, making it the premier platform of its kind. By definition, an online social network is an Internet Web site and/or application whose purpose is the creation and maintenance of voluntary social bonds. The most common forms of these networks are instant messaging sites (chat rooms, Twitter), comprehensive identity-building sites (Facebook, Pinterest), and activity-driven sites (video gaming communities/clans and discussion boards). Facebook alone has accumulated over 1 billion subscribers worldwide and well over 100 million users in the United States alone.<sup>7</sup> Each person receives his own home page with a hodgepodge of data fields to be filled: relationship status, political views, pictures, favorite media, and applications *ad infinitum*. Millennials, in particular, have gravitated toward this medium as a way to maintain a level of social connectivity.<sup>8</sup>

The culture's perception of the worth of an OSN will, in some way or another, shape the direction of mission efforts toward the Millennial generation. The perception, thus far, has been inconclusive. On one end of the spectrum, futurist Ray Kurzweil envisions a bright and interesting future in which the whole of human experience is intertwined with computer technologies, a world where there is no longer any safe distinction between human and computer.<sup>9</sup> Video game designer and sociologist, Jane McGonigal, urges society to look at video games as a creative source for solving some of the world's most enduring problems.<sup>10</sup> A Christian missionary who is sympathetic to such views might laud the opportunities that the Church has within the realm of the virtual. For example, one might argue that Facebook offers pastors a new way to connect with their congregants. Christian video gaming clans offer a potential touchstone for the gospel to interact with groups of teens and young adults.

On the other end of the spectrum, many scholars claim that Internet technologies, such as OSNs, are potentially dangerous for a variety of reasons, ecclesial and otherwise. Theologian Shane Higgs implores the Church to consider how media continues to shape faith often in the negative sense.

I find it troubling that so many communities of faith are in hot pursuit of these technologies. The Internet is seen as the Holy Grail of "building community." However, churches will find the unintended consequences of this medium coming back to bite them. The Internet is a lot of things, but it is emphatically *not* a neutral aid. Digital social networking inoculates people against the desire to be *physically present* with other in real social networks—networks like a church or a meal at someone's home. Being together becomes nice but nonessential.<sup>11</sup>

Nicholas Carr, in *The Shallows*, argues that the broad, superficial world of the Internet itself is physiologically altering neural patterns in our brains, making it increasingly difficult for users to sustain any deep thought about an isolated subject.<sup>12</sup> If one takes these warnings seriously, the Church should be reluctant to see the virtual world as a healthy environment in which to carry out the work of evangelism.

I would argue that these emerging issues are essentially theological. Sites like Facebook are ultimately bound up in communicating human identity, a facsimile that threatens to supplant the true identity we have received from God. This incongruity requires our theological attention. While the social and physical sciences offer the Church a variety of helpful perspectives, theology must be brought to bear on these concerns before any mission strategies can be constructed. History tells us that contending views on human identity can be difficult to eradicate. Most heresies are.

### **SUB-QUESTION: ARE WE REVISITING MIND-BODY DUALISM?**

As human communication substitutes face-to-face experiences with tweets, texts, and blogs, the Church may be witnessing the reemergence of an ancient heresy. At various times throughout the Church's history, it has been forced to confront forms of mind-body dualism. In such a worldview, matter is considered inferior, flawed, and prone to manipulation while the mind or spirit is given an elevated status. In historic Gnosticism, for example, one's capacity to transcend the body led to a form of salvific illumination. Capturing this elusive *gnosis* was the ultimate goal. Irenaeus and other Church Fathers boldly rejected this type of anthropology, however, as they were unwilling to yield humanity's physicality as a meaningful part of Christian identity. If the pursuit of knowledge renders the body meaningless, then it follows that authentic community is best (perhaps, only) experienced at the transcendent, intellectual level as well.

A connection is not difficult to form. OSNs similarly reinforce the notion that bodies are superfluous to community. People can now participate in relationships that exist only in a non-temporal, transcendent plane, fully removed from the demands of physical presence. To take this one step farther, not only is the body disassociated from the Self, but OSNs encourage users to upload a substitutionary image, or avatar, that best represents their persona to the digital universe. There is no promise or expectation that the image will be an accurate representation of one's own physical body; in fact, the image serves as a "shadow self" that highlights only the qualities that the user wants others to see—the ultimate form of shaping one's brand.<sup>13</sup> The harsh reality of the digital realm—particularly OSNs—is that it encourages an alternate, non-physical identity. The shadow self is fully orchestrated by the user and fully removed from their particular creatureliness. When these technologies supersede God's word as the fundamental defining factor in one's identity, individuals begin to separate their "selves" from their bodies to their own detriment. A fully-realized digital identity potentially decays into deception, anonymity, and ultimately, narcissism. In spite of the American cultural obsession with the sexualized body, the Millennial generation is sliding into mind-body dualism.

This is not to say that sites like Facebook have no true or lasting worth. If the Church can articulate a role for such technologies that keeps the Christian's source of identity intact, OSNs can be made to serve the Church in another capacity. They can be given a more functional role where goods and information are exchanged but wholesale explorations of identity are resisted.

## THE SECOND QUESTION: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH?

With our context more adequately understood, we can now confront our second question: What is the shape of mission as the Church attempts to engage this brave new world? It may be helpful to think of the answer from two different angles. In the catholic sense, the nature of the Church is unchanging. It continues to be a "holy flock" of pure saints who have been given the task to present Word and Sacrament to its members. By the Church, the Holy Spirit "creates and increases sanctification" and sustains a community where "God forgives us, and we forgive, bear with, and aid one another."<sup>14</sup> These truths are immutable. They have motivated the Church since its inception and found invigoration during the Reformation.

At the local level, however, the Church adjusts its approach to mission in order to speak relevantly to the culture at hand. It focuses and refocuses the nature of its proclamation, causing the local congregation to examine its own structures and cultural biases. Acts 15 serves as an example *par excellence*. The congregation in Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to discuss the basic requirements for newly-converted Gentiles. After hearing evidence of God's work amidst the Gentiles (v.12), James uses this local, contextual knowledge to enhance the Church's understanding of the *Missio Dei*. His fresh interpretation of the Amos prophecy (vv.16–18) allows for a re-ordering of values. Before, there was the conviction that the Jews held some form of primacy over the Gentile converts. Now, the experiences of Paul and Barnabas forced a reinterpretation of the Church's position. The new wine of hospitality and equality could not be forced into old cultural wineskins. James appeals to the presence of the Holy Spirit as confirmation of this reformed attitude by explaining, "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith."<sup>15</sup>

The *Missio Dei* expands, and the integrity of the Great Commission is preserved. Jerusalem was both the source of the problem (its bias against the Gentiles), as well as the source of its solution. "Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose *some of their own men* and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas."<sup>16</sup> The Jerusalem Christians were invested in resolving this problem. The Jerusalem representatives confirmed the text by their own testimony (v. 27), were received with cheerful hearts (v. 30), and ultimately sent on their way with a blessing (v. 32). What had the potential to wrack the church with dissent and schism became an instructive template to deal with cultural roadblocks.

## POSSIBLE PATHS

It is one thing to speak of mission in theoretical terms; it is quite another thing to actually *do* mission. Local parishes generate the necessary man power to

fulfill the Great Commission, and their efforts determine the success or failure of any attempt to minister to the Millennial generation. These parishes may feel a push to react in one of two ways. The first possible reaction of the congregation is to assimilate itself into the culture at hand. If the Church can present itself as a relevant force in online forms of identity—spiritual or otherwise—it can potentially create new and effective methods of evangelism that break through limitations of physical space. Christian missionaries could theoretically work from the comfort of their homes. Under this approach, the Church acknowledges the virtual as an acceptable form of human identity and then proceeds to operate within those spaces as a medium of the gospel message. Accepting the mind-body dualism inherent in OSNs is the price one pays for the opportunity to remain relevant.

Author Gabe Lyons has given the term “blender” to church bodies and particular Christians who seek relevance in society above all else.<sup>17</sup> Blenders view themselves as Christian, yet on a cultural level, “they attempt to blend in with the mainstream.”<sup>18</sup> Christian faith may have some intrinsic value, insofar as it does not interrupt the daily patterns of life. Lyons believes that churches who display this mentality insist on a culture of tolerance, often expressed in their corporate worship.

[The church’s] highest value is to create an atmosphere of acceptance—which is definitely a Christ-like characteristic. On the surface, this seems admirable. They place emphasis on providing a comfortable environment where all are welcome. When they do, spiritual seekers and blenders feel right at home. Complete with a Starbuck-style coffee shop, Disney-like children’s programming, and a worship experience that rivals a Coldplay concert, weekend services attempt to emulate the cultural competition.<sup>19</sup>

Drawing on Lyons’ observations, one can possibly see how such a church could view technology. Actively accepting OSNs is seen as an opportunity to embrace the local culture. If relevance is the material principle at hand, what could be more important than approving a technology that boasts a “membership” of 80% or more of Millennials? A congregation might, for example, offer online worship experiences and late-night chat rooms devoted to spiritual discussions.<sup>20</sup> Uncritically accepting these advances may be the new norm for social (and congregational) life in America. It may lead to a culture in the Church that accepts a new definition of community, reducing it to a collection of associated people gathered in physical *or virtual space*.

With this definition, we lose something significant. The Church moves away from the crucial understanding of man and woman *as creature*. Rather than reinforcing all of the creative aspects of God the Father, a person’s core identity is isolated from his physicality. The cascade effect of this transformation upsets the individual’s sociality, as once again culture regards the body as superfluous to one’s communal participation. A technology should never exceed its inventor, but if the technology is actively shaping the identity of its creator (and community, by extension) does it not follow that the invention itself is master?

On the other end of the spectrum, the Church could react with an anti-technology, neo-Luddite stance. Rather than “blend,” this posture values culture insofar as it conforms to an explicitly Christian ethos. The Luddites were a group of English textile merchants in the nineteenth century who reacted violently to the influx of new technologies penetrating their businesses. As certain technologies

rendered their skills superfluous, low-skilled workers were used as low-cost alternatives, increasing profits. In modern usage, the term “Luddite” is used to designate those who view technological change as a form of social decay.

Perhaps there are those in the Church who hold similar attitudes toward online social networks, regarding OSNs as a social cancer without any long-term redeeming value. The Church could potentially close its eyes to the goods that are brought forth by these networks in the distribution of new modalities of health care, communication, political relations, and entertainment. If the Church moves in this direction, it risks being seen as an anachronistic, backward institution in league with those who once thought the world was flat. The material principle is not one of aggressive outreach, but rather, the Church demands that the world present itself in homage before a relationship can begin.

### **THE THIRD QUESTION: IS THERE A “THIRD WAY” MOVING FORWARD?**

Perhaps the Church can present its witness by neither disappearing into the culture nor isolating itself from OSNs altogether. In such a model, the Church engages the Millennial generation as an embodied, sacramental alternative, providing local parishes criteria for evaluating these and future social technologies. How is this accomplished?

First, the Church can seek out opportunities to promote modern social technologies insofar as they promote information-sharing, connecting over long distances, and to a reasonable degree, play. It does not need to shun “connectivity,” but it is bold to reject connectivity for its own sake. In other words, a healthy approach to OSNs uses connectivity as a means to a particular end, community, but not as an end in itself. To be virtually connected in the body of believers via OSNs must serve a greater purpose: to be in an authentic, confessional community. This functional approach uses OSNs to gather, but not to define. It beckons the spiritually curious, but it does not attempt to bind them together in sacramental forms of worship. It gathers information for servant opportunities, but it cannot pick up a shovel.

Such an approach works well if the Church is willing to put forth a better analogy of the OSN experience. Rather than seeing OSNs as *community*, Christians can carefully articulate a more accurate metaphor: OSNs as *marketplace*. In a marketplace, there is a minimal amount of deep relationship-building in favor of a pragmatic buying and selling of goods. It does not pretend to offer a way forward for human identity, but it claims an inherent dignity where certain communal needs are met.

Second, Lutheran theology in particular can be brought to bear on the OSN phenomenon. It is a theological tradition that readily and willingly proclaims the reality of our creatureliness in the world.<sup>21</sup> The Small Catechism reminds us that “God has made me and all creatures.”<sup>22</sup> Luther, in his Genesis lectures, places Adam’s shared creatureliness in tension with his unique capacity to bear the image of God. Yet even in this tension it is clear that Luther wanted the title “creature” to be of great consequence.<sup>23</sup>

The first article of the Apostle's Creed continues to press this point. God, as Maker, freely chose to form man from the dust of the earth. Not only does He construct our flesh with His hands, but God uses the very same materiality to communicate his grace. The Incarnation serves as an immediate verification of that fact! Jesus is God in the flesh; God among us!

God in the flesh was among the significant concerns of the early Church—recognizing Jesus' own physicality separated the believers from the influence of Gnostic thought. "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ *has come in the flesh* is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God."<sup>24</sup> Jesus, in the act of humiliation, presents Himself to the world in finite form to redeem fallen humanity.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer used humanity's finitude as a way to express a two-fold need. First, human beings need one another to bear their own creaturely limitations; second, we need others to serve as a boundary against the temptation to assert a self-serving power. "The other person is the limit placed upon me by God. I love this limit and I shall not transgress it because of my love."<sup>25</sup> Our bodily existence, then, becomes a form of loving freedom—in Clifford Green's interpretation, "being-free-for."<sup>26</sup>

Finally, Lutheran theology is highly sacramental. It is, at its very core, a rejection of mind-body dualism. The notion that God would choose to communicate His grace through the material means of water, bread, and wine is utterly incomprehensible to those who seek salvation by intellectual transcendence. Partaking in the sacrament engages all five of our senses. We hear the words of Institution. We see the breaking of the bread. We taste and smell the wine. The meal touches our mouths in a way that reinforces what it means to be physical. The Lutheran Reformers were at the forefront of this charge. Exploring this crucial facet of our theology allows communities of faith simultaneously to participate in the ongoing Incarnation of Christ in the world (as the Church) and to receive the means of grace in the material presence of Christ's body and blood. If an OSN cannot, by definition, lead users to receive Christ's body and blood, then we are forced to recognize its most fundamental limitation. That is, OSNs cannot direct us to the rich, grace-based community revealed in the Lord's Supper.

Using these guidelines, a simple criterion for rightly-ordered OSNs may be offered.

1. OSNs are best used to facilitate embodied relationships, not take the place of them.
2. Church bodies can use OSNs as a way to gather resources and people as a means to the following end: Growing an authentic, sacramental community of saints *in toto*.
3. Any digital technology that is used to supplant the biblical conception of identity, particularly concerning our creatureliness, should be boldly challenged.

### **GROWING GARDENS**

It may be helpful to close with one simple, practical example of how the Church can reach the Millennials who find themselves immersed in the turbulent

waters of virtual existence. Build a community garden. Many parishes around the United States are doing this very thing. By transforming a small portion of property into a neighborhood vegetable garden, the Church is aligning a theological point of interest (“we are to be stewards of God’s creation”) with a secular, widespread concern for environmental sustainability. The Church is recognizing and reinforcing the materiality of the community both in theology and action. Christians are not so much condemning their neighbors’ dual existence (physical and virtual), but rather are inviting them to participate in embodied living as a bold alternative. The embodied witness of the Church, in turn, allows for the gospel to be presented in its full force. The prophet Jeremiah, when told of the impending doom of the Babylonians, is instructed to buy a field as a promise of future restoration. “For this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.”<sup>27</sup> Every field and vineyard is a reminder of God’s faithfulness. Indeed, horticultural metaphors for the Church emerge from Scripture on a consistent basis—as branches of a vine, a vineyard, a fig tree, and an olive tree.<sup>28</sup>

In its best form, the Church builds relationships outside of its own doors! The people of God move toward the neighborhood, not expecting them to materialize on the church doorstep. Perhaps the greatest by-product is that community gardens affirm the proper use of technology. OSNs can be made to serve the interest of the entire community by providing functional assistance. After all, a community often shares its best ideas in digital formats like discussion boards. What is the best plot design for a garden? How many hours of sun are required for heirloom tomatoes? How do you keep bugs and varmints out? Ultimately, participants use the digital space as a marketplace, not a temple. It becomes an opportunity to retrieve information for communal good, not an attempt to fill one’s deep spiritual longing for knowing another and being fully known.

The Church is in the unique position to see OSNs for what they are and what they are not. Such online sites can provide connectivity; they can provide services; and they can build a certain measure of social cohesion. However, they cannot physically feed us, they cannot properly give us identity, and they cannot remind us of our creatureliness. In our limitation, our “freedom-for-the-other,” may we invite our Millennial brothers and sisters to participate in the embodied life of the Church, where authenticity defines us and our identity is found only in Christ.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:2 (New International Version).

<sup>2</sup> Acts 1:8 (NIV).

<sup>3</sup> The Millennial generation, while not monolithic by any means, commonly refers to the American generation born between 1980–2000. They are commonly ascribed the characteristics of: being globally minded, technologically savvy, critical of nationalistic attitudes and government, and cosmopolitan. They tend to have socially liberal worldviews and are comfortable with various forms of spirituality. Alternately, this generation has been labeled “Generation Y.”

<sup>4</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic, 2011), 152.

<sup>5</sup> There is precedent for finding such characteristics within the normal usage of the Internet. See David O. Berger, “Cybergnosticism: Or, Who Needs a Body Anyway?” *Concordia Journal* 25 (1999): 340–45.

Berger speaks solely to *Internet* characteristics in this article, not the online social networks which would emerge several years later.

<sup>6</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale uses the phrase “exegeting a congregation” to describe the task of practical theology. In order to know one’s congregation, a pastor must interpret the socio-historical context of their flock. Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 56–90.

<sup>7</sup> “Facebook tops Billion-User Mark,” *Wall Street Journal* (October 4, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> While strong with Millennials, it appears that Facebook is losing its grip on the youth market, as teens are moving toward other social networks. For an interesting article on the situation, see Patrick Hickey, Jr., “Facebook Reveals Teens Getting Bored of the Site,” <http://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/tech/Facebook-Admits-Teens-Are-Bored-of-The-Site-194838891.html> (accessed March 5, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Shane Hipps, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 115. Author’s emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Joel Oesch, “The Ethics of Facebook,” online presentation, Feb. 2, 2011.

<http://prezi.com/qhybdwcz0nn-/ethics-of-facebook/> (accessed March 4, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> Large Catechism II/51, 53, 55 in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 417–8.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 15:8–9 (NIV).

<sup>16</sup> Acts 15:22 (NIV), my emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> This designation has many similarities to the Niebuhrian typology, the “Christ of Culture.” See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 83–115.

<sup>18</sup> Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians: How a New Generation is Restoring the Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 40.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> One early, perhaps more extreme, version of online church was [www.churchfools.com](http://www.churchfools.com), where users designed a comic-like character that entered into a church, sat in pews, raised hands, and participated in altar calls. Users would direct the avatar’s actions through their keyboard strokes and mouse clicks.

<sup>21</sup> This has not always been area of intense theological concern for Lutherans, who tend to focus much of their efforts on Christology. The CTRC document, “Together With All Creatures,” is a pleasant reminder of the Lutheran tradition in environmental ethics. “Together With All Creatures.” A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. St. Louis, April 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism, Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 322.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” in *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 1–5*, Vol. 1 of *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 56 Vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86), 55–87.

<sup>24</sup> 1 John 4:2 (NIV), my emphasis.

<sup>25</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 66.

<sup>26</sup> Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Jeremiah 32:15 (NIV).

<sup>28</sup> Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 42–49.

# The Millennials: Reflections on Reaching a Lost Generation for Christ

Sarah Guldalian

**Abstract:** There are 80 million Millennials in the United States. Most of them are living outside the church. What's worse is that they're living without Jesus. The eternal impact of our silence as witnesses is tragic for them, but doing things the same old way as before isn't moving us forward either. Learn about these unique teen and twenty-somethings and how you can share the Gospel relevantly with them—whatever generation or position you are in.

I'm Sarah Guldalian. I am a Christian *and* a Millennial. These two categories are too often exclusive. In fact, the Millennial generation is the most unchurched group in recent history. I'm grieved by this and, as a Christian, you should be disturbed too. This group is in need of our attention, in need of Jesus. Whatever generation you're in, you can be a Christian witness to Millennials. However, in order to effectively reach them with the Gospel, we must come to understand our audience.

The Millennial generation, also known as Generation Y, is the group born from 1980 through 2000. Eighty million people in the United States are Millennials.<sup>1</sup>

Meet their parents, the Baby Boomers, also known as Helicopter Parents. These parents, the wealthiest and most educated parents in our nation's history, work tirelessly to prevent harm from befalling their children. In fact, they are *still* shielding their children, who are now adults, from consequences—despite the hazards of such protection. It's no wonder that Millennials, often referred to as “trophy kids,” are frequently overconfident, narcissistic, and possess a sense of entitlement. (Please don't misconstrue my description here as judgmental; these comments reflect both textbook definitions and, in my own case, are fairly self-descriptive.)

Millennials have been afforded every opportunity from their hovering parents and often find the “nest” too comfortable to leave. Think about it. Would you leave if your bills were paid, your laundry cleaned, your meals cooked, and you had no curfew? They are living with their parents far longer than any previous generation. While you, who are perhaps a Boomer or part of the Golden Generation, would be mortified to cohabit with your parents as an adult, 90 percent of this Peter Pan Generation claims to be “extremely close” to their parents.<sup>2</sup>

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As people, Millennials are self-expressive and highly inspired by fashion and pop culture. Their communication preference is technology. If you want to connect with a Millennial, go the virtual route over one-on-one communication. You will constantly find them multi-tasking with their various technology media.

They lean toward high performance too, having been programmed with numerous activities due to their parents' rapid and shifting lifestyles. As workers, you will love it that they are upbeat, technologically-savvy, and open to change. As an employer, though, you may find yourself perplexed when they seek rapid rewards and promotions. The label they receive of being "high-maintenance" is often well deserved.

Having received constant feedback and recognition from parents and teachers growing up, they are big believers in their self-worth. They have little fear, or even regard, for traditional authority figures. You'll also notice that they have hung up conventional business attire in favor of fads and personal preferences. Flip flops have even made their way into the office. (Meanwhile, my grandmother is mortified at the thought of such informality. But then, the notion that Goldens wore suits to baseball games and movies appalls me.)

Millennials are the most diverse generation in our nation's history—ethnically and politically. They describe themselves as uniquely tolerant. However, with 9/11 as their major life event, their view of the world around them is clouded by global insecurity. They are distrusting of and cast a wary eye on human nature. In fact, two-thirds of the Millennials surveyed said that you can't be *too* careful.<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to family values, you will find them marrying five or more years later than their parents, if at all. More than 62 percent of Millennials have cohabitated at least once before marriage.<sup>4</sup> However, in this generation, it is not politically correct to judge others morally. Experience shows they will not respond well to moral judgment.

When it comes to religion, three-fourths of Millennials hold a negative perception of Christianity.<sup>5</sup> They find present-day Christianity to be judgmental, hypocritical, and old-fashioned. Their parents, the Boomers, have been less tied to tradition than previous generations and, as a result, have been less regular as churchgoers. Church is not even on the radar for many Millennials.

As to "religious preference," many mark themselves as "none." However, those who adhere to religious beliefs usually customize their religion, as they might their Starbucks coffee, checking this box and that from various religions. Their self-described tolerance leads them to endorse the concept of co-existence. It should be no surprise Millennials are the most highly unchurched generation in recent history.

Speaking of church, the very word itself and especially the term, "denomination," is often a point of contention for Millennials. For most of them, the term represents the institution. This generation is neither attracted to nor fond of institutions.

Because of economic woes that have robbed their parents of retirement funds and the negative press surrounding fallen religious leaders, they distrust institutions. They don't want to be part of a club or league like previous generations. They don't get a charge out of being a member of anything. That might also be why

only 2 percent of Millennial males are military veterans, as compared to 13 percent of the Boomers and 24 percent of men in the Silent Generation.<sup>6</sup>

This self-expressive, self-aware group appreciates that which is experiential and “real.” Although turned off by institutions, they may not, however, be opposed to *hearing* about Jesus. And so, as Christians, we should focus on introducing them to Jesus Christ first and the church second. Most appealing to them would be hearing your personal experience with Jesus Christ (i.e., what has He done to change your life?). Remember, they are open to change—and your experience.

Although the Millennials are a breed different from previous generations, spiritual truth does not change. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. There is a heaven, and the only way to get to our Father in heaven is through Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Eternity looms in the balance for every person. So, the question is not, “Should we reach the Millennials?” As Christ’s ambassadors, the resounding answer to that question must be “Yes!” But, instead, we ask, “How do we as the church reach Millennials with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a manner that will lead them to listen?”

Matthew 5:14–16 says, “You are the light of the world ... Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Rather than cursing the darkness, let us instead shine a light.

An example of cursing the darkness would be giving your child or grandchild a guilt trip for not attending church or for living with his girlfriend. Remember, as the most diverse generation yet, the Millennials consider “tolerance” to be a must. If they view you to be intolerant, they will tune you out completely. Once you’ve lost their trust, it’s hard to regain it. Although you may be right, you will probably not be heard. The Law is necessary for pointing to our sins and our need for a Savior. However, you will have more success pointing to your own sin as an example, rather than pointing to theirs.

The way to shine the light is to package the Gospel—the love of God as expressed in His Son Jesus Christ—in a manner relevant for them. Millennials have been bathed in a lifestyle of instant gratification. Their role models have been pop culture icons—many of whom have adopted self-destructive addictions. As a result, you may find a generation addicted to various substances, to materialism, to eating disorders, and more. Remember, when it comes to communicating, their world is primarily virtual, not personal, leaving many feeling alone.

Although they may not identify any burdensome feeling they experience as shame to be associated with sin, guilt and shame *are* feelings they experience regularly. Many teens and young adults whom I have mentored have expressed major regrets and believe there is no hope of change for the future. Robbing people of hope is a fundamental scheme of the devil.

The message that resonates with their hearts is that God loves them, Jesus seeks a personal relationship with them, and true freedom from bondage and addictions is found only in Christ.

When I was in college, I slipped away from the Lord. I got involved in addictive habits tied to partying. As a result, I became severely depressed. I tried pulling my act together time and time again. However, because of my addiction to

partying and all the social aspects connected with it, I could not find my way out. I saw no alternative. I was in too deep.

I would wake up in the morning with severe remorse, shame, and an utter sense of hopelessness. I had dug myself in so deeply that I believed I could never recover. There was no light at the end of the tunnel—only darkness. On the path I was traveling, eternity looked dark as well.

A peer of mine, a Christian female in my journalism class, saw how badly I was struggling. Instead of reminding me of what I already knew—that I was a huge mess—she told me that Jesus died for me to clean up the mess I had made. She said there was no way I could do it on my own. She told me I could only change because of the power of the Holy Spirit and that God was chasing me. He would meet me where I was at, even in the middle of my mess. I wasn't alone. In fact, He went to hell in my place. All I had to do was trust in Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Through faith in Him, I had a clean slate; I was a new creation. I have never heard or felt anything more beautiful than when He came into my life. It transcended everything else.

This transition was not an easy one. But, God used my friend in a wonderful way. She stuck by me as God brought me out of darkness and into a new life. What I heard was that God loved me and Jesus died for me. What resulted was a total life change. Jesus changes lives. If He doesn't, why else would you be reading this article? You must share the Gospel with this generation that is lost and moving toward destruction.

In what medium should we express this to Millennials? The answer is through real relationships and the avenues that they love: tech media and pop culture.

While my professional background is in television and radio, I am an evangelist at heart. One thing I am doing as the producer of evangelism training for Lutheran Hour Ministries is sharing the Gospel with Millennials through multi-media and entertainment events that share the Gospel in innovative and exciting ways. Remember, they love media, technology, and pop culture.

Using media and edgy marketing pieces distributed in high-visibility locations around our destination city, especially around college campuses, we invite high school and college-age students to high-energy events that combine original music from numerous bands, fun, engaging media, and raw drama from professional actors. Together, these cast members share the Gospel relevantly. We also connect people to local churches.

**Five14** comes from Matthew 5:14, which tells us, “You are the light of the world.” Christians are coming together to shine the light of Christ through these events. In fact, Christian students are trained prior to these events to invite their friends and to be a witness to them.

The word “revolution” represents the theme woven throughout the night: there is real change that can happen in your life. It comes through Jesus Christ, the ultimate Revolutionary. He loves you and desires to be in relationship with you.

These events are very experiential and personal. The speakers and musicians are open about how God has changed their lives, and people are given an opportunity to pray with a Christian at the end of the night. Local youth help as volunteers too so that attendees can be connected with local churches. To make it

easy for anyone to attend, everything is free: parking, entrance, food, drinks and prizes.

While you may not have the resources available for a large venue event, there are things you can and must do to reach the Millennials. The consequences of our apathy are already evident. Our church will continue to suffer diminishing numbers; worse still, without Christ, these young people—people whom God loves—will end up in hell. Maybe we need to look at it this way and ask ourselves this question: How much must you dislike or even hate someone to be okay with their going to hell?

Consider these ideas for effectively connecting with Millennials.

Ideas for **peers**:

- Get on their turf. Show you value your relationship and their invitation by showing up to their events.
  - Maybe they'll take you up on a future invitation to a spiritual event.
- When your friend is struggling, take her out for coffee or a meal. Give her your undivided attention. Then, share how Jesus showed up in a dark moment for you.
- Share Jesus through social media.
  - On Facebook and Twitter, share a verse and personalize it with a comment.
  - Start a blog and share the real moments—the good and the bad, and what God is revealing to you through it.
    - Make sure to invite all your friends to it!
- Invite a friend to a concert or an event you know will share the Gospel relevantly. Then, encourage candid discussion with him afterwards.
- Extend an open invitation to church, youth group, or campus fellowship.
- Be real and raw about your shortcomings. Don't act better than them. You aren't.
- Help them overcome addictions by sharing the Word and providing alternatives to unhealthy events.
- Tell your friends to check out an artist or movie you're into that has Gospel undertones. Talk about it afterwards.
- Just do it. Tell people that Jesus has changed your life, and He's there to change theirs too. Don't let your fear of being labeled "intolerant" leave you in silence.
- Remember, there is a heaven; there is a hell. The only way to get to heaven is through Jesus Christ. If your friends don't know Jesus, they are headed to hell. Be bold in proclaiming Christ during conversations of muddled spirituality.

Ideas for **parents**:

- Lead with love, not fear. Don't become frantic if your Millennial has walked away from the Lord. Hovering will not help and may push him further away.
- Ask the Holy Spirit to show you when to speak and when to be silent.
- Give your desperation and fears to the Lord. He loves Millennials even more than you do.
- Speak the truth when prompted, but do it in love.
- Pray! Ask God to bring Christians into their lives they can look up to and listen to. You may be too close to the situation.
- Foster relationships in which they are able to be open with you about failings. Pray that God gives you words to minister to them within those situations.
  - If you need to apologize for past failings, do so.
- Show them through your life what it means to be fortified by Christ every day.
- Continue to love them no matter what.

Ideas for **their elders**:

- Be a storyteller.
  - Millennials are highly educated and love what is “retro.” They enjoy learning what has happened in the past and recreating it for their lives.
  - Tie in how God was with you during these moments in your life.
- Adopt a Millennial.
  - Become a surrogate grandparent. Remember, Millennials are extremely close to their parents. That goes for grandparents too.
  - Create a sense of home for them by using your gifts of hospitality.
    - Cook dinner for your Millennial and his or her friends.
      - College students and young career people are especially looking for a sense of home.
    - Offer to take them out frequently for meals to catch up on their lives.
- Show enthusiasm for their successes with a card or kind word.
- Don't judge their differences in lifestyle. Just listen and pray for opportunities to share Jesus.
- Overall, don't be afraid to connect with them. If you are real, yet loving, they will see you as pure gold.

Ideas for **the church**:

- Don't expect Millennials to walk into our churches. The numbers show they aren't.
- Train your members to share Jesus lovingly in their everyday lives.
- Cast out the nets by serving the community (outside of the church walls).

- Ask your Millennials to assist in choosing relevant outreach and in leading the cause.
- Invite the community to *serve* the community *with* you!
- As a church worker, model evangelism in your life. Your people will follow your example.
- On Sunday, preach the Gospel every time. Don't assume they know the backstory.
- Share the Gospel relevantly. Don't be tied to traditions simply because "we've always done it that way."
- Put your message into everyday terms. Our churches revolve around a culture that is foreign and irrelevant to newcomers.
- Host various ethnic and cultural events in your church and not just those of Germanic origin. Without diversity, this richly varied generation will feel there is no room for them.
- Show your human side: share personal shortcomings, then point to how God saved the day.
- Refrain from putting down other denominations. Christian Millennials value tolerance and will lose respect for you as a spiritual leader if you belittle other groups.
- Allow young people to lead. They will attract people like them.
  - Millennials seek community. If they come in and do not see other Millennials, they won't stick around.
- Ask Millennial members to help you with social media for your congregation.
- Through social media, share Jesus before a church invitation.
- Be transparent. Be the same person all week long as you are on Sunday. Millennials are watching you to see if they can trust you. If they can't, they won't want to be a part of your church.

For more ideas on reaching out to Millennials, feel free to visit [whatsfive14.com](http://whatsfive14.com) or e-mail us at [five14@lhm.org](mailto:five14@lhm.org).

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Leung, "The Echo Boomers," *60 Minutes*, CBS News, September 2005. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/10/01/60minutes/main646890.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> Jill Mahoney, "Stronger by Association: Understanding Generational Conflict." July 2011. <http://blog.drakeco.com/2011/07/understanding-generational-conflict.html>.

<sup>3</sup> PewResearch Social & Demographic Trends, "Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change," Feb. 24, 2010. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/02/24/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Barna Group, "A New Generation Expresses its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity," Sept. 24, 2007. <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/94-a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity>.

<sup>6</sup> PewResearch Social & Demographic Trends, "Millennials."

# On Millennials and Story

Jeff Cloeter

**Abstract:** If Millennials are viewed as a distinct people group, the church must understand their particular cultural realities. In this essay, Rev. Jeff Cloeter lifts up a narrative approach to communicating the gospel in a culture which values personal experience and converses in story. Under Modernity's influence, the church has tended to convey the faith in statements. Rev. Cloeter suggests story as a means of speaking the faith in a Millennial context.

I was introduced to Jeanette through a mutual acquaintance, a member of my congregation named Amy. Jeannette and Amy had become friends through their volunteer work at an animal rescue agency. There would be no other reason for us to have met. I am a male, heterosexual Lutheran pastor; she is a lesbian, an atheist, and survivor of physical abuse. Only because of the relational capital of our mutual acquaintance was she willing to share her story with me. After an honest revelation of her life's experience and her pointed criticism of Christianity, there was a pause in the conversation. She had told her story, and the pause indicated that it was my turn. What should I say?

## Storytelling as Methodology for Evangelism

In this essay, I contend that in a twenty-first-century American context, reclaiming the art of story is critical to conveying the gospel in a culture largely unimpressed with our claims of truth. 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.

Story is a powerful method for conveying the gospel, particularly within the culture of those coming of age in these early decades of the twenty-first century. In his essay, "On Stories," C. S. Lewis writes, "The story does what no theorem can quite do."<sup>1</sup> Story was critical in Lewis's conversion. He famously recounted his late night conversation with J.R.R. Tolkien and the revelation that Christianity was "the true myth" that "really happened."

Christians have always been "storytellers." With regularity, Israel recounted what God had done for them (Ex. 15:1–18; Deut. 6:20–23). Early Christians were always retelling the story that God was setting the world's agenda in a man from Nazareth (Acts 2:22–24; 1 Cor 15:1–11). Christians are those who know **God's story**. Because of this, they recognize God's activity in **their own personal stories**. A Christian witness among the Millennial generation necessitates a compelling

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narration of this intersection, between God's story and our own.

Among the Millennial generation in particular, the church must be able to tell a clear and compelling story amidst a landscape of competing narratives and sub-stories. Unfortunately, the average Christian fumbles in two critical areas of this task. First, there is a lack of clarity on what precisely God's Grand Story is. Thus there is a struggle to speak it with any clarity or conviction. Second, 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. Christians will continue to elicit all the stereotypical religious parodies unless we can be good storytellers.

A narrative methodology fits well in an era of American Christianity that is shifting from places to people, from attractional to incarnational in nature. My friend and colleague, Robert Millar, notes this important change: Under the old paradigm, "If you build a place, people will come and fill it." Current ministry tends toward, "If you build people, they will fill a place." The shift in focus from **place to people** highlights the need for deep investment in the maturity of God's people for the sake of mission. A narrative approach to evangelism aligns with this paradigm.

After revealing her story, Jeannette was awaiting my story. As a theologically-trained clergyman, I admit an impulse to respond with complex **statements rather than stories**. In general, Christians have a propensity for responding this way. We have stock and standard means of articulating the gospel. This is not to negate the importance of statements, only to note that Millennials tend to communicate narratively, valuing the exchange of shared experience.

A common "gospel statement" is, "Jesus died on the cross for our sins so that we can go to heaven." To Jeanette, this statement would have been met with hostility. *Why do you have to bring Jesus into everything? The cross is so morbid. Why do you think everyone is a sinner? How do you know Jesus is the way to heaven? How do you know I'm not going to heaven anyway? And I was waiting to hear about you. I don't even know you. And just like every other arrogant Christian, you starting talking at me.*

## **The Current State of Story**

Before the onset of cable TV and the internet, only centralized sources of information existed. Three major evening news broadcasts told the transcendent national narratives. A small number of major newspapers published the common stories that every American knew. With the "flattening" of media, the channels, sources, and sites are endless. So are the stories.

The world is filled with competing stories and sub-stories, narrated by a plethora of subcultures. Millennials quickly find their lives to be a collection of sporadic, confusing, and painful episodes. In all of the chaotic noise, they ask, "What do all these episodes mean? Is my story going anywhere? Is there any transcendent significance in my story?"

The forceful and rapid advancement of technology has radically changed the nature of story and its meaning. The digital age has created new ways of communicating, relating, and storytelling. 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.

Unfortunately, most technology is not conducive for thoughtful reflection. Finding meaning and significance in one's story requires patient processing and frequent pauses for intentional thought about the day's frantic events. Instead of a sense of significance, we are left with convoluted days of unrelated episodes. 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.

For Christians, one's personal story finds its meaning and significance in a larger Story, the grand narrative of what God has ever and always done for the world. This Story allows one to take a step back and see the big picture. God's Story affords significance and meaning to the endless information we possess, ordering the chaotic events and episodes that once seemed unrelated. Amidst this landscape, Christians have a remarkable opportunity to tell a Story of unparalleled significance into a culture desperate for meaning.

### **The Modern Church's Disconnect**

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 (or post, post-modernism, or whatever paradigm we are now in) has built its foundation on **experience**. Those in the Millennial generation are particularly compelled by what they have genuinely felt, heard, and seen. This observation is not intended to defend or promote either paradigm (modern or post-modern), only to recognize that they exist and how we might exist within the dominant influence of one or the other.

For centuries, the church (Lutherans in particular) has operated primarily in the realm of modernity's reason. The Reformation arose from the context of modernity's rise. Confessions, theses, articles, and systematic arguments are all modes of a modern theological approach. The goal is to persuade with logical arrangements of facts. While this is certainly an important part of the Christian faith (Paul's epistles function in this manner), it is clearly distinguished from a narrative approach.

While emerging generations have not altogether abandoned reason, they are more likely compelled by relationship. Millennials long to experience truth in shared stories. If this is the case, there is obvious disconnect in our mode of communicating. The modern church's witness has been about "making the case." Millennials are saying, "No, tell me your story." And Christians operating in modernity respond, "Well, let me explain our teachings." And Millennials respond, "No, I don't want to know about your teachings. I want to know about *you*."

After a few weeks of volunteering at the animal rescue agency, Jeannette wanted to know Amy's story because she wanted to know *Amy*. Jeannette was familiar with sharply clad preachers on TV. She knew of homophobic Christians. She had a reactive impulse to "Christians who legislate their morality." She knew of abusive Christian clergy cloaked in robes. No well-thought reason or post-modern

apologetic was going to sway her. But Jeannette was intrigued by Amy. Here was a young Christian female who loved Jesus and cared for abused animals. And here was a Christian who was generally interested in her own story. When Jeannette discovered Amy's Christian faith, she screamed, "No way! You're not allowed to be a Christian!" Amy's story contradicted the stereotypical Christian stories that Jeannette had come to know.

### **Scripture as Story**

Scripture begins with, "In the beginning . . ." (Gn 1:1). It is our Story's "once upon a time." Mark began his gospel with, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God" (Mk 1:1), and then proceeded to tell the Story. Luke wrote his gospel as "a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us" (1:1). The Christian faith and its Scriptures are largely one big narrative. The Bible tells the Story of God and His activity among human beings. In narrative fashion, Scripture reveals who God is by what He does.

The episodes found in the historical narrative of God's people give them their identity and purpose in the world. For instance, a rainbow gives meaning to a worldwide flood. An annual meal of unleavened bread defines a people once enslaved and now made free. A surgical procedure on every 8-day-old baby boy tells the story of God's promise from generation to generation. A dark Friday afternoon is remembered by its defining mark, a Roman execution device called a cross. Christians observe this day annually, and we now call it a "Good" Friday.

Like a song, the Bible tells one overarching Story through verse and chorus. Each verse was a new episode in which God acted upon human history (for example, the Exodus). Each chorus reiterated the common theme woven throughout all the episodes (a redemptive God). In each "sub-story," we trace the activity of a God whose steadfast love drives Him to rescue a rebellious people. Psalm 136 illustrates this redundantly, "His steadfast love endures forever."

The Story's climax is clearly the cross event, the ultimate iteration of God's activity in every story throughout all time. In helping the first disciples make sense of the crucifixion, Jesus reviewed the Grand Narrative and told the Story "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). In similar fashion, these followers would tell and retell the Story, as did Philip who "beginning with this Scripture told him (the eunuch) the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). The Christian faith possesses a narrative heritage, rooted in the Scriptures. It provides the church with a natural propensity to be a people of story, God's Story in our own.

### **Learning to Tell Stories**

Everyone has a story. Most stories begin with "me" or "I." They may be stories of triumph or tragedy. They may be about possessions, popularity, or being loved. Or they may be defined by victimization, brokenness, and pity. The Scriptural narrative is a reversal of all human stories. Instead of beginning with "me," its beginning and central theme is God. Human history is His story. It is not that the individual Christian is unimportant, but simply that one fits into the larger Story.

What does this grand Story mean to individual stories? How might we speak of The Story within our own?

After Jeanette told me her story, it was obvious that she was waiting to hear mine. I could have addressed the issues in her personal life, or refuted her objections to Christianity. Instead, I told a story, a personal story of loss and pain. I shared it because my painful experience related to hers, although they were very different stories. She had experienced the death of a sibling. My story served as a bridge to her own experience. In telling my story, I accomplished three things:

- 1.) I **diffused** any tension or hostility she had.
- 2.) I **identified** with her pain, validating her own feelings. In a sense, this confirmed the painful consequences of the law in her life.
- 3.) I **earned** relational capital. I was no longer just a pastor; I was a person. It created a deeper connection in a short amount of time.

Now that my story had created a bridge to Jeanette, I could carry something across that bridge, namely God's Story. While it is tempting to open the floodwaters of the whole counsel of God, I kept my focus simple and narrow. I shared the gospel with her by telling of how it addressed my painful experience. I told her that in the midst of death, I had a good Christian friend tell me, "Our God is a God of life." This simple statement was the turning point in my story, allowing me to grieve with hope. "This was my remedy, my way out of depression," I told her. At this point, I had not spoken of Jesus specifically. But she asked, "How do you know he's a God of life?" "Well, let me tell you about this thing called resurrection," I replied as I unwrapped the Easter story.

I did not tell my personal story by accident. I was prepared. I have taken time to consider God's Story and what His Story means for my own. In so doing, I have become aware of four characteristics of storytelling that are critical to Christian witness.

**Clear:** The Christian message must be communicated a clearly focused manner. There is enough static, confusion, and chaos in the world. Christians easily devolve into religious complexity. Messages having a clear goal cut through all of the obscurity. Can you speak clearly enough that the person listening to you can repeat the essence of your message?

**Concise:** Especially among Millennials, the message must be summarized succinctly. Modern media has trained us to pay attention in short intervals. Additionally, our interactions with those unfamiliar with the Bible are often brief. This is not to undermine the necessity of longer explanation, but if we can't summarize our message in one minute, we will be challenged to do so in 60. Can you share your message in 60 seconds?

**Consistent:** The Christian community must be consistent in her message. If you asked ten Christians what the gospel is, you may well get ten different responses. Consistent doesn't mean the "same." Scripture uses a variety of language and metaphors to express the gospel. Consistent *does* mean that the core of the gospel is fundamentally unified.

**Compelling:** In a world of competing narratives, what makes the Christian story uniquely compelling? What is so gripping about Jesus? Why would we ever devote our entire lives to a first-century carpenter executed as a criminal? Christians must know the uniquely compelling components of the Christian narrative.

### **Integrating God’s Story and Our Own**

I have proposed that telling stories is an effective way to communicate with a Millennial generation that values experience. I have talked about the “bridging” nature of personal stories. But how does one’s personal story ultimately become a witness to God’s Story? Clearly, the Holy Spirit can use our lives as means for “incarnating” the gospel. Even apart from our intentional efforts, His work can be authentically manifested in our life. But we strive to be faithful in our Christian witness, longing to give “reason for the hope within us” (1 Pt 3:15).

The art of storytelling lies at the intersection God’s Story and our own. It requires us to answer two questions. First, what is God’s Story? Second, what is my story? Answering the first question requires not only the knowledge of Bible stories, but the recognition of overall themes in the “big Story.” The Creeds may help us navigate this, giving us a Trinitarian orientation and showing us key interpreters of individual texts—creation, redemption, and sanctification. Christians must be conversant with the general scope of God’s Story.

In answering the second question, Christians must give thoughtful reflection to their own life experience. In identifying the key episodes of one’s personal history, the Christian must interpret them in light of God’s Story. For instance, joy at the birth of a child points us to God’s goodness as Creator. Or the loss of a loved one draws us to the pain of the cross and the hope of the tomb’s emptiness. The art of this process is in ascribing meaning to our own history through what we know of God’s history.

I do not have a tidy conclusion to Jeanette’s story. I’d be making it up if I did. To my knowledge, she is still resistant to the Christian message and distant from Christ. We cannot produce neatly packaged “God stories” with cute Christian clichés that fit on a bumper sticker. It is God who ultimately authors the narrative of our lives. Human stories are messy, unpredictable, and frustrating. Millennials are an honest people group, and they recognize the genuine messiness as well as any.

The recognition of such messy untidiness fits well within the Story of all stories. The cross is our paradigm for interpreting the ugliest, most hideous parts of life. On Good Friday, things were anything but “good.” Yet God was most clearly at work on the cross, in the midst of suffering and death. While we have ultimate conclusions of hope, the messy middle often leaves us speechless. The cross event reveals an honesty about the mess, as well as a conviction that God is at work in the worst parts of the story, His Story and ours.

Necessary for Christian witness among Millennials is the ability for every Christian to be a storyteller. I don’t have ready access to conversation with Jeanette. We met once. We’ll see if we meet again. But Amy continues her friendship with Jeannette. As a pastor, my task is to teach, model, and deploy my people to enter vocations and communities that I could never access. This is where Jeannette’s story continues, with our mutual acquaintance Amy, who has entered her story.

Story is a powerful method for conveying the gospel, particularly within the culture of those coming of age in these early decades of the twenty-first century. Each Christian's task is to listen to the stories of those outside the faith and to walk through those stories with them. As we do this, the invitation to tell our own story will arise. Our narratives are compelling because God's Story has intersected with our own. We pray for resolution in each person's story. As Christians, we have been graciously caught up in this Grand Story. We long for those who are far off, that they, too, may find themselves in this merciful narrative of God's love in Christ.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, "On Stories" in *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1966), 77.

# Millennials and Maslow: First Article Needs and Christian Apologetics

Jonathan Ruehs

**Abstract:** The collegiate experience is a time of transition that seems to bring about a natural “growing pain” experience for young adults. Since the 1970s, the theological discipline of apologetics has been closely identified with campus ministry. The Millennial generation, which is that generation currently in college, in some respects echoes previous generations in regard to the questions that arise during their college experience. Yet simply applying past apologetic practices to current contexts does not always work. Tackling intellectual questions to the faith with Millennials does not always mean providing a thoughtful answer as a first response; rather, it requires a sense of discernment in order to determine other underlying causes to the questions that arise. The following article seeks to show how the “hierarchy of needs” proposed by Abraham Maslow, a twentieth-century humanistic psychologist, provides the contemporary campus apologist with a helpful tool to help determine what “First Article” issues might be barriers to a Millennial’s “Third Article” faith.

## Introduction

### Scenario #1

Emily’s Facebook posts were pretty severe. One said: “I know there is proof that God does not exist.” Another remarked how the LCMS had turned her into an atheist. Concerning her first quote, there were other posts related to the tragedy at Newtown, Connecticut. Could this be what she was responding to? But the puzzle became even more intriguing to me when I read other posts that were prayers, even re-posted prayers from LCMS leaders! I began to wonder whether she really an atheist after all.<sup>1</sup>

### Scenario #2

Katy came to my attention when a fellow colleague shared with me that, while she describes herself as not really being a religious person, she was open to having a spiritual discussion with someone in campus ministries. When she came to my office, she talked briefly about having a Lutheran upbringing and mentioned a vague reference to belief in God, but she really wasn’t all that interested in talking about spiritual things. In the midst of our conversation, I asked myself: “What was the point for her coming to talk with me?”

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Scenario #3

Brad's text messages were angry. "I hate God. If he's even real, I hate him. He's never answered a single prayer of mine. I'm done with these religious lies!" What turned a Christian young man, eager to study theology and hopefully one day to enter into seminary, into an angry "misotheist"?<sup>2</sup>

### **Maslow and the Apologist**

Talk about "Millennials" should reckon with the fact that they are people of a certain age. Saying this is probably true for any time of life, but it surely holds true for "Millennials" right now, because right now they are young adults. They are at that time in life when many question the wisdom handed down to them through the years or rebel against the ways in which they were brought up. I know that the young adults I come across or learn about often have questions about what they grew up with, which includes matters of faith.

Questioning faith as a young adult is nothing new. Stanley L. Jaki in his book *The Savior of Science* shares an interesting historical correspondence that took place between an angst ridden W. Mengden, who was a young adult at the time of the dialogue, and an aging Charles Darwin over whether Darwin's theory of evolution was compatible with his Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> James W. Fowler, famous for his theory on faith development, wrote that this time is a transitional stage in life when a person "must undergo a sometimes painful disruption of their deeply held but unexamined world view or belief system."<sup>4</sup> While we need to be careful not to take stereotyping too far, it is easy to conclude that this stage in life often carries with it the theme of transition.<sup>5</sup>

College life has historically been identified with the cultivation of the intellectual life. It is therefore not surprising that much of the ministry geared toward this transitional time in life has focused on intellectual challenges to the Christian faith. Para-church evangelical ministries that rose in popularity in the latter half of the twentieth century, such as "InterVarsity Fellowship" and "Campus Crusade for Christ," focused much of their efforts on building apologetic ministries aimed at giving a "defense" for the Christian faith in light of such polemical philosophies as scientific naturalism and religious pluralism. Christian apologetics, for the most part, has been understood, in the words of Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland, to "help unbelievers to overcome intellectual obstacles to conversion and believers to remove doubts that hinder spiritual growth."<sup>6</sup>

Apologetics of the kind just mentioned is often a thoroughly intellectual affair. But apologetics should not be merely intellectual, and in fact it should always keep in mind other factors and reasons that may be at play in the lives of others. "Intellectual obstacles" to growth in one's faith or faithfulness can arise for a variety of reasons, some not obviously intellectual. For some, obstacles arise because of new data that they are exposed to in their sociology, philosophy, or biology class. For instance, a student who has grown up with a "literalist" understanding of the Genesis creation story (e.g., literal six-day creation) might find that belief system rocked when he or she encounter an atheistic biology professor who militantly presents arguments against creationism—presenting so-called "facts" for a purposeless evolutionism. Or students exposed to the works of the "father of sociology," Emile

Durkheim, who argues that the deity worshipped in religion is just a reflection of the collective values of the community, may find themselves wondering whether the Jesus they worship is just a collection of the American values found in their church community.<sup>7</sup>

For others, obstacles arise because their experimentation with questionable moral behaviors. For example, students who grew up with a belief that sex before marriage is wrong might find themselves easily slipping into temptation to engage in sexual acts because everyone around them is “doing it,” which may include other Christians that they know and are friends with. Experimentation and enjoyment with sex may cause a student to question the beliefs they grew up with and they may begin to wonder whether the Christian faith is worthwhile believing in.

And then for still others, a whole host of psychological or societal factors may be involved. For instance, if students were physically, emotionally, or verbally abused by their fathers as children, that abuse may cause a skewed understanding of God as “Father.” Understanding God as Father will be viewed through the lens of their earthly father, which will result in seeing God as a judgmental and cruel deity who delights in the demise of those who disobey Him. The student’s faith, therefore, may focus on how he or she might go about seeking to appease God in order to get into His good graces.

When the intellectual obstacles arise, the campus apologist is tempted to be quick to answer the objection without discerning all of the reasons for the objection. For instance, if a student in his ministry shares with him that he or she is doubting whether Jesus is real, the minister might be quick to share “ten historical proofs” that provide certainty for the historicity of Christ without discerning where the questioning comes from. In many respects, this is similar to a doctor that seeks to treat the symptoms of the illness without seeking to understand and treat the illness directly. Doctors should seek to treat the illness while attending to the effects of the illness as well. In the same way, the campus apologist should seek to understand why such obstacles exist in order to help address that deeper issue as well as attend to the resulting “symptoms” brought on by that deeper issue.

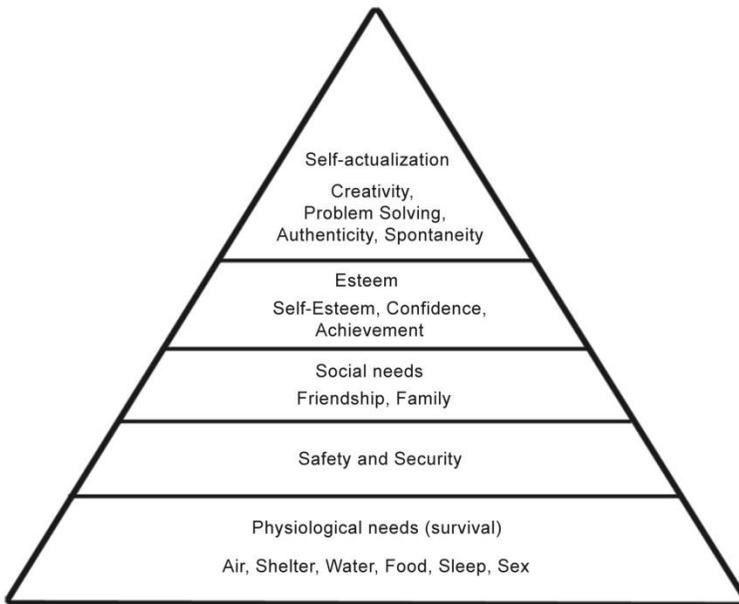
Sometimes and perhaps more than usually thought, these deeper issues are “First Article” concerns. When Luther’s Small Catechism speaks about “creation,” it is about “me” as a “creature” placed within a “created world” that includes food, clothing, shelter, and various personal and social relationships.<sup>8</sup> As a creature, we do not confess simply that “I” am a “body and soul” with “eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason all my senses,” but also that God has given me “all that I need to support this body and life.”<sup>9</sup> And why? So that I “thank and praise, serve and obey him,” or live in faith and all faithfulness.<sup>10</sup> And therefore it stands to reason that if things are not good in all of my “First Article” dealings that perhaps my faith life will suffer too.

In order to address the deeper issues that might cause a young adult to question or reject the Christian faith, the work of developmental psychologist Abraham Maslow is of great help. Maslow is primarily known for his “hierarchy of needs” developed out of a paper that he wrote concerning a theory of motivation, which was published back in 1943.<sup>11</sup> While some may question the use of a

humanistic psychologist for Christian ministry, the words of St. Augustine come to mind regarding the use of such things for Christian purposes. Augustine writes:

in the same way all branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil, which every one of us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid; but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad...<sup>12</sup>

Here we echo Augustine in stating that Maslow's hierarchy is some of that "gold and silver" "dug from the mines of God's providence" that has great ministerial value. While there are indeed other deficiencies with Maslow's theory in regards to cross-cultural and generational issues, in the broad spectrum, his theory is still a helpful tool in identifying potential motivating forces behind the doubts of Millennials.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

The accompanying image<sup>14</sup> of the pyramid shows the basics of Maslow's theory starting with the foundational physiological needs all the way up to needs related to self-actualization. Maslow makes the argument that all humans have the same basic needs which are organized upon a hierarchical structure.<sup>15</sup> So all humanity have the needs for food, shelter, safety, friendship, confidence, and finally

for a sense of actualizing their potential and purpose in life. It is important to point out that the hierarchy model makes an assumption that when lower needs (which are stronger) are met then the individual can seek to focus on higher needs as Maslow notes:

The basic needs arrange themselves in a fairly definite hierarchy on the basis of the principle of relative potency. Thus the safety need is stronger than the love need, because it dominates the organism in various demonstrable ways when both needs are frustrated. In this sense, the physiological needs...are stronger than the safety need, which are stronger than the love needs, which in turn are stronger than the esteem needs, which are stronger than those idiosyncratic needs we have called the need for self-actualization.<sup>16</sup>

In looking at Maslow's pyramid we can see how Luther's comments reflect the various hierarchical needs from the basics of food and shelter all the way up to needs related to our reasoning abilities. God is involved with all aspects of our needs and does indeed care about providing for them. We are also reminded in the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer to ask God for these daily needs, summed up in the words "daily bread."<sup>17</sup> While God can provide in a direct sort of way for our daily bread, such as He did with the Israelites in the wilderness, God more often than not provides for our daily needs through the vocation of others.<sup>18</sup> For example, while God is capable and able to directly heal the meth addict of his addiction, often times the desperate prayer of the addict is not met with a "miraculous" removal of the addiction; rather it is met through the loving intervention of family and friends and the work done through the doctors and nurses at the rehabilitation center. Lutheran theology, therefore, provides what some might consider a spirituality of the ordinary or mundane.<sup>19</sup>

This is an important concept for us to wrestle with especially in light of our discussion on meeting the First Article needs of Millennials. For Millennials, relationships are of prime importance.<sup>20</sup> So despite the fact that many Christian Millennials seek proof of God's existence in the experiential realm (see, for instance, Brad's story above), in the end, relationships become even more important for helping them to sort through disillusionments and doubts. A good twentieth-century historical example of this is C.S. Lewis's conversion story. It was in the context of his friendships with J.R.R. Tolkien and others where he was exposed to and challenged with the gospel.<sup>21</sup>

### **Emily, Katy, and Brad**

So how does this all apply to our discussion concerning Millennials and apologetics? For starters, let us go back to our opening scenarios and flesh out some more details. In regard to Emily's atheistic Facebook posts, it was discovered that despite certain faith struggles that she might have been dealing with in light of the Newtown tragedy, she herself was in the midst of some physiological struggles. College can be a tremendous financial burden for some families and Emily's circumstances were as such that she was unable to live on campus and participate in the meal plan. In light of Maslow's pyramid, we can see that the basics of shelter and food were not being met. Also Emily was dealing with some physical ailments which

prohibited her from being able to work. Again, the lack of incoming funds contributed to her literal concern for finding her “daily bread.” Fortunately, for Emily, a local Lutheran pastor and his family were able to take her in and provide for those basic needs. With her concerns for finding daily bread being met, Emily was free to wrestle through some of her faith questions in a loving and safe environment. We see how the vocation of a family was able to answer her desperate prayer for daily bread and how the vocation of the pastor was able to engage with Emily’s reason in order to find answers to her questions. Notice how Emily’s story progresses from meeting her basic needs of shelter, to security, to relational needs, to confidence, and finally up to the level of problem solving. In Lutheran language, we see how the vocation of the pastor and his family not only helped to meet her First Article needs but they are also involved with helping to provide for her in the feeding of her Third Article faith.

In regards to Katy’s story, it was discovered that her greatest need was for human companionship. Katy’s needs of shelter, food, and security were being met, but as a freshman, she had struggled to establish solid relational connections in this new environment. Katy repeatedly said that she just wanted “a friend.” Unlike Emily’s story, Katy’s story is still hovering at the “social needs” level. While Katy desires social connection, the challenge is in finding her a friend who is not going to seek to “shove Jesus down her throat.” One of the ongoing challenges present in apologetics and evangelism is the tension to establish authentic friendships with non-believers and skeptics while at the same time desiring for them to come into a saving faith in Christ. In Lutheran language, the First Article need of friendship doesn’t end when that person, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, converts to a Third Article faith. Yet, that First Article need might just be something that God uses in order to bring that person into a saving faith. It is our prayers that as Katy’s social need for friendship is fulfilled that this will in turn support her in her confidence and bring her to a point where she is willing to have open and interested conversation concerning any objections that she might have to the Christian faith.

What about Brad’s story? Brad’s story involves some interesting dynamics. Brad’s story involves the problem of a developmental misstep in his early years. Neuroscience, psychology, and sociology have come to some joint conclusions that show if early attachments are not formed between mothers and fathers then the healthy development of a child through to adulthood will be severely stunted.<sup>22</sup> There is also some evidence that suggests that those early healthy attachments also affect the way that we understand meaning and purpose in the world, which in turn can affect our understanding of God.<sup>23</sup> How does this relate to Brad? In looking at Maslow, we note that Brad’s sense of security and family relationships are areas that are lacking in his life. Since Brad had a troubled upbringing, he sought to fulfill those needs for security and relational connection through pre-marital sexual engagement (note how this even connects to Maslow’s physiological needs). His sexual problems, in turn, caused other problems for him in the university. He also had a very unhealthy view of the nature of God and grace, which led him to say the things that he did in his text message. Part of the ministry being done in regards to this young man is to help create, in the words of Marva Dawn, a healthy social sexuality.<sup>24</sup> Social sexuality is understood as the gender identity piece that is separate

from genital sexuality.<sup>25</sup> In other words, it is the goal to support Brad fully in his masculinity. These First Article needs of Brad are first and foremost being met through a male Christian counselor who understands Brad's past and is able to journey alongside Brad and help him make sense of his pain. Secondly, Brad meets weekly with a trusted male professor who is spending time in God's Word with him. In this regard Brad's Third Article questions, caused by First Article issues, are also being addressed in a relationship that supports him in his social sexuality.

## Conclusion

The Millennial generation as a whole is oftentimes classified as an age group that desires relationships, which was a common theme found throughout the three scenarios listed above.<sup>26</sup> They want to know whether you care about them as a person. In turn, if you are able to show that you care about their First Article needs, they tend to be more open to listening to the "answer [the apologetic]...for the hope that you have."<sup>27</sup> In the final analysis, the words of twentieth-century Christian philosopher, Francis Schaeffer, remind us of the importance of relationships in Christian apologetics. He writes:

Yet, without true Christians loving one another, Christ says the world cannot be expected to listen, even when we give proper answers. Let us be careful, indeed, to spend a lifetime studying to give honest answers...So it is well to spend time learning to answer the questions of men who are about us. But after we have done our best to communicate to a lost world, still we must never forget that the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians.<sup>28</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The above scenarios are based off of real situations. The names, however, have been changed.

<sup>2</sup> Misotheist translates as "God-hater." It is a term I have borrowed from Bernard Schweizer's work *Hating God: The Untold Story of Misotheism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> See Stanley L. Jaki, *The Savior of Science*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 3–6.

<sup>4</sup> James. W. Fowler, *Faith Development and Pastoral Care*, Theology and Pastoral Care Series, ed., Don S. Brown (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 68.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 34.

<sup>6</sup> J.P. Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul*, Spiritual Formation Line, Dallas Willard, Gen. Ed., (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 131.

<sup>7</sup> See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, abridged edition, Oxford Classics Library (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> A. H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, 370–396, Reprinted in *Classics in the History of Psychology*, Christopher D. Green, ed., access at <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Maslow/motivation.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Marcus Dods, ed., *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo: A New Translation, Vol. IX—On Christian Doctrine; The Enchiridion; On Catechising; and On Faith and the Creed* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1892), 76.

<sup>13</sup> For instance, see: T. L. Tang, A. H. Ibrahim, W. B. West, "Effects of war-related stress on the satisfaction of human needs: The United States and the Middle East," *International Journal of*

*Management Theory and Practices*, 3/1 (2002): 35–53, and B. L. Goebel and D. R. Brown, “Age differences in motivation related to Maslow’s need hierarchy,” *Developmental Psychology*, 17 (1981): 809–815. doi: 10.1037/0012-1649.17.6.809.

<sup>14</sup> Communication Theory. 2010. <http://communicationtheory.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/maslow-hierarchy-of-needs-diagram.jpg>.

<sup>15</sup> Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), 35ff.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 97–98.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> F. Samuel Janzow, *Luther’s Large Catechism: A Contemporary Translation with Study Questions*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 90.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 71ff.

<sup>20</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 73.

<sup>21</sup> *Bio.True Story*, s.v. “C.S. Lewis,” accessed 02/27/13, <http://www.biography.com/people/cs-lewis-9380969>.

<sup>22</sup> The information comes from a report titled: “Hardwired to Connect” which is quoted by Mark Matlock in “Apologetics and Emotional Development: Understanding Our Ways of Knowing and Finding Meaning,” in *Apologetics for a New Generation: A Biblically & Culturally Relevant Approach to Talking About God*, Sean McDowell, Senior Ed. (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009), 138.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 139ff.

<sup>24</sup> Marva Dawn, *Sexual Character: Beyond Technique to Intimacy* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 73ff.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)

<sup>28</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton, IL: Crossways, 1984), 164–165.

# Embracing Luther's Theology of *Tentatio* as Key to Reaching the Millennial Generation

Ryan T. Fouts

**Abstract:** Over the last decade, much has been written about the emergence of a “therapeutic” approach to Christian faith, particularly among America’s youth (See Christian Smith’s *Soul Searching* or Philip Rieff’s *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*). Some, attempting to meet this felt need, have made a concerted effort to add a therapeutic dimension to their method and their message. Others have taken a more adversarial approach to the “therapeutic” impetus of the Millennials in a way that has often been more conflictual than constructive. In contrast to either approach, a recovery of Luther’s concept of *tentatio*, *Anfechtung*, or struggle, may be called for if the church wishes to seriously engage American youth while, at the same time, remaining faithful to our core convictions. Too often, in therapeutic efforts to spare our young people from godly struggle, a very vital component of Christian maturity has been lost in the process. How might a re-embracing of *tentatio* in the life of the Church better equip Christians today to reach the millennial generation?

It is no secret that the contemporary church has struggled to connect to young people. What is commonly referred to as the “Millennial” generation has seemingly disappeared from church, exacerbating the trend modeled by their Generation-X predecessors. If the church has struggled to retain Millennials who were raised within the faith, reaching Millennials without any previous connection to church seems to many as no more than a pipe-dream. Often the response to this exodus of America’s youth from the church is lamented. Many are quick to point accusatory fingers at culture at large, imagining that the quickly evolving milieu of the American context is on an irretrievable crash course toward apostasy. What is left, some might suppose, but to “hunker down” and protect the theological and institutional vestiges left us from our forefathers?

This author vehemently disagrees with such sentiments. Having been born in 1980, I fall somewhere in the “bubble” between what some social scientists would call “Generation-X” and the Millennial generation. In some respects, falling within the transitional period between generations, I resonate with the attitudes and concerns of both. I was raised in an LCMS congregation, but was not a product of the “system.” I attended public schools and pursued undergraduate studies at a public university prior to attending seminary. As a young college student, as the millennium turned, I often felt as though I had a foot firmly planted in two rowboats, each following a different current, at times straining my flexibility to hold the two worlds

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together. The temptation, in such a predicament, is to simply choose one boat over the other and follow a single current. It certainly would have been more comfortable than attempting the splits! I always felt, though, that the tension, or struggle, between these two “worlds” was a struggle worth having.

All the above being said, both my experience and sociological research is consistent in one fact: Millennials attach an experiential value to their spirituality.<sup>1</sup> It is widely acknowledged that culture is evolving and changing more quickly than at any other time in history.<sup>2</sup> Over a single decade, culture can undergo more change than would happen in a century in ages past. As such, Millennials increasingly see their experience of the world as very different from the experience of their parents when they were their age. For those who are raised in the church, many find that the church experience they were raised with was tailored more directly to deal with their parents’ world than their own.

As institutions often resist change, or change at a sluggish pace, the church’s ability to adapt and evolve in the ever-changing landscape of the American experience is often slow going. Imagine a large ship, with a relatively small rudder, attempting to navigate through the rapids of a quickly moving river. The issues and challenges that the faith of young Christians must face today is different than it was a generation ago. Millennials look at the “rapids” of their culture and find it incapable of adequately dealing with their experience of the world. In order to reach Millennials today, the church must find a way to help them navigate through the struggle. The struggle has to be respected, even valued as a part of the Christian experience, rather than dismissed, ignored, or even resolved.

The good news is that Lutheran theology is a theology that embraces struggle. In many respects, the Millennial generation is ripe for Lutheran insights. There are core principles at the heart of Lutheran theology that allow the church to engage Millennials in a profound and relevant way. If Lutherans hope to engage the Millennial generation effectively and faithfully, we simply have to recover our theology of *struggle* and *experience* as the avenue through which God makes mature disciples.

### **Martin Luther on *Tentatio***

In his later years, Martin Luther faced a considerable amount of pressure to publish an authorized edition of his German writings. Publishers were eager for the chance, now that the fires of his opponents had simmered down, to release a version of his writings that could be more widely enjoyed and preserved for posterity. Luther hesitated to authorize any such publication. He feared, as he had already seen some evidence of the same in his own day, that his writings would simply become a new sort of canon law to replace the genuine study of Holy Scripture. He recognized that many of his works, particularly his earlier writings, reflected remnants of Romanism that he had later rejected. In the end, however, Luther was persuaded to allow the presses to proceed. He was convinced, albeit to his dismay, that the release of such an edition was inevitable. Were it to happen after his death, he knew that his works would be taken and twisted beyond his own intentions. Thus, Luther agreed to release a Wittenberg edition of his German works in 1539. He offered a preface to these works, articulating his concern, yet also giving guidance that those who would

read it would learn the proper method to read and study theology from Holy Scripture.

One could argue that the “method” presented herein is Luther’s suggested hermeneutic for how a Christian should approach theology—particularly through the study of Holy Scripture. Being a “preface” to his other works, these comments in a sense orient his reader toward all of his writings with a suggested discipline, or approach, modeling how all study of God’s Word ought to be pursued.

I want to point out to you a correct way of studying theology, for I have had practice in that. If you keep to it, you will become so learned that you yourself could (if it were necessary) write books just as good as those of the fathers and councils... This is the way taught by King David (and doubtlessly used also by all the patriarchs and prophets) in the one hundred nineteenth Psalm. They are *Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*.<sup>3</sup>

*Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio*. Prayer, meditation (upon Holy Scripture), and struggle. Luther’s assertion that these three are the making of a theologian should not be used to limit them to professional theologians. For Luther, all Christians become theologians when they become students of God’s Word in the right manner. One could argue, in common parlance, that this is Luther’s paradigm for Christian discipleship. This is not a pattern reserved for the ivory tower academics. Luther was not the first to propose *oratio*/prayer or *meditatio*/meditation in Christian discipline, but his insight of *tentatio*/struggle was unique.<sup>4</sup>

To properly understand the full impact of Luther’s three-fold insight, one must consider the heritage from which Luther derived and modified his insight. Guigo II, a twelfth century Carthusian monk, had first used similar Latin terminology in his book *The Ladder of Monks*.<sup>5</sup> Guigo II’s proposed four-step ladder through which one might reach communion with God is often regarded as the first description of methodological prayer in the Western mystical tradition. Guigo named these steps *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*. One first reads a text, which leads one then to meditate upon its meaning. Prayer follows in response to these meditations. The fourth stage, contemplation, leads one to draw nearer to God in quiet stillness. It is hard to imagine that Luther, from his own monastic background, would not have been familiar Guigo’s ladder.

Luther also encountered this distinction, though, from his Scholastic education. Luther’s Occamist teacher, Gabriel Biel had urged that Scripture should be approached through the three-fold *lectio, meditatio, oratio*. For Biel, this sequence of reading, meditation, and prayer sufficed as man’s best efforts, an act of love toward God that God Himself would complete or perfect. This was possible through a concept Biel called *prudencia*, an innate wisdom within man that allowed man to do what was within him.<sup>6</sup>

It could be argued that Luther simply turned Biel’s three-fold pattern on its head, replacing *lectio* with *tentatio*. If one understands, however, that Luther’s very concern in his preface to the Wittenberg edition is that one would continue to read Holy Scripture and appropriate it with this pattern, it is probably better to argue that Luther removed *lectio* from the sequence because *lectio*, or the reading and hearing of Scripture, is never abandoned in his process. One becomes a theologian as he prays, meditates, and struggles precisely with Scripture as the sole source of

theological insight. Prayer must come before meditation on the Word precisely because the Christian has no innate wisdom, or *prudentialia*, but has his meditations guided only by the Holy Spirit, who must first come to the Christian through prayer. Nonetheless, prayer and meditation alone fail to apply fully the Word of God to real life experience. Meditation cannot be considered a good work before God, nor before neighbor. Guigo II's *contemplatio*, however, is equally troublesome for Luther and cannot complete the process. One does not become a disciple, or a theologian, merely through the mystical contemplation of God. One does not ascend upward into the heavens, whereby he gains communion with God; but he proceeds outward into the world, where he finds Christ in his neighbor. Whereas a monastic life of contemplation removes the Christian from the real world and its struggles, the Christian who follows Christ's bidding to be *in* the world according to God's calling (vocation) will face temptation and struggle.

Thirdly, there is *tentatio*, *Anfechtung*. This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.<sup>7</sup>

Luther emphasizes an experiential faith. That experience often involves struggle as the Word of God kills and makes alive. This experience is initiated by God's Word and the profound effect the Word has on the disciple. It is the Holy Spirit, through the Word, who serves to safeguard the Christian throughout his struggles and temptations, so that *tentatio* is no threat, but a genuine part of God's work in the life of the disciple. This struggle is not a mere "idea" that can be learned and intellectually appropriated. This Christ-patterned death and rebirth is an experience that involves pain, turmoil, *tentatio*. The Holy Spirit accompanies the Word of God, conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Another matter of importance, applicable to the subject of this article, ought to be pointed out. Luther, reflecting on his own development as a theologian, recognized that his *tentatio* was not a one-time event. "I didn't learn my theology all at once. I had to ponder over it ever more deeply, and my spiritual trials<sup>9</sup> were of help to me in this, for one does not learn anything without practice."<sup>10</sup> The struggle one endures when coming to faith, or while maturing in the faith, cannot be forced into an artificial timetable. One cannot expect it to come to fruition in the course of a six-week discipleship course. While Luther affirms that "the devil" is an active subject in such *tentatio*, this is no cause for concern.<sup>11</sup> Luther's simple faith in the efficacy and power of the Word of God over and against Satan assures him that the Word will prevail. *Tentatio* is not something one should fear.

### ***Tentatio* and the Struggle of Millennials**

One need only spend a few hours at a coffee shop or local hangout to find Millennials discussing and wrestling with spiritual questions. Millennials have frequently been described as a very "god-conscious" generation, but the identity of "god" is up for grabs.<sup>12</sup> Struggle has become the *modus operandi* of Millennial spirituality. Many Millennials feel that the church fails to resonate with their experience in the world. When they have come to the church with genuine *tentatio*, the church has too frequently responded with mere *refutatio*. They've become all too

accustomed to the things the church protests against and opposes, but they struggle to identify what the church actually values and embraces. Rather than nurturing the struggle, the church has often robbed them of the struggle God would give them by demanding a sort of intellectual conformity to doctrinal standards. It is as though because such matters have already been “resolved” for the church, their struggle has been dealt with vicariously by the church already. If the demand to conform is not made explicitly, the pressure to conceal their struggle from the church is felt implicitly. Thus, increasing numbers have turned to any other number of sources outside of the church to guide them through their spiritual struggle.

All the above are common perspectives that many Millennials share concerning the institutional church. Many within the church may hear these things and become defensive. Has the church been judged unfairly for being judgmental? Perhaps. Are these perspectives fair or accurate? In many respects they are irrelevant. If we intend to reach Millennials with the Gospel, their perceptions function as reality. It does the church no good, if the church is to value this generation as Christ does, to complain about the anti-institutional sentiments of Millennials. Their concerns cannot be simply dismissed, but must be heard. The struggle must be nurtured and embraced.

### **Embracing *Tentatio* as the Church**

Tendencies in Christian catechesis within Lutheran churches over the last several decades are revealing.<sup>13</sup> While it is not the only focus, a great deal of emphasis is often placed on how well the catechumen has memorized and absorbed, intellectually, the doctrinal content of the Catechism. This is an important task, but often the cognitive “mastery” of church doctrine becomes the main thing. The process for making disciples often resembles the paradigm of Gabriel Biel—*lectio, meditatio, oratio*—emphasizing the initial import of the right “information” that then must be intellectually understood or memorized, under the false assumption that it will result in a life rich in prayer and discipleship. Catechesis, though, is not confined to the classroom.<sup>14</sup> When “classroom catechesis” has prevailed, Luther’s profound concept of *tentatio* has not only been forgotten but, in many respects, undermined.

It is this author’s opinion that the mass exodus of Millennials from the organized church is a wake-up call that ought to call us in the church at large to repent and reorient ourselves toward the Word of God. The Millennials are, in many respects, ideally situated to reinvigorate Christianity with a profound character that has long since been forgotten in the American context, that is, the concept of *tentatio*, or struggle, as a necessary component of discipleship. While experience is not the foundation of faith, experience that emerges from a profound relationship with God’s Word—*oratio, meditatio, tentatio*—is an essential component of Christian identity. It is one thing to suggest that this pattern be re-embraced, though, and another to actually put it into practice in a way that remains faithful to our doctrine and core convictions as God’s people. What would it look like to fully embrace *tentatio* in the life of disciples or sojourners in the Millennial generation? What follows are a few suggestions, derived largely from an interplay among this author’s experience with Millennials, of what resonates with their generation and Lutheran theological insight.

## **Be patient**

As Luther's *Table Talk* affirms, already cited, *tentatio* in the life of discipleship takes time. A seed must sow and come to maturity before the harvest. Reaping too soon not only kills the seed, but leaves the grain either immature or prematurely dead. Many churches are quite welcoming to visitors their first few visits, but often the visitor feels the pressure to conform to the standard expectations of the group, or even to join the group, before they are ready. The church needs a larger proverbial "narthex" where sojourners can explore, struggle, and build relationships with committed Christians who can help guide them through their struggles. An attempt to "reap" the harvest too soon can happen for a number of reasons. Perhaps there is an unsettled fear that if someone does not join quickly enough they will soon leave and go elsewhere. Sometimes it is a matter of discomfort—the visitor or sojourner does not quite fit in with the rest of the group and his lifestyle is seen as a threat to the believers already committed to the fold. Here one must recognize that the presence of such a sojourner may actually provide valuable *tentatio* to the believers already gathered. The possibility of a visitor creating struggle for other disciples need not be feared; it should be embraced. It may just be, quite simply, that there is a pattern in a church's history that has typically "always done it that way."

## **Create "safe space" for *Tentatio***

If an unbelieving Millennial enters a church and feels immediately judged, as if his sin is worse than those of the members of the church, he will most likely head for the hills. Not only that, he will probably spread the word about his experience. A "safe space" does not necessarily have to be a "safe place," though. The "safe space" can happen within the corporate gathering of the church service, but it often happens through interpersonal relationships between Christians and inquirers. A "safe space" can occur in small groups or in missional communities. Regardless, if one ever gets the impression that he is in an "unsafe space," *tentatio* never gets a chance to develop. As noted earlier, Millennials will struggle with spiritual matters. If the church will not provide the "safe space" and guidance to foster that struggle, they will find guidance elsewhere.

## **Focus on affirmative "Natural Law" rather than on negative "Revealed Law"**

Lutherans rightly embrace the proper distinction between law and gospel. That said, the law has its proper "killing" function even when the word of law spoken is not explicitly condemnatory. The law of God is written on our hearts in creation.<sup>15</sup> It was wrong for Cain to kill Abel even before God had ever written the law, "thou shall not kill," on tablets of stone. While it is true that the Commandments are law, the law is not always explicitly commandment. The law is, essentially speaking, the blueprint of God's architectural design in creation. The law is, more properly, positive than negative. The law tells us how God designed everything in creation; it reveals the beauty and genius of His original plan. Commandments are given later because sinful man was unable to perceive God's order clearly. From the

perspective of natural law, sin is more fundamentally understood as “brokenness” or “disorder” than mere transgression of a commandment. When commandments are given, though, they are typically given to God’s people who already understand the authority of God’s voice, either spoken through prophets or inspired through Scripture. The “second use” of the law, while it is the primary function of the law over and against sinful man, is not the essential use of the law. There is nothing essentially condemnatory in the law itself; rather, it is man’s fallen disparity from God’s original righteous design that makes the law condemnatory. In many respects, the second use, or function, of the law doesn’t reside in the law at all, but in sinful man.

I have a friend who is an accomplished artist. He tells me that one of the most effective ways to teach young, budding artists to discern good art from bad art is to simply immerse them in really good art. They spend a lot of time appreciating the beauty, the detail, and the masterful work of fine artists. They become so accustomed to really good art that when they are presented with bad art they can recognize it immediately. They may or may not be able to articulate what makes it bad, but they can tell it is so from the outset. While the beginning artist may be able to take his teacher’s word that something is bad or good, it is only when he begins to fully appreciate the beauty of the good that he can discern for himself. The same is true of learning to distinguish the goodness of God’s masterpiece, his created order, from the broken, fallen, and sinful perversions of God’s design. For those who already have a commitment to biblical authority, a word of Scripture that says, “*x* is wrong,” may be sufficient to convince them that *x* is, in fact, sinful. On the other hand, even that leaves one with an incomplete picture regarding God’s original plan. If, rather, one learns to appreciate the positive side of God’s order in creation, one can more readily perceive what’s wrong and sinful in the world.

Consider a few examples of how this might play out regarding particular issues of tension or struggle that biblical Christianity often has with the Millennial generation. Consider how one might address the topic of homosexuality, a hot topic among current social issues. Typically, when asked, “what is your church’s view of homosexuality,” one might turn to verses that explicitly condemn homosexuality: Leviticus 18:22, 1 Corinthians 6:9, Romans 1:26, etc. At that point, conversation often breaks down. These verses, all spoken to people who already accept the authority of God’s Word, will not likely speak to one who has no such commitment. Why not, rather, turn to Genesis 2? Here, one can begin to construct a picture of God’s design for human sexuality that embraces the beauty and wonder of God’s original plan. Many works have explored this topic.<sup>16</sup> The beauty of God’s design for human sexuality is far more palatable to one who may be sympathetic to homosexual inclinations, as Millennials increasingly are, than a proof-text approach that emphasizes the sin of homosexuality. It will also provide a firmer foundation upon which a genuine, Godly, marital union of persons can be pursued. Perceiving the beauty of God’s design, Millennials may have to wrestle with the tension between God’s design and cultural perspectives on homosexuality. While a quick condemnatory proof text might immediately cause an inquirer to dismiss the Christian as judgmental, reflecting on the order of God’s design for man and woman will at least cause some further reflection and, ideally, some fruitful *tentatio*. Many

in the gay and lesbian community have already struggled with their sexuality for their entire lives. It is absurd to expect that they would simply change their orientation or choose an abstinent lifestyle without enduring at least as much struggle to embrace God's design. Some may be willing to engage the struggle immediately; others may come to the struggle over time as they further embrace the Christian life. Regardless, there is no paradigmatic timetable for the struggle.

Millennials, not unlike many other Americans, often indicate that they struggle with the exclusive claims of Christianity. They feel very much at home in an increasingly pluralistic culture. St. Paul actually provides a powerful example of evangelism through the use of natural law in Acts 17:16–33. Much like today's Millennials, the people of Athens embraced tolerance and a plurality of religions. Paul engaged the Athenian people from the position of an outsider. He recognized that his apostleship carried no favored status. He could not use his apostolic authority simply to rebuke or condemn the false gods invoked there. Instead, he praised their religious devotion. He spoke a message that is, in its substance, an exclusive and universal message identifying the true God as the one who "made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth" (Acts 17:24). He spoke a clear proclamation of the Gospel, a message that is by its very nature particular, without going out of his way to explicitly condemn the false gods represented there. He spoke the Word of God. He trusted that the Word, accompanied by the Holy Spirit in truth and power, would be sufficient to perform what God intended without worry or fear that it would simply blend in to the pantheon of gods represented on the Areopagus. Nonetheless, he spoke a word that would cause *tentatio*. Paul's message to the Athenians was an exclusive message, but he did not prematurely attempt to rob the Athenians of the struggle by explicitly condemning their pluralistic worldview. When Paul spoke of the resurrection, "some mocked," but others said, "We will hear you again about this." In other words, his approach nurtured the struggle for those who wished to hear more. Some of the men joined him.

Paul's example demonstrates how Christians today can remain faithful to the Gospel, upholding the scandal of particularity, while still engaging the world at large in a way that nurtures, rather than robs, our hearers of the struggle that is necessary for one to truly mature as a disciple. It is sometimes suggested that because the American culture is pluralistic, one must clearly point out the exclusive nature of the Gospel when engaging the public square in the company of false spiritualities. One must ask, though, if the *purpose* of engaging the culture is to refute pluralism or to actually bring people to a saving knowledge in Jesus Christ. Can one come to embrace the Gospel through the Holy Spirit working through the word in faith, while still wrestling with sympathies toward pluralism? Absolutely—*tentatio* takes time.

### **Have Faith in God's Word**

Even as Luther recognized that the devil was often the agent that God used in his personal *tentatio*, he never seemed to articulate any fear that this process would put his salvation in jeopardy. Struggle and discomfort, though, do not tend to resonate well with the American psyche. When one begins to experience struggle, or pain of any sort, the habitual response is to try to alleviate the struggle at nearly any

cost. In the church, this can happen either by dismissing the validity of one's struggle, as though it's insignificant, or by trying to resolve it with propositional claims or through condemnatory proof-texts. Out of discomfort, or fear, one may be tempted to put more credence in the power of the devil's working through struggle to dissuade the elect from God's grace than they do in the power of the Holy Spirit in the Word to both create and sustain faith in those whom the Lord would call to Himself. At the root of this matter, ultimately, is unbelief.

Luther's theology of *tentatio* in the Christian life is closely related to his theology of the cross. It is precisely through suffering and the cross that God reveals Himself *for us* most clearly. The importance of re-embracing this insight in our churches, if we are to reach the Millennial generation, cannot be overstated. This must first begin, though, with self-application. As essential as it is to embrace *tentatio* for the Millennials, whom the church is called to reach, it will seem disingenuous if Christians already within the church do not embrace *tentatio* in their own lives. That may very well mean embracing the struggle and challenge that the Millennial generation has presented the church at large. Merely assigning blame or fault, either to the church or the Millennial generation itself, is only another way of trying to avoid the necessary struggle that Christ has called the church to embrace in the world. As the Body of Christ, the church is called to pursue those for whom Jesus died just as stubbornly and persistently as He pursued them on the road toward Calvary. This might mean sacrificing our own temporary comforts for the sake of the lost. It certainly means entering into the struggle and suffering of young people who need the Gospel. It means being a people of suffering and the cross—embracing *tentatio*.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Barna Group "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," The Barna Group, <http://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/teens-next-gen-articles/528-six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church>, (accessed February 20, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> C. Perreault, "The Pace of Cultural Evolution" *PLoS ONE* 7:9 (2012)

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* 34:285 (Saint Louis/Philadelphia: Concordia/Fortress, 1958–1986). (Henceforth *LW*)

<sup>4</sup> "*Tentatio* is testing, temptation, and trial which occurs when God and his word intersect with us and our world." Andrew Pfeiffer, "The Place of *Tentatio* in the Formation of Church Servants" *Lutheran Theological Journal* (December, 1996) 111–119.

<sup>5</sup> Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks: A Letter on the Contemplative Life and Twelve Meditations* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1978).

<sup>6</sup> Heiko A. Oberman. *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought*, Kindle Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), loc. 1229.

<sup>7</sup> *LW* 34:286–287.

<sup>8</sup> As John Kleinig put it, "We do not internalize it and assimilate it into our way of being; no, it assimilates us and makes us godly. We do not use it to make something of ourselves; it makes us theologians." John Kleinig, "Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: What Makes a Theologian?" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66:3 (2002): 264.

<sup>9</sup> Latin: *tentationes*

<sup>10</sup> *LW* 54:50.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> For example, Dawson McCallister, *Saving the Millennial Generation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1999), 5.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, John M. Palka, "The Impact of Societal and Education Trends on Theological Education in The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod" *Concordia Journal* 30, no. 3 (July 2004) 217–241.

<sup>14</sup> For a full exposition of how Luther's Catechism was designed less to be a "textbook" and more to be a handbook for daily Christian living, see Charles P. Arand, *That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther's Catechisms* (Saint Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2000) and also John Pless, "Catechesis for the Life of the Royal Priesthood" *Logia* 3, no. 4 (1994) 3–10.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Jeremiah 31:33, Romans 2:14–15, Hebrews 10:16.

<sup>16</sup> While not frequently engaged in evangelical or Lutheran circles, John Paul II's work on the theology of the body is predominantly a work that engages the identity of the human creature within spousal relationship and demonstrates the sort of "positive" theology emerging from natural law that this article suggests is necessary to engage Millennials. His treatment of the topic is worth considering. See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006).

# Bringing the Gospel to a New Culture

Matthew J. Peeples

*The next generation is caught between two possible destinies—one moored by the power and depth of Jesus-centered gospel and one anchored to a cheap, Americanized version of the historic faith that will snap at the slightest puff of wind. Without a clear path to pursue the true gospel, millions of young Christians will look back on their twenty-something years as a series of lost opportunities for Christ.*

—David Kinnaman<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** To summarize all the statisticians and futurists, the church is done with business as usual, but are we the only ones saying that? The reality is marketers and advertisers are saying the same thing. Which gives us hope. The drastic cultural shift we have experienced is something everyone is wrestling with. So what can we learn from the marketers and advertisers who are addressing the same issues? The message is simple. Understand and embrace the ways in which understood cultural communication paradigms have shifted. If you do this, it is not a matter of changing the message, it is only a matter of changing the presentation. That is easier than you think.

## The Issue at Hand

I recall sitting in a bookstore coffee bar on my vicarage in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I was halfway through my third year of seminary, enjoying that moment when the classroom meets the real world. The book in front of me was the newly released *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters*. As I read, I realized that for many readers this is a book about an emerging generation leaving en masse the church and the historic faith, but for me, it was more than that. It was a look into my generation. They were my classmates, my teammates, my family, my friends. They were the people that meant the most to me. I wasn't reading an exposé on the emerging generation; I was touching base with the tragic reality of my generation, a generation that was losing touch with the most important person in life, Jesus Christ. As I read, one passage leapt off page. It shocked me, but it did not surprise. It smacked me in the face, as if to say, "Wake up!"

Most young people who were involved in a church as a teenager disengaged from church life and often from Christianity at some point during early adulthood, creating a deficit of young talent, energy, and leadership in many congregations. While this is not a uniquely Buster or Mosaic phenomenon

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—many Boomers did this too—our tracking research suggests that today young people are less likely to return to church later, even when they become parents.<sup>2</sup>

My generation wasn't just walking away from the church as their parents had, only to return later; they were walking away, and it didn't look like they were coming back. As I thought back, it made sense. I remember the year I took off between college and seminary. Unsure of what I wanted to do, I had gone back home to "figure it out." After living at home just a few months, I remember feeling as if I had no friends left in Kansas City. Everyone had moved away and moved on. I felt that way because every time I stepped into the church that is how it appeared. I looked around a church of 1,000 attendees on a Sunday, and I was one of four people in their early twenties. I was convinced that everyone my age had moved on—until I entered a bar one night with some people I met while substitute teaching in my old school district. As I walked through the doors of the bar just blocks from my home church, I felt as if I had stepped into a high school reunion! Everyone was there. I was connecting with people I had not seen in five years, people who still lived in town, some of whom I had even attended church with as a youth. The question nagged at me: Where are all these people on Sunday? That's when I realized that they had not left the city; they had just left the church—not just our church, but any church.

### **Why I Am Here**

While I am not by nature an academic or a missiological expert, I love to learn. And I like to apply what I learn as a church planter and missionary to Knoxville, TN. Neither am I an expert in Millennial outreach methods. Rather, I am a Millennial who is passionate about reaching disconnected Millennials. I want my disconnected generation to become connected to Christ. I am not just theorizing or writing about the subject, because the issue is too important. It is an issue in which I am actively engaged, something I am working at and seeing results in each week as I step into our church. But I am not satisfied with being one missionary out on the front lines. I want to help your churches do the same thing. I want to help you reach a disconnected generation! The issues we face are too big for one person simply to say, "Look at me!" Rather, in the words of Hebrews, we need to "stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."<sup>3</sup> I am here not to simply repeat the research of the church or to share with you some new insights that I have seen in the marketing world, or even to share with you what I have seen work in our church. I am here to challenge you on the level of practice, to think differently in order to meet the challenges set before us as we go about sharing the gospel with a new generation in what we all realize is a new culture.

### **Our Concern Is NOT Unique**

As a church planter, I was forced into a world where I was not just a pastor; rather, I was an entrepreneur. When you start something from scratch, you have no choice but to wear both hats. As an entrepreneurial pastor, I realized I needed to learn best practices from any field where I could find them, baptize them, and then

put them into practice in our church. With this focus, I began to immerse myself in the world of marketing and advertising. After all, I had a vision for the church, I had a mission for the church, and I even had a hard target for the church. What I needed help with was learning how to focus these on people, and so I tried to absorb as much as I possibly could on the topics of vision casting, branding, and, ultimately, marketing.

Many in the church are leery when they hear anyone suggest using best practices from the business world and especially the insights of marketing and advertising. Even though I have discovered in them some incredible insights for use in the church, I find that many pastors consider marketing another form of witchcraft. You will hear expressions such as, “We are NOT called to push a product; we are called to share the gospel.” It is a statement with which I completely agree. The gospel is not a product we push; it is a message we have to share with the world. And that is the very reason I love learning from marketers.

A marketer’s sole job is to learn the most effective ways to share a message with a specific group of people. Marketers pore over research, and if something is not working, they are quick to adapt. In the end, if something doesn’t work, they don’t get paid. So they work tirelessly to find the best ways to share their message, a message that will have minor impact compared to the message that we have to share. So why do they often work so much harder at sharing their message well than we do in the church? We have the most important message! Shouldn’t we be the most interested in learning how best to share it with the world? That is why I think we should look at the insights of marketers. Remember, Jesus called us to go into the world and be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”<sup>4</sup> It is time we applied this mandate, using some of the best practices of the marketing world.

### **What the Marketers Are Learning**

Brian Solis is a digital analyst, sociologist, and futurist who has done extensive research and influenced the emerging media on business and culture. He is also a globally recognized thought leader in the arena of new media. In short, he has many helpful insights into how media and communications have not only changed, but are also shaping our culture in new ways.

As Solis looks out on the landscape of business with regard to marketing and advertising, he has found that everything is changing, and the business world cannot waste time talking about it; they must do something about it. In a foreword to Solis’s book, co-founder of *Katalyst*, Ashton Kutcher, sums up the issue at hand.

New Media is [sic] creating a new generation of influencers and it is resetting the hierarchy of authority, while completely freaking out those who once held power without objection. The truth is that most of the existing formulas, methodologies, and systems miss or completely ignore the role of new influencers to inspire action, cause change, spark trends, and recruit advocates. We are absent from the exact movement that can help us connect with those who guide their peers.<sup>5</sup>

When it comes to the Millennial generation, Solis is discovering that everything is changing so rapidly that one cannot conduct business as usual. New technology is rapidly changing all the rules that the business marketing models are

built on. Solis is calling out to the business world to understand that the medium is no longer the message, influence is no longer top down, monologue has moved to dialog, and companies can no longer tightly control their brands. What Solis has discovered is important for the church to listen to. It is the end of business as usual.

Solis finds that the Millennial generation, a generation larger than the Boomers, is wielding a massive influence across generational lines. He finds also that the effects of rapid change in technology have not just grabbed the attention of those who have grown up as Millennials, but they are also affecting Generation X and even the Boomers. He observes that “[i]n 2010, The Pew Internet and American Life Project, which studies how technology is affecting American culture, revealed that Internet users age 65 and older flocked to social media, growing by 100 percent over the previous year. One in four people (28%) in that age group are now logging in to Facebook or Twitter, among others, to stay connected.”<sup>6</sup>

The marketing world has discovered that constantly connected people are not just a generational group; rather, they are becoming our whole culture. I realized this when my grandmother-in-law friended me on Facebook. She was 86 at the time. We need to take notice of this phenomenon. Reaching the Millennial generation with new ways of communicating is actually about reaching our entire culture! When the established church pushes back with the question “What about the older people?,” they need to realize that older people have already begun to communicate differently as well. It is no longer simply a matter of reaching one generation; the rapid changes we have seen in the last ten years are affecting everyone. What the marketing world has discovered is that when we learn to reach out more effectively to the Millennial generation we will actually be learning how to communicate more effectively across generations.

### **What Is the Marketing World Learning when It Comes to Millennials?**

The marketing world has found that 57% of Americans feel more connected to people than they did previously and that 56% keep in touch with more friends now than in the past.<sup>7</sup> These communication phenomena have turned us not only more into a culture that is always “on,” but also into a culture of egocentric influencers.

What Solis discovered is best summed up in a photo he shared from a lecture hall. The photo shows the viewer facing a lecture hall full of students all with their Mac laptops open. The caption reads, “A visualization of the Connected Consumer and an Audience with an Audience of Audiences.”<sup>8</sup> The picture sums up some very important insights for the church.

The reality is that the medium is no longer the message; the medium is just the medium. It is a portal through which people spread messages in the “egosystem,” the term Solis uses to describe person-to-person sharing. His research revealed that it takes only a few key strokes to reach the masses.<sup>9</sup> He explains that connected consumers (those taking advantage of the egosystem)

are the architects of a future information system that is already significant as it stands today and is only growing in prominence. Whereas brands and media outlets have existed on proprietary networks and distribution channels to control the flow of information, the egosystem is a far more

efficient system. The future of commerce is linked to the human network or what I call the “nextwork.”<sup>10</sup>

With terms like “egosystem” and “nextwork,” Solis describes our present reality, a time when the Millennial generation, and now most in our culture, share information through a few key strokes via social media to disseminate it to the masses. This phenomenon has completely rocked the business world because businesses have less control over how their products are branded. What used to be a top-down system of influence within their control has become an organic, lateral system outside their control. The mobile devices that connect us have turned into tools to share real-life experiences peer to peer. These have become a type of social currency, producing influence. This social currency shows friends that they are engaged in the conversation and shows the marketing world that top-down influence and branding does not have the same effect that it used to.<sup>11</sup> Social media are at the forefront of this change, and marketers are finding out it has less to do with technology and more to do with a conversation.

People do not create accounts on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, or any other social network to hear from brands. . . . The bottom line is that people are re-seeking answers and direction, not messages or sales pitches. . . . [I]n order to be heard, we have to communicate as though we were speaking person-to-person with our customers.<sup>12</sup>

“In order to reach people, we have to figure out who they are and where they go for information. In the process, you’ll quickly discover that there is no magic bullet for reaching everyone, all at once.”<sup>13</sup>

If we take away no other lessons from the changing landscape that the marketing world is wrestling with, we need to take Solis’s advice: There are no magic bullets. Marketers are learning the hard lesson that it is no longer about selling or about rebranding. It is now about connecting with people in conversation and realizing that it’s not a conversation they control.

This same realization emerges in the church world as reflected in the ground-breaking research of the Barna Group. In books like *unChristian* and *You Lost Me*, we find that the top-down practices and rebranding schemes that we have employed as the church are not going to make a difference. Everything is changing, and we cannot stand by and say that the problem is limited to the Millennial generation. The Millennials’ way of life is quickly making its way into our entire culture across the spectrum of generations. So how do we reach a generation that is radically changing our entire cultural landscape? The following is what I propose.

### **The Issue Is NOT Theology**

Our problem is not theological or doctrinal. As a church planter, I reach an average first-time church-goer who is 10–20 years disconnected from church. In a congregation that I founded over two years ago, about 200 attend on average, 60% of whom were de-churched or un-churched and 80% of whom were not Lutheran. I have found that we have the best doctrine and theology to connect the disconnected to Christ, especially disconnected Millennials. I know this because I see it happen each week. The reason is simple: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has held on to an understanding and practice of the gospel that allows people to see Jesus first

and foremost. Our law/gospel distinction, our understanding of the hidden and revealed God, our understanding of justification and sanctification, our emphasis on the theology of the cross, and an ability to stay in the tension of Scripture are all things that those disconnected from the church are crying out for. Our problem is not our theology, because our theology holds up Christ. Our problem is not doctrinal, because our doctrine actually allows for more flexibility in worship style and practice than we like to admit. As long as we are delivering the Word and Sacraments effectively to our culture, we are within our rightful call as members of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Articles VII and VIII provide an amazing confessional framework for missional worship that can be used to do worship that connects the disconnected to the faith:

For the true unity of the church it is sufficient to agree on the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that everywhere human traditions or rites or ceremonies instituted by human beings be the same.... For this unity we say that it is not necessary to have similar human rites, whether universal or particular, because the righteousness of faith is not a righteousness tied to certain traditions, as the righteousness of the law was tied to Mosaic ceremonies. For this righteousness of the heart is a matter that makes the heart alive. Human traditions, whether universal or particular, contribute nothing to this giving of life. Nor are they caused by the Holy Spirit, as are chastity, patience, the fear of God, love of one's neighbor, and works of love.<sup>14</sup>

If our issue is not theological or doctrinal, then what is it? It is the same issue that other denominations and even the business marketing world are wrestling with. The issue is how we are communicating the message.

### **The Issue Is in How and What We Communicate**

The way in which we have been communicating the gospel has worked well for a top-down society, where church was at the center of the culture; but we no longer live in that world. Not only are we not at the center, but “we have become famous for what we oppose rather than who we are for.”<sup>15</sup> We are learning from the marketing world that we can no longer play by the top-down, brand-control rules that have governed our society for decades. What's even harder to grasp is the fact that there are no hard and fast rules for what we can do moving forward, because the future is changing at such a rapid pace. That may sound somewhat depressing. However, even without a clear set of rules or direction, there are a few key points that I see resonating in the church world, the marketing world, and in my own church planting experience.

### **It All Comes Down to Three Factors**

I believe that three primary factors relate to and shape our communication and outreach efforts to the Millennial generation. These are not methods or mere communication styles. Rather, they are, for want of a better term, values—values that we can use to shape how we communicate and interact with the next generation. These three core values are mentioned in both secular and Christian research studies. More importantly, they are values that connect to our own outreach efforts to the

Millennial generation. They are simply these: authenticity, relationship, and conversation.

### **Authenticity**

The marketing world is realizing that people are done with shallow promises that do not live up to the hype. They are not interested in what brands have to say about themselves; they are interested in how the brands conduct themselves. Companies increasingly take on social issues. Consider two brief examples: Tom's Shoes gives a pair of shoes away for every one they sell, and Starbucks makes sure all farmers are paid above fair trade wages. Why? These companies want to be known for more than a bottom line, because our culture demands it. Look at the reality TV phenomena that have sprung up. I am not saying these shows are authentic; rather, they have been created to give the appearance of authenticity. If reality shows are "*fake* authenticity," are they a good example of why they are popular among Millennials? As odd as this may seem, I would say yes. Reality television shows a desire for something more, something that has not been completely scripted or contrived. The more you know about the shows, the more you will know that they do not portray authentic experience, but that is not the point. You have to look past what these shows actually are and look to the value these shows are appealing to. They hit at the heart of what Millennials desire, authenticity. While the shows themselves are not 100% authentic, they offer an important insight into a generation that craves authenticity. Millennials will accept you for who you are, as long as that is authentic.

I have seen the importance of authenticity in my experience at our own church. In all of our marketing, I share only two promises: You can come as you are and you can text in your questions. We wanted people to realize that God's love is an authentic thing that meets you wherever you are and takes you places you didn't know you can go. We don't promise the best music, coolest venue, or best teaching in town. We have remained focused on these two authentic promises. Even in our marketing, everything is aimed at being authentic. I do a lot of radio ads. In these ads, the first thing I tell people is, "This is Pastor Matt." What we have found is this: People don't want to listen to the entire 60-second ad and then feel tricked at the end because it ended up being for a church. Rather than pull a "bait and switch," I let people know up front that it is a pastor who is talking about his church. What I have found is that they end up feeling a sense of authenticity from that format. They have the impression that this pastor is just a guy, sharing the love of God. Even if they are agnostic or atheist, they respect that, because it's authentic. To this day, not a Sunday goes by without someone coming to church because they heard our ad on a secular, hard rock radio station. The number one comment is that they like that the ads are funny and they wanted to come to check it out. They were coming to find for themselves if we are as authentic as we claimed. In fact, one couple arrived in Gothic attire, thinking that they would prove us wrong, only to find just as warm a welcome as the couple who has been with us from the start.

Authenticity is a value that cannot be ignored in the Millennial generation. This is a real asset that the church needs to capitalize on, because what we are offering is an authentic gospel. If we focus on sharing that in our actions, as well as

in our words, the outreach tools to share the gospel will become obvious to us. If we focus on sharing the authentic life of faith with those far from God, the disconnected, we will find them actually connecting to faith.

## **Relationship**

In an egocentric culture, we need to find ways to build authentic relationships. The days of cleaning people up before they come through our doors need to be over. In my opinion, those days should have never been. People need to see the church reaching out to them where they are in authentic relationship. One of the reasons that radio ads have worked so well for us in the relational aspect of radio is that people tend to build a relationship of trust with the people on the stations they listen to. I found that when I went on the air of a hard rock radio station, sharing an authentic message stating that this is who we are and we will love you whether you are an atheist, agnostic, have baggage, etc., it showed our community that we cared about more than just filling our church. It showed our community that we cared about starting a relationship. They saw that the first thing we wanted was to get to know them and to connect with them regardless of “where they were” or what they were dealing with. We followed this same model with the events that we went to, such as Brewers Jam, Tattoo Convention, and Dorm Storms. We hosted a tournament for a popular tailgate game called Corn Hole, built a Habitat House, helped renovate a homeless shelter, and hosted guys’ nights in bars, girls’ nights out, and even a public wine tasting—all based on the same model: We don’t care who you are and we don’t care where you have been; we just want to connect with you in relationship. Whether it is Sunday morning worship, a social outreach project, a service event, or a social gathering, the goal is always to build relationships.

In these ways we created relationships that showed people that the church was a place where they didn’t have to have everything put together; they could come and just figure things out for awhile. We offered a genuine relationship before we extended the gospel message. What we found was a group of disconnected people opening up their lives to hear the gospel, because we had a relationship. Adults were being baptized, and people were being radically transformed in faith and then going out to tell all their friends about this amazing thing they found: the gospel. I was even given the opportunity by my agnostic friends to do a small five-person Bible Study at a bar when our trivia night was cancelled. The key was not a program; the key was connecting with people in authentic relationship.

## **Conversation**

One of the most important values I have found for reaching Millennials is a willingness to have a conversation. This may sound like a repeat of relationship, because how can you engage in relationship without engaging in a conversation? But it actually goes much deeper. You have to realize that we live in a culture in which people talk and comment on everything. Even TV shows now have Facebook pages and online comment sections where people can engage in conversation and share their thoughts about the week’s episode. Just think of how Facebook is set up. Your status updates are filled with a comments section. People will actually start a conversation around the picture of your morning coffee. We are a culture that is

driven by conversations. They have bled into even the most mundane activities in our lives. If people want to talk about the picture of the latté you posted, how much more do they want to engage in an authentic conversation on faith with someone they have established a relationship with? The answer is obvious, and the question becomes: Are we willing to engage in that conversation?

At the Point, I use a simple mantra: “It’s OK to have questions.” I want people to know that they didn’t have to have everything figured out to come to church. The church was actually filled with people, pastors included, who had questions about God. If we have no questions about God—who He is, and what He is doing—are we really pursuing Him in relationship? With this understanding that people have questions, I created a system to have them bring those questions up during the service. Every Sunday I would tell people to text in their questions. They do, and we take time at the end of the service to respond to them. My intent was to let them know it is OK to have questions, but what I stumbled on was something much bigger.

I had created a way to turn my sermon from a discourse in which I am talking to/at the people into a conversation in which I am talking *with* them. The content didn’t change, and my delivery style didn’t change. The only thing that changed was introducing an open system for organized dialog. I suddenly realized that we had moved from a lecture to a conversation. It changed the whole atmosphere. I can bring up difficult subjects, even hard truths of the Scriptures, without being seeker-sensitive, to steal an old phrase. People wanted to have a conversation about faith, and that meant dealing with the difficult issues as well. I didn’t change my preaching style, my subject matter, or Scripture. I simply opened a venue for conversation. The approach allows people to feel less threatened because they are just learning more about the church with which they are building an authentic relationship.

Adding the “come as you are” attitude to that, I found that we had created a place where people were quicker to open up to us in conversation about their spiritual struggles. Others felt more comfortable to let me know from the start that they don’t believe and are just trying to “figure it out.”

## **What I Have Found to Be True**

Through authentic relationships and authentic conversations, we have been able to connect the disconnected at The Point. More than that, we have been able to connect disconnected Millennials to the faith and keep others from leaving the church. The Holy Spirit has been at work, bringing people in and helping us identify three important values to help us build relationships that will connect the disconnected. I don’t want you to miss that point. These are things we figured out through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and a whole lot of trial and error. But I have found that when we are willing to reach out to the people whom God wants to see reached amazing things begin to happen. Rather than be vague about the impact we have seen, I will share a story with you from our Easter 2013 service.

Every Sunday morning, I pray a simple but powerful prayer with our volunteer team: “God, wake somebody up this morning who was not planning on coming out, and open their heart to hear Your gospel.” God answers this prayer

every week. You can see that through the words of an anonymous email I received just two days after Easter. The email is what I like to call a “Holy Spirit moment”—a moment when you see the vision and strategy that the Holy Spirit has given our church mixed with a gospel that is clearly spoken and lived out to awaken faith in the life of someone. It is the same vision and strategy that we just unpacked for you, using the same gospel message shared in churches since that first Easter celebration. But when you see it take hold in the lives of real people, it takes on a life of its own and demonstrates the importance of reaching out to the Millennial generation with the gospel in authentic, relational, and conversational ways.

*I attended The Point for the first time on Easter Sunday, and all I can say is WOW!!!!*

*I was brought up in church and attended every Sunday and Wednesday. In 04, I was married and it only took 6 months to realize it was a terrible mistake. For the next 4 years I found myself constantly hiding bruises and broken bones from the abuse I was receiving. I fought back every emotion finding my husband in bed with several women while I was at work to support my family. After several failed attempts at counseling I made the choice to leave in fear of being killed. Although I have realized it was the only thing I could do, I have found that I have been pushed away by my family and the church I attended. It had been 5 years since I have went to a church and I have found myself questioning “is this God real”. Why would the people on the front row every Sunday turn their back on me? Why would God allow me to feel this? I found myself drinking regularly to numb the pain, which I am happy to say in January I was able to break the chain of alcoholism and I have not had a drink since. I[n] everything I have had going through my head for the past couple years I also chose in January to start figuring out for myself what I believed in agnostic was a cop out I have to know! I began reading the bible through for myself and I hope to do so in a year. I also wanted to find a church where I “fit” in I am a 29 yo single mom with 3 kids, I am covered with tattoos and piercings, so lets just say some churches looked at my a little different, especially when my 3 kids are in favor of Shawn white and look like skaters.*

*Crazy turn of events, ie I work nights and got off to late to go to the church we was going to “try” on Easter, we ended up at The Point. Wow wow Wow!!!! Nobody there looked down on me, nobody tuned their nose, everybody was so friendly and my son first thing out of his mouth as a 5 yo was “mommy these people are like us” and he was thrilled that he didn’t have to remove his hat.*

*I cannot thank you enough for what you do, and giving me a place to go every Sunday and figure this thing called life out!!!*

*Sent from my iPhone*

I offer these thoughts and this final email as an encouragement. I realized that when we read the depressing statistics on religion in the U. S., one of two things happens: we either see them as a hopeless pursuit of a lost generation or as a call to action to reach out to an increasingly disconnected generation. My hope is that these changes are not perceived as merely a problem that we are wrestling with as church. Rather our changing culture is causing changes in every aspect of our lives, and

within these changes, people are experiencing great success in sharing the gospel and seeing people connected to Christ. So be encouraged to see these changes as opportunities to reach out in new ways and to learn the language of a new generation so that this generation, too, can learn the true, eternal language of the gospel, a gospel that has the power to connect with even the most disconnected of generations.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...And Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 27.

<sup>2</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What A New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2007), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 10:24–25 (ESV)

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 10:16 (ESV).

<sup>5</sup> Ashton Kutcher, foreword to *Engage: The Complete Guide for Brands and Businesses to Build, Cultivate, and Measure Success in the New Web* by Brian Solis (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), ix.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Solis, *The End of Business as Usual* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 148–149.

<sup>12</sup> Solis, *Engage*, 7–8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> “Apology of the Augsburg Confession: Articles VII and VIII,” *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 179.

<sup>15</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *UnChristian*, 26.

# Sacramental Theology and the Third Place

Paul Mueller

**Abstract:** What does sacramental theology have to do with the third place (whatever that is)? This article briefly challenges the reader to consider sacramental theology and sacramental living as two sides of the same coin, and what that means in the life of a Christian and in the life of the church. If, as a quoted author states, “Most of our mainline denominations were assembled . . . when the . . . Church operated from the center of society,”<sup>1</sup> and that reality no longer exists, how does the church operate from outside the center?

I live in the GREAT Northwest—Portland, Oregon, to be exact. One of the “mandates” I was given when I arrived to serve as director of the Center for Applied Lutheran Leadership (CALL) at Concordia University in a partnership with the Northwest District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was to explore what it means to be Lutheran in the twenty-first century out in the great Northwest. This part of the country brings some significant challenges. As large as it is (including Alaska, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and even one congregation in Hong Kong), and as eclectic as it is (I live in a place where most anything goes: legalized marijuana, gay marriage, naked bike rides, “Keep Portland Weird” bumper stickers on cars and painted on city building walls, and green everything to local, on the ground, in-the-dirt conservative farmers), the challenges are even greater.

So, in this cultural milieu of people and ideas and perspectives, I want to share some insights, stories, ideas, and challenges related to sacramental theology and third place ministry. The former is more philosophical, some might say theological, I would say missiological in nature. But there is no intent to create a theological treatise on the subject. The second topic is more practical in nature, and so let me begin with the obvious.

I probably don’t need to tell you that we’re not in Kansas anymore. Ministry contexts are very different than they were even 13 years ago at the turn of the century in a world radically different from mine and probably from many of yours of the past. A book that made me think more intentionally about these issues was a compilation of articles entitled *Ancient Faith, Future Mission*. One of the writers briefly described why he believes it is different today. He wrote, “Most of our mainline denominations were assembled . . . when the . . . Church operated from the center of society.”<sup>2</sup>

Please allow me to pontificate for a moment and repeat a few items from an earlier article. I expect this will resonate with many who are reading this article. As a

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young boy in the late 50s and early 60s, I still remember Friday nights at church. My home congregation was a rural place (nearest town of almost 100 people was a mile away) as were many Lutheran congregations where I grew up. Since my father was the principal of the Lutheran grade school, we lived next door to the school in the teacherage. Across the gravel road was the church and parsonage (and, of course, the cemetery). My back and side yard were corn or oats or alfalfa—depending upon what crop Ed Gruett up the road decided to plant that year. The highlight



**The Mueller Family, 1966**

twice a month was the drive to Green Bay 30 miles away, to shop at Shopko and eat at one of the first McDonalds.

At least once a month, if not more often, all the high school kids in the church would meet for Walther League. They would go on hayrides, play softball, have a Bible study, hang out, get together for whatever reason. I was never invited since I was still too young. But I surely looked forward to that age when I could join in. It was the center of activity. Everyone seemed to be there. The guys brought their cars. They would toss around a ball or football. The girls would all be in their skirts or pedal pushers. And whether or not they studied the Bible or prayed or worshiped did not seem to matter. The activity (perceived as religious or not) was centered on and around the church. And that reality was not discussed, questioned, or pondered—it just was.

And this was not the just the case for the high school kids and activities. The people from the community participated in the church's activities as well. The church was an integral part of the community. When church activities occurred, the church took the lead. However, when community events occurred, the church had its voice there as well. When events were planned or developed, the church (represented by the pastor or other "employed" leadership), as part of the community, responded.

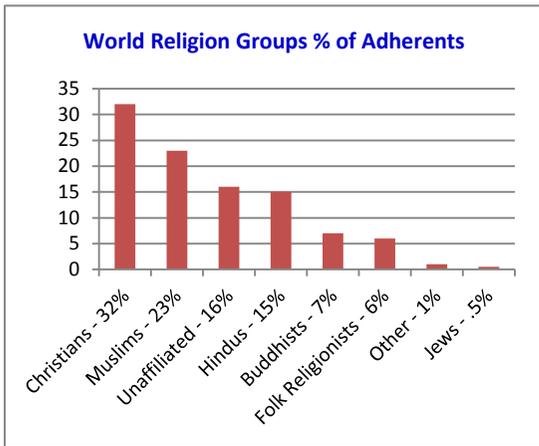
No one seemed to shy away from being associated with the church. If you weren't, your personal voice was somehow weaker, less significant. And even those who were not part of the church expected and accepted the voice and activity of the church in the community, for it was a player. The church mattered. It was obvious. As a result, very little needed to be done to make people aware of the local church. The church's activity and visibility in the life of the community made it known—both for what it was, but also for what it taught. It was, by its very nature, attractional. So, the church did not need to involve itself in much "evangelism" work. They were already doing it—even if it was not called evangelism.

It must also be remembered that the cultural worldview and value system in place during this season of history were quite different from those of today. For all the talk about postmodernism, GenX, I-Gens, and a post-Christendom world, the church described above lived and worked within the Christendom world. Despite atheists and agnostics and even other world religions within the American context, Christianity was an accepted and highly valued worldview and posture. And the church was where Christianity resided and from out of which it lived and worked in

the community. The church had a voice, and most people wanted to be a part of that organization.

This reality does not need to be rehearsed for anyone over the age of 50. Most of them lived this reality. But now? The church is almost, if not already, on the fringe. We reside in a country that lives not only as if the Christian faith no longer brings any viable voice into the marketplace conversation, but as if a spiritual choice, if even considered an option, is of little significance. In the past, religious surveys asked which Christian religion a person followed. Today, many surveys focus on spirituality, not on a specific religion (e.g., Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc.), nor on a branch of a religion (e.g., Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist). If they do focus on

the specific world religions, they are quick to point out that 16% of the people in the world and 20% of the people in the United States do not choose one religion over another. They are the “nones.”<sup>3</sup>



Another author from *Ancient Faith, Future Mission* summarizes it this way, “A further challenge emerges from post-Christian contexts, which provide little cultural reinforcement of Christianity . . . Indeed, such familiarity with

**Pew Forum On Religion and Public Life<sup>4</sup>**

Christianity as may exist is often roundly dismissive, negative, and even scornful.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, that same writer notes, “Those communicators must earn an opportunity to be heard despite that negativity.”<sup>6</sup>

If this is how the community is interpreting the church, which includes Christianity, we need to reconsider how we connect with people—both with those who know Christ as well as with those who don’t. And a key to connecting is recognizing the following: the three primary places where we connect with people—(1) our homes, (2) our work, and (3) the third place. The first two have not changed much over the centuries. We still form strong, close relationships with people in our homes and where we work.

But that third place has changed dramatically. In the past, the third place was the church. People in the community considered the church not only a spiritual house for spiritual things, but a place to connect with another set of friends, find their spouse, join the softball team, hang out on Friday night—in summary, to form personal relationships. Today they are finding those at the bar, Starbucks, Facebook, dating sites—almost anywhere. Being part of the church in order to marry a Lutheran rather than a Catholic is not even a conversation anymore. Most Lutheran parents are happy if their children are dating, and hopefully even marrying, Christians, let alone Lutherans.

Individuals are searching for their own spirituality in all sorts of places. The church might be one of those, but surely not the only place. People are developing their own truths and constructs based on a multiplicity of faiths and religions and experiences. The church might be a resource, but it is not the center, and maybe not even a choice as people contemplate their spirituality. Subsequently, churches no longer have captive audiences learning about or searching for the truths found in Christ. People are not frequenting churches to find or develop their spiritual walk. And they are not coming to the church to fill their other third place needs either. They simply are not coming!

The author of *Tangible Kingdom* negatively evaluates that reality: “The worst mistake has been that Christians have tried to make their church programs or worship services their third place. The key is that third places need to be in public zones.”<sup>7</sup> In defense of that Christian practice, it happened in a time and cultural worldview when it was the appropriate thing to do. The unfortunate reality is that leaders and congregations continue to act as if the world and culture has stood still, holding on to past methods and strategies in hope that they will once again be successful and popular.

So if that third place has changed, it requires us to readjust our strategies related to the third place. If we continue to develop programs and models and ministries, hoping that people will come to the church to access those resources, we will miss the audience. They are not coming there to connect or access the resources, and we can’t develop church-based activities and simply export them into the community, workplace, or home. An important aside: those who are attending church do need resources and support and catechesis and training in discipleship. But even those ministries for “members” need to be rethought and repurposed—not only as support and help and soul saving, but also as equipping and discipling to be out and about in the new third place. Church should not only be a destination point; it should be a point of departure. How do disciplined Christians live and work and talk in a way so that in their community where mission is possible, i.e., their missional community (be it their bowling team, Friday card night, cul-de-sac families, football buddies, soccer team, book club, Zumba class) people are touched with the love of Christ?



What does that look like in practice? Here is an example of third place ministry thinking and practice. An established congregation was just beginning to consider connecting with people in the public zone. A new believer and member, let’s call him John, who had significant leadership qualities, was asked to become part of the church council. Honored to be asked, he inquired when they met. “First Wednesday evening of every month” was the response. Unfortunately, that was the same evening John hung out with his radio controlled airplane club—his friends. The congregation made a decision—they changed their church council meeting to a different evening so that John could serve but also remain connected with his friends, his missional community in that third place.

A pastor friend of mine told me about a man who came into his congregation. He was a motorcycle rider—leathers, tats, smoked, smelled, and spoke gruffly. But, he was a Christian and for some reason found his home in that

congregation. The pastor knew it would be a difficult fit—not for him, but, unfortunately, for the congregation. After some time, the congregation was able to look past some of his oddities (as interpreted by them), accepted him, but encouraged him to remain connected to his third place—the missional community of motorbike riders with whom he was still closely associated. Their encouragement was for him to be Christ among them. Church was happening in the public zone, the third place.

A final example may suffice. A leader in a congregation with which I am familiar had many relationships with people not connected with the church and was encouraged to continue those relationships after he became a Christian. The goal was not to bring them all to church, but to take Christ to them. As a result, those relationships gave him ample opportunities to not only be Christ-like, but also to share the hope of Christ with them as questions were asked, as life-stages were achieved, as hurt and grief entered their lives. Without too much work on his part, his friends began asking questions about his faith, which turned into regular gatherings for movies and dinner and talk; and soon, people were asking how they, too, could be baptized and walk the life of faith in Christ. And so they did, baptisms occurring even without the pastor being engaged in the event. And all of this was done with the blessing of the congregation—the congregation actually training and developing him (and others) to live for Christ in the third place of the public zone where church was being realized.

The preceding are examples of individuals recognizing the role that they play as missionaries in their missional communities in the third place. However, congregations need to practice this posture as well. The engagement of congregations in and with their local communities is absolutely vital if they expect to be seen as relevant institutions and organizations with voice and influence. The familiar mantra today regarding this issue is: “If your church were to close its doors today, would anyone in the local community care or even know?” I am familiar with numerous congregations that are involved in mercy and justice and community development and have adopted organizations in the communities in which they are located. They serve regularly in nursing homes, local schools, public venues, hospitals, recreation centers, shelters, and social service agencies. Paid leadership of the congregation serves in public roles in the community. Rather than collecting and filling the food shelf with donations, they work in them. Rather than supplying the paint and brushes to paint the local classrooms, they do the painting. Whenever something is needed at their adopted ministry site, they are available to fill the need in the best way they are able. And as the congregation engages, opportunities mount for being Christ and in many instances, sharing Him as well. They represent the institutional church in the public zone, the third place.

This posture and activity of individual members and the congregation as an institution are quite different than they were in the near history of church. But once this new paradigm is satisfactorily discussed, understood, and embraced, we can then address strategy, methods, and appropriate communication. And what does that communication look like? What forms does it take? How does the church earn the opportunity? And what is the content of that communication? There are many issues which might be highlighted in addressing these questions. In their book, *Emerging Church*, Larson and Osborne note one important key to addressing those questions:

“blend[ing] the dynamic of a personal Gospel with the compassion of social concern.”<sup>8</sup> Allow me to unpack one word in that sentence— “blending.” I am not referring to a blending of theology and activity into a liberation theology. Rather, it is connecting these two pieces of the broader Gospel as inseparable. Faith without works and social justice on its own are and have been quite possible. One could easily misunderstand “personal Gospel” in our COEXIST world if we listen to the politically correct manner in which to be a spiritual person. And while compassionately serving the disenfranchised, one can easily leave out the clear link with one’s personal relationship with God through Christ.



The phrase of St. Francis of Assisi, or whoever spoke it, does not ring true today, “Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words.” In my opinion, people use this as an excuse to remain silent; it fits in well with our politically correct way to be spiritual. But studies have shown that connecting the deed with the motivation and meaning by those being served is nonexistent if words are not used. The workers from the church and from USAID are assumed to have the same motivation: they both are people who embrace civic and social responsibility, and that is good. But if our works are to help people glorify God, as Peter wrote: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pt 2:12), more than deeds are needed. Christ-motivated people living their faith daily and being able and willing to give a word whenever called upon is just as important, as Peter also wrote: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Pt 3:15). By the way, Peter’s caveat is important today.

This is slipping sacramental theology and its obvious corollary, if not its synonym, into sacramental living. When you refer to sacramental theology, the Christian in the pew will probably be able to give some meaning to those words. Theology is doctrine or teaching or talk about God. Sacrament has two meanings, maybe three: Baptism, the Lord’s Supper/Eucharist, and possibly confession and absolution. But few if any would understand the role people play in the practice of a sacramental theology—that they, too, are means for dispensing the means of grace, as Martin Luther noted in the Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article IV. Of the Gospel:

We will now return to the Gospel, which not merely in one way gives us counsel and aid against sin; for God is superabundantly rich [and liberal] in His grace [and goodness]. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached [He commands to be preached] in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. Secondly, through Baptism. Thirdly, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar. Fourthly, through the power of the keys, and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren.<sup>9</sup>

It is in this last action listed by Luther that people can truly realize their personal sacramental living.

How do these elements, especially the last element of our sacramental theology, fit into the world? It is in the *blending* of a personal Gospel with the

compassion of social concern. Sacramental theology needs to become sacramental living.

The connection between spiritual/theological matters, well-defined and taught in our textbooks, and the real life experiences on the ground is becoming a desire of more and more people in the world today. Those who live in most parts of Africa have much to teach us about this unrealized dichotomy that we have experienced in America the past 100+ years. “The last few years have seen a growing awareness in culture that all of life should be seen as holy and sacred . . . the simplistic binary opposition of the sacred and secular has been increasingly challenged. . . . A sacramental life is life lived in God, so each day is sacramental and we ourselves are sacraments of God in the world.”<sup>10</sup> We need to connect God and the narrative of Scripture with the narrative of life on the sidewalks of the world. I recently read an article that spoke about religion and children. It was clear that the author misunderstood religious spirituality and its ultimate purpose. She spoke of religion as a link that connects people to their history or a way to bond or build community or strengthen family, but she completely ignored or forgot, or just didn’t know, that is about humans and their relationship to the God who created us. Her final sentence revealed that shallow understanding of spirituality when she said that maybe her kids would end up with the “pleasant acceptance of its absence that their father and I enjoy.”<sup>11</sup> That summary sentence says it all. She has no clue about that relationship with her true Father in heaven. For her, religion is not about God and His creation—it is only about herself. She missed it all.

Today, people do not necessarily associate sacramental theology with sacramental living. Sacraments are things that happen in church. Theology is words about God—words that may or may not have an impact on our lives, as is the case of the author above who claims a “pleasant acceptance” of the absence of God’s word in thought or life. But sacramental living cannot ignore God in one’s life—for it is He who is lived out each and every day.

Sacramental theology is more than defining the Sacraments and adding as much clarity as possible to it through theological terms, often incomprehensible to the Christian who slogs it out in daily life. It is embracing Christ through faith and then living in Him in the mystery and emotion which is present in the grace freely dispensed by God in everyday items of bread, wine, water, and words. It is daily life where the mysterious presence of Christ influences not only the personal decisions made, but also touches the lives of an individual’s missional community, the new third place, where Christ presents Himself through actions and words. Sacramental theology is life in action. It surely is not confined to words defining it on a page, no matter how well that has been done. Unless it breathes organically in life, it is only profitable for study. “Thus an individual, privatized, or purely personal spirituality is an oxymoron. Authentic spirituality can never be an isolated, privatized, or an individual affair.”<sup>12</sup>

I help host in our district an online conversation related to concepts found in a popular book at the moment, *Tangible Kingdom*. The PowerPoint slide in front of the group asked for their understanding of the word “incarnational” and, subsequently in our conversation, “incarnational living.” It was a robust conversation with many ideas, suggestions, and words defining and describing it. Their responses

noted the following: tangible; Christ made present, visible in material stuff; Christ incarnated in us; the Holy Spirit coming so close that God is right inside; sent-ness involved; Apostle's Creed; purposefulness and a mission attached to it; embodiment of a deity or spirit in us; makes love specific; lifestyle evangelism; missional living; life matching up with faith; speaking AND living the truth; Christians involved in community; going where people are; first making the cultural leap into the world rather than first inviting them into our culture; us into the community.

I then posed another word. I asked them to define "sacramental" and, subsequently, "sacramental living." Again, it was a robust conversation. They shared the following: looking up and out, not down and in; involved in the grace being dispensed; unity/solidarity; naming and laying all at the foot of the cross; day by day, moment by moment; theology closely connected to missiology; linked to will-live action; doing things. I was particularly struck by the following words being used to describe it: tuned in to what happens on the other side of the water.

I then posted another slide. I asked them if incarnational and sacramental could be synonymous? It was an interesting conversation.

What I have been finding in my reading and interactions with congregations in the Northwest is a desire to connect sacrament to the world. But they struggle with how it can be accomplished. Without a doubt, there is a desire by regular, everyday, spiritual people in the world to discover meaning and living not only in theological abstracts but connected to the mysterious, emotive, and rhythms of "in the world" monasticism. Tony Cook, a professor friend of mine from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, pointed me to the book mentioned earlier by Osborne and Larson, who summarize this perspective well. "In the emerging Church, due emphasis will be placed on both theological rootage and contemporary experience, on celebration in worship and involvement in social concerns, on faith and feeling, reason and prayer, conversion and continuity, the personal and the conceptual."<sup>13</sup>

But what does that look like? Churches are experimenting (I realize some people do not like that term) with different ways to connect sacramental theology and sacramental living. A YouTube video<sup>14</sup> shares a simple way to consider this paradigm shift. It illustrates the difference between the church as the third place and the community where people live as the third place. Teaching Christians that the church is not the third place for many, if not most people, in their community is a start. Teaching them to recognize that the third place for many, if not most people, is the public space, the marketplace, the community in which they live is then essential.

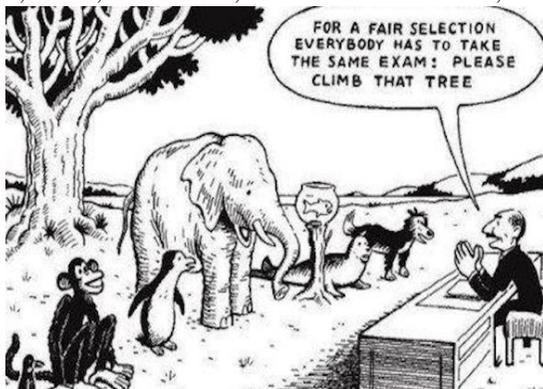
But even when people do attend the church for worship, they are being encouraged to understand how they connect to God and what that means in different ways. One writer noted it in the following way, "Fundamentally, I believe that our primary encounter with God in worship is not an intellectual one, but an emotive one. Worship is one of the first ways that seekers of faith encounter Christ, and when asked about their first dip in the worship ocean, they do not reflect on worship in terms of reason or logic, of whether they were convinced by the argument, but in terms of how it made them feel."<sup>15</sup> And as much as that makes some Christian leaders uncomfortable, it is the Spirit-generated faith response of people who have been graced by a God who has infected their whole being, not just their intellectual, rational side. We should not hang our hats on an intellectual response to

proclamation as the “proof” of Holy Spirit generated faith. It is as silly as relying only on some emotional response or backing ourselves into a corner with some hands-off magical moment which dishonors God’s Word. This is not an either/or conversation. It is about our God who, through the Word and Sacraments, claims the whole person as He made us—soul, mind, body, and spirit.

One example from *Ancient Faith, Future Mission* will help to illustrate. A church in the Anglican tradition in Oxford, UK, called hOME, has a very deep

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understanding of sacrament, of Christ among us and within us, and has been strongly influenced by tradition and liturgy. And as a result, it has worked diligently to place the Eucharist as the center piece in their liturgical moments. Yet, it is surrounded with sounds and forms and movements and smells which grab the emotional and sensual moments of each individual, addressing the whole person rather than focusing on a person’s intellectual capacity. And many of those sounds and forms and movements and smells do not match up with what we traditionally have employed in our own sounds, forms, movements, and smells. In addition, they have “reworked poverty as simplicity, chastity as purity, obedience as accountability, and stability as presence. The great advantage of such a monastic rhythm is that it enables spiritual tourists to belong and therefore experience the sacramental way of life, worship, and prayer before having worked out if they believe.”<sup>16</sup> In this place called hOME, the door is



wide open in its welcoming forms and its inclusive posture before commitment to the truth has been voiced. People are participating in the four rhythms with others in the worshiping community even before they have been captured by the truth of Christ’s claims on their life. And these four rhythms are being lived in life’s third place, among the missional communities of the people who attend services. For a slice of the Christian Lutheran world, this expectation borders on heresy.

There is a challenge before us. It is up to us to recognize and embrace whether the change we see in the world requires a change in how we live and practice as Christians in that world. I believe (especially punctuated by my mission experiences and tenure in Africa), along with the writer, that

an honest recognition is required, that one size does not fit all, and that every expression of church is just that, an expression of a certain form and shape that is part of a community’s ongoing response to Christ. New cultures and new questions demand new shapes and new responses. . . It is this recognition, more than anything else, which is the vital first principle of

the missiology that has been encouraged by the Fresh Expressions movement.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, it is

helpful for us to remember that the particular branch of the catholic Church, the particular worshipping community we are a part of, whatever pattern or shape it now takes, had a beginning that was born of mission. . . . Or to put it more simply: every old way of being church was once new. And every new way of being church must become old and in turn give birth to what will follow as the Church responds faithfully to the commission of Christ to proclaim the faith afresh.<sup>18</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Brackett, "Midwifing the Movement of the Spirit," in *Ancient Faith, Future Mission: Fresh Expressions in the Sacramental Tradition*, ed. Steven Croft, Ian Mobsby, Stephanie and Spellens (2009; repr., New York: Seabury Books, 2010), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "'Nones' on the Rise," October 9, 2012, [www.pewforum.org/unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx](http://www.pewforum.org/unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx).

<sup>4</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, "The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Major Religious Groups as of 2010," December 18, 2012, [www.pewforum.org/global-religious-landscape-exec.aspx](http://www.pewforum.org/global-religious-landscape-exec.aspx).

<sup>5</sup> Katharine Jefferts Schori, forward to *Ancient Faith, Future Mission*, viii.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 158.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Larson and Ralph Osborne, forward to *The Emerging Church*, (Waco, TX: Word, 1970).

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther, Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article IV. Of the Gospel.

<sup>10</sup> Ian Adams and Ian Mobsby, "New Monasticism," in *Ancient Faith, Future Mission*, 26–27.

<sup>11</sup> KJ Dell'Antonia, "Children, Choosing Their Religion," *New York Times*, Wednesday, January 3, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Adams and Ian Mobsby, *Ancient Faith, Future Mission*, 31.

<sup>13</sup> Larson and Osborne, forward to *The Emerging Church*.

<sup>14</sup> Kelly Tshibaka and Niki Tshibaka, "Making Disciples," YouTube, August 22, 2011, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJWkQ9UP\\_m8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJWkQ9UP_m8).

<sup>15</sup> Simon Rundell, "Blessed: A Sacramental Perspective of Alternative Worship with Young People," in *Ancient Faith, Future Mission*, 159.

<sup>16</sup> Ian Adams and Ian Mobsby, *Ancient Faith, Future Mission*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Bishop Stephen Cottrell, "Letting Your Actions Do the Talking: Mission and the Catholic Tradition," in *Ancient Faith, Future Mission*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 56–57.



The MissionShift Institute of Concordia Seminary is not a building, but a network of local leaders brought together to equip Christians to build and lead culture-crossing ministries. MissionShift Institute's curriculum combines immersion experiences with the expertise of 30+ ministry practitioners from the Greater St. Louis Area. Participants receive valuable training in the theory and practice of starting and leading local, cross-cultural ministries. Courses run September through May annually and open to Christians from every tribe.

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# **MissionShift:**

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## **Reaching the World Next Door**



# THE CHURCH AND THE CULTURE OF THE MILLENNIALS—THE BEST OR WORST OF TIMES?

**Armand J. Boehme**

**Abstract:** The Millennials are a group of people who are increasingly leaving religion. What are the reasons this is occurring? Recent studies are examined to find answers to the question. Are there changes in Lutheran beliefs and trends in religious education which might impact outreach to Millennials? What do Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions say in relationship to those trends? What cultural and social movements have impacted the Millennial worldview? Ways of addressing the culture and reaching out to Millennials with the saving Gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ are also suggested in this essay.<sup>1</sup>

## **A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE MILLENNIALS AND THEIR CULTURE**

Christianity is growing exponentially in the Global South. In many ways this is the best of times for Christianity in Asia, Africa, and South America. However, it is not necessarily the best of times for Christianity in the Western world. The Christian Church in the West has experienced steep declines in membership.<sup>1</sup> One group that is declining in church membership is identified as the Millennials. The Millennials are generally described as those born from 1981 to 2000. They are identified as Millennials because they have come of age in the new millennium. Their oldest members are nearing 30 and their younger members are becoming adolescents. Ethnically they are very diverse. They are progressive or liberal in their political persuasion. They are predominantly liberal on social issues like adults living together without marriage, having children outside of marriage, same gender marriage, same gender couples adopting and raising children, and in their approval of abortion. They are more inclined to accept evolution as the explanation for human life. Just 20% are married but 33% are parents. They are wary of people but exhibit a significant degree of trust in institutions, believing that the government should deal with and solve society's problems. They also accept absolute standards of right and wrong in about the same percentages as their elders. They are also somewhat comfortable with churches having involvement in politics.

Millennials have grown up with tweeting, texting, Facebook, YouTube, and all other aspects of the digital age. Many have tattoos and piercings. A majority of

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Millennials believe that the older generation is superior to theirs in the areas of work ethic and moral values. They are the least religious generation on record in modern times. Though fewer Millennials say that religion is important to them, almost half pray daily. Over 60% express certainty that God exists. Significant percentages believe in life after death (75%), heaven (74%), hell (62%), miracles (78%), as well as angels and demons (67%).<sup>2</sup>

The Millennials have grown up and lived in an era that has experienced an impassioned clash of cultures. Some have described this as a culture war in which secular values and beliefs and religious values and beliefs have struggled against one another.<sup>3</sup> The current culture is growing more secular yet is also religiously pluralistic.

One example of that culture war is the rise of militant atheism. The most visible of these new militant atheists are Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins. These individuals and others claim that religion poisons everything and that religion is the root of all society's evils. Other atheists are not as virulently opposed to religion.<sup>4</sup> Violence associated with religious people helps fuel anti-Christian and anti-religious perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, we examine (I) the findings of other studies on the Millennials to provide a broader picture of who and what they are and investigate possible cultural reasons for and factors involved with the Millennial perspective on religion; (II) Lutheran beliefs from 1998 and 2008 to determine their clarity and how they might compare to Millennial beliefs; (III) recent trends in Lutheranism concerning religious education, including what (IV) the Lutheran Confessions and (V) the Scriptures say about Christian education. Finally, we offer (VI) suggestions for the Church's interaction with and gospel outreach to Millennials and others in the twenty-first century.

## **I. OTHER STUDIES WHICH HELP TO BETTER UNDERSTAND MILLENNIALS AND THEIR CULTURE**

### **A. OUTSIDERS AND DROPOUTS**

Neither religion in general nor Christianity in particular has a sterling reputation in the world especially among the youth and younger adults—the Millennial generation. According to the book *unChristian*, 24 million Americans aged 16–41 are outsiders to Christianity.<sup>6</sup> These outsiders see Christianity as judgmental, biased, hateful, and insensitive towards those who have other religious beliefs and especially hateful towards homosexuals. Those outside the faith view Christians as being too involved in politics, too interested in getting converts, too sheltered and out of touch with the real world, and too interested in getting money.<sup>7</sup> One result in the studies underlying *unChristian* appears to conflict with the Pew results above, which found the Millennials somewhat tolerant of religion's involvement in politics. Perhaps the question to be asked is, What kind of involvement? It would appear that religious involvement in more conservative causes is unacceptable for many Millennials, but religious support of governmental action in favor of same-sex marriage, abortion, and similar causes is acceptable. This is an area that needs further study. Sexual abuse and money scandals involving

prominent Christian leaders have also contributed to this negative view of Christianity.

A Pew Forum study, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation,” (2012) states that “more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics” now populate the United States, with another “33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation.”<sup>8</sup> Theories given for this dramatic increase in atheists, agnostics, and non-affiliated (the nones) are similar to the findings in the book, *unChristian*: (1) political backlash because organized religion is seen as too “deeply entangled with conservative politics” causing “many young Americans to view religion as ‘judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political.’”<sup>9</sup> Other possible factors are: the delay in the age of marriage (greater “adultolescence”), the increasing social disengagement of the nones (*Bowling Alone; Habits of the Heart*), and the increasing secularization of American society.<sup>10</sup>

Many of these nones say that they believe in God and are spiritual but have no desire to be affiliated with any organized religion. This trend of being individualistically religious or spiritual was seen already in the 1980s. *Habits of the Heart* was a sociological study of American society and culture. Individuals shared with researchers statements like, “I feel religious in a way. I have no denomination or anything like that.”<sup>11</sup> Many felt that organized religion was hypocritical because its adherents did not practice what they preached. Others desired personal autonomy that identified self in harmony with nature and other humans even if that harmony conflicted with established norms.

The weakness of this type of religious individualism is seen in its compromise with the world, its pursuit of self-centered experience, and its lack of commitment. The researchers wrote about their concerns that excessive individualism would lead to greater social disengagement.<sup>12</sup> One individual named Sheila invented her own religion “Sheilism.”<sup>13</sup> The researchers cautioned that the “radical religious individualism”<sup>14</sup> they found leads to “loneliness and vulnerability” rather than the “autonomy” those practicing it desire.<sup>15</sup> Such religious individualism “can only survive in a renewed relationship with established religious practices.”<sup>16</sup> These same authors penned a follow-up book entitled *The Good Society* which focused on declining trust in society’s institutions—religion, education, business, family, and government—and encouraged greater participation therein to deal with society’s problems in helpful ways.<sup>17</sup>

Young Americans are dropping out of religion at an increasingly alarming rate: about 5–6 times the historic rate. Thirty to forty percent have no religion today versus 5–10% a generation ago. The religious discontent and disaffection of many young people also stems from their discomfort with religiosity being tied to politics.<sup>18</sup> One might conclude that religious leaders, educators, and parents need to offer young Millennial Americans a sound biblical faith rather than politics, gimmicks, fads, or social trends.

*American Grace* recounts other trends among youth and young adults. Surveys at the core of the book indicate that “nearly two-thirds [66%] of evangelicals under 35 believe that non-Christians [Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, et al.] can go to heaven,” whereas “only 39 percent of those over age 65” believe that.<sup>19</sup> This shift is in part a result of the fact that young evangelicals have grown up in a religiously

pluralistic society so that they don't feel it is right to condemn someone to eternal damnation on the basis of differences in their religious beliefs. They are people who are loved and known well. They are beloved friends. It just doesn't feel right that God would send them to hell. Also, younger evangelicals pray, attend church, and read the Bible less; they are also less likely to take the Bible literally.<sup>20</sup>

Young Americans today inherit both religion and congregation far less than their parents and grandparents did, and there is remarkable religious fluidity, with 1/3 to 1/2 of all Americans changing religion from the one into which they were born. These statistics do not simply reflect a change from Methodist to Lutheran. Rather the shifts are more often from Christian to Buddhist, or from Lutheran to atheist. Approximately 70% of Americans have at least some extended family in a different religion, and this figure rises to 75% for closest friends. Eighty-five percent of Americans live with neighbors of a different religion. The inter-linkage of these religious networks moves people to be more tolerant of the faith of others.<sup>21</sup>

## **B. RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE IN THE MILLENNIAL ERA**

Some of the Millennials' indifference to and antagonism toward religion is a result of the lack of knowledge about religion that exists in the world today.

This decline in religious knowledge is part of the general decline in knowledge prevalent in our culture and society today. One can no longer assume that everyone knows who Lincoln, FDR, Julius Caesar, Homer, Socrates, and Washington were. Nor can historical facts be assumed—knowledge of the Civil War, the War of the Roses, or even facts about the American Revolution. This decline in knowledge moved E. D. Hirsch, Jr., to write a book entitled *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. The 60+ page list of words and concepts that a culturally literate person living in the Western world should know includes over 300 religious words and concepts.<sup>22</sup> Knowledge of the Bible and the beliefs of various religions are part of being culturally literate—culturally educated. Knowing and understanding the meaning of religious terms are part of the general knowledge that one should possess. Religious knowledge is cultural knowledge.

Sometimes this truth about the importance and necessity of religious knowledge is found in places that one would not normally expect. Some of those places are secular college campuses. English teachers at major universities want their incoming students to have a reading knowledge of the Bible since “without a working knowledge of the Bible it is almost impossible for their students to understand the vast corpus of western literature they teach.”<sup>23</sup> For instance, Steinbeck's novel, *East of Eden*, is a modern retelling of the biblical story of Cain and Abel. Many college English professors have found that a working knowledge of the Bible is woefully lacking in their students since most haven't read the Bible!

Part of this lack of religious knowledge comes from the increasing distance of young people from religion and the growing lack of education about religion, even the major religions, in American schools during the last half of the twentieth century. Western educational systems tend to treat religion as a relic of the past, which would eventually die out as society grew more modern, and have been afraid of being sued if it were discussed in the classroom. Whether teaching about religion should occur in public school classrooms became a much more lively subject of debate after

9/11.<sup>24</sup>

1. RELIGIOUS LITERACY: The lack of religious knowledge has been the subject of a number of studies and books. Like Hirsch, Steven Prothero also believes that religious knowledge is part of the cultural literacy necessary for being an effective citizen of the world.<sup>25</sup> His book, *Religious Literacy*, illustrates the lack of religious knowledge especially among the young—the Millennial generation. Prothero, who teaches religion at Boston University, gives his incoming students a brief religious quiz. The results are that most students cannot name the four Gospels, only 1 of 8 could name the first five books of the Old Testament, most could list only 4 of the 10 Commandments, and Paul is consistently believed to have bound Isaac for sacrifice. Others believe that Noah led the Israelites' Exodus out of Babylon, that Abraham was blinded on the road to Damascus, and that Jesus was born either in Jerusalem or Nazareth. Isaac, James, Michael, Simon Peter, and Paul are often named as the authors of the Gospels.<sup>26</sup>

Prothero found that religious beliefs are increasingly less related to factual biblical knowledge and doctrinal content. Most religious people are in three primary groups: the experientialists, whose beliefs are based on emotions and feelings; the moralists, or ethical Christians; and the confessionalists, who emphasize doctrine. The latter are a small minority of Christians today. Religion today is primarily concerned with the realm of ethics (being for or against family values, homosexuality, abortion, sex outside of marriage, illegal immigrants, the environment, etc.) or emotions and feelings, e.g., service that makes one feel good or questions and statements related to feelings: What did you feel when you read that passage? How do you think Jesus felt when He was hanging on the cross? Some people at St. Mark's spoke to me when I visited there, but I felt they really didn't like me! While a minority of Christians still holds to substance in doctrine that motivates practice, Prothero maintains that the majority of believers don't disagree about theology because theology is no longer much taught or emphasized. The majority of religious battles today are argued on the basis of ethics or feelings.<sup>27</sup>

Many younger Americans not only lack knowledge about Christianity but they lack knowledge about other religions as well. Barely half of American teens surveyed could name Buddhism and Judaism as major world religions. Even fewer could name Hinduism and Islam.<sup>28</sup>

This lack of religious knowledge is found not only among Millennials. A significant number of American adults cannot name one of the four Gospels—but most know the names of the four Beatles. This lack of religious knowledge has caused the pollster George Gallup to label America as “a nation of biblical illiterates.”<sup>29</sup>

Part of the lack of knowledge about religion today is a result of the lack of teaching about that subject in public education. However, the knowledge gap within Christianity is a result of the emphasis of Christian education on experience and emotion rather than on doctrinal content in teaching and in preaching.<sup>30</sup>

2. SOUL SEARCHING: Prothero's findings are similar to those of Christian Smith, a sociologist of religion who teaches at Notre Dame. His studies indicate that

...only a minority of U.S. teenagers are [learning] the traditional substantive content and character of the religious traditions to which they belong. For, it appears to us, another popular religious faith, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, is colonizing many historical religious traditions and . . . converting believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious version of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness . . . a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten stepcousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This has happened in the minds and hearts of many individual believers and, it also appears, within the structures of at least some Christian organizations and institutions. The language and therefore experience of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States at the very least, to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward. It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather more subtly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith,

i.e., Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.<sup>31</sup>

In an interview with *Christianity Today* about his book *Soul Searching*, Smith said, "It's unbelievable the proportion of conservative Protestant teens who do not seem to grasp elementary concepts of the gospel concerning grace and justification. Their view is: be a good person."<sup>32</sup>

Michael Spencer, a religious blogger, expressing the same concern for his research, found that "massive majorities of Evangelicals can't articulate the gospel with any coherence" and that "[w]e Evangelicals have failed to pass on to our young people an orthodox form of faith that can take root and survive the secular onslaught. Ironically, the billions of dollars we've spent on youth ministers, Christian music, publishing, and media has produced a culture of young Christians who know next to nothing about their own faith except how they feel about it. Our young people have deep beliefs about the culture war, but do not know why they should obey scripture, the essentials of theology, or the experience of spiritual discipline and community. Coming generations of Christians are going to be monumentally ignorant and unprepared for culture-wide pressures."<sup>33</sup>

3. SOULS IN TRANSITION: That Spencer's concerns are not unfounded has been seen in further studies of beliefs held past the teenage years. In a book entitled *Souls in Transition*,<sup>34</sup> Smith studied the religious beliefs of emerging adults aged 18–29. They are experiencing greater "freedom" and are faced with an almost endless array of options in life, work, marriage, sexuality, where to live, go to school, and what to major in. These emerging adults are also extremely self-focused, confused, and anxious because they perceive a lack of permanence in marriage, work, place of residence, etc. This has led to "adulthoodescence," an elongation of adolescence which extends well into what formerly were described as adult years.<sup>35</sup>

Smith notes that "Most of what happens in emerging adulthood works

against serious faith commitments and putting down roots in congregations. Most emerging adults are disconnected from religious institutions and practices.” They have free geographic and social mobility. They desire options and want “to be crazy and free in ways most religious traditions frown upon.” They also desire “an identity different from” their family of origin. These factors lead to a reduction of serious faith commitment. Smith also found “a significant minority of emerging adults who are raised in seriously religious families who continue on with that.” The “most important factor” for the retention of faith commitment among emerging adults “is parents.” How is that faith commitment formed? Such a commitment is formed when youth have “established devotional lives,” which means that they are “praying” and “reading Scripture”—a pattern of life that begins “during the teenage years” or even earlier. Having other adult relationships in a congregation who provide spiritual support and model the faith is also an important factor.<sup>36</sup>

4. LOST IN TRANSITION: Another Smith book, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, notes the problems faced by those entering adulthood in the twenty-first century. The postmodern cast to society filters down to an individualized morality, moral relativism, confused sexual mores, excesses in drugs and alcohol, excessive consumerism, greater social disconnect from society, and confused moral reasoning. In fact there seems to be a distinct lack of ability to think clearly or to exhibit coherent reasoning about the moral issues noted above.<sup>37</sup> The faith of a majority of emerging adults is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

Emerging adults have a more pronounced consumerist element to their faith—the church shopping element. If one doesn’t feel one fits at Park Ridge Lutheran, there are many, many other options. Emerging adults “view religion as training in becoming a good person.” Many believe “they are basically good people” because if you aren’t a good person you are then “a horrible person.”<sup>38</sup>

The belief expressed above that one needs to be a good person appears to be part of a growing trend among the young. The American Freshman Survey given to American college freshman indicates that many believe they are above average, have a sense of entitlement, and have unrealistic ambitions in relationship to their actual abilities. They tend towards a celebrity culture, exhibiting a desire for accolades based on little actual achievement. Another study indicates that one in four are narcissistic, exhibiting improper self-love, vanity and self-centeredness. Such tendencies lead to dissatisfaction, depression, and frustration as well as failure in adulthood. This is a growing trend which some attribute to an excessive emphasis on personal self-esteem.<sup>39</sup>

There is also a larger segment of emerging adults than teenagers who are “outrightly hostile to religion.” Most emerging adults who are overtly hostile to religion were believers in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. They experienced a downward spiritual drift from traditional religion to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, which then led them to forsake any religious faith altogether. Often those who are antagonistic to or have dropped out of Christianity were exposed to a faulty or false version of Christianity, and it is this faulty caricature of Christianity which they have rejected and to which they are hostile. This faulty caricature of Christianity is a barrier to their re-entrance into the true Christian faith. As many teens are

“disconnected from the adult world,” so many emerging adults are “structurally disconnected from older adults” who could guide and mentor them in matters of life and faith.<sup>40</sup> The emerging adult world is “self-enclosed.” Change can happen only “in relationships” with others. What emerging adults need are “engagement” and “relationships” with older adults.<sup>41</sup>

However, generational interaction is not a trend seen among the Millennials. Rather they exhibit greater tendencies to generational separation. This age segregation and separation that occurs with many emerging adults reflects the mantra of the 60s: “Never trust anyone over 30.” Some then even said, “Never trust a God over 30!”<sup>42</sup> Regarding this attitude, Millennials in the Church are the best resource for helping other Millennials to discover the correct teaching about the Church and to help them remain connected to the Church.

### **C. WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS MEAN FOR CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRIES TO MILLENNIALS AND OTHERS?**

To begin with, church denominations and congregations need to understand that children no longer simply move from adolescence to adulthood. Relationships between older adults and Millennial teens/emerging adults are extremely important for faith formation and retention. Congregations and church bodies need to understand the necessity for serious intentional ministries with teens and emerging adults that build sound relationships in the Body of Christ. Most church programs are set up to minister to married couples with kids. Today many live together without marriage. Many remain single well into adulthood. Fewer children are being born. Many who are born are born out of wedlock. Society increasingly comprises single adults and single parents, and many of them are unchurched and without faith. Many children have multiple parents and more than one home. Church bodies and congregations “need to realize that American demographics and the American family are changing.”<sup>43</sup>

Youth ministry needs to come to grips with these social changes and provide sound biblical and doctrinal substance for youth. The difficulty is that Christian youth ministry in the last several decades did not always provide the youth of the church with sound biblical and doctrinal substance. An article in *Lutheran Forum* expressed the concern that beginning in the late 1950s Christian youth ministry became almost entirely relational and moralistic to the detriment of the proclamation of the Word of God and the gospel. Pizza and feel-good activities do not grow the faith. This article also expressed concern about the extension of “adulthood” in our culture.<sup>44</sup> There is a growing concern that the church has failed to hand the faith from one generation to another. A growing number of individuals are encouraging a return in youth ministry to sound biblical and doctrinal teaching and the practical application of that teaching to the young.<sup>45</sup>

Leaders in the church need to grapple with and understand the social forces shaping the beliefs and actions of teens and emerging adults today. We live in a post-Christian, post-modern world that is increasingly secular. In days past the young people who dropped out of the Christian faith did so for a shorter period of time before they got married and returned to church. And the culture they entered was in times past much more permeated with the ethos of the Judeo-Christian faith. Those

factors are no longer true today. Many children today come from homes where the parents were non-religious and they follow in that non-religious pathway.

Reading sound sociological studies to better understand our culture today is essential. Christians also need to avoid the blame game—“These young people or their culture are at fault. We bear no blame.” As American Christians we need to examine our assumptions, beliefs, and actions in relation to Scripture, as well as our perspectives on finances, consumerism, self-gratification, relationships, sexuality, world events, lifestyle, personal success, and personal freedom. How are our beliefs and ethics the same as the culture? How are they different? How do they square with what God’s Word teaches? What opportunities are there to share our biblical faith in the public square? If the beliefs of parents and the church are not much different from the world’s beliefs, the church will have little to offer to Millennial teens/emerging adults or others. Church and congregation leaders need to walk in the youth culture and to gain an understanding of their music, video games, sports, and other interests so that the gospel can be shared and applied to their lives in ways that more easily communicate in their culture.<sup>46</sup>

The church also needs to listen to those who have left it. *unChristian* was a book about those outside the church, but *You Lost Me* is about those in the church—or rather who were in the church but have left it for various reasons. Some have experienced hurt. Many do not see the church as a safe place to discuss doubts and uncertainties. Many feel they received half-baked answers to tough, involved questions. Other young adults see the church as preaching at them rather than communicating with them. A sizable number said that they had lost faith in government, education, commerce, politics, marriage, and the church. They feel that the institutional church has failed them—hence the title of the book: *You Lost Me*. Yet some still desire active involvement in the church and are looking for new ways to put their faith into action. *You Lost Me* encourages established Christians to live a life that faithfully follows Jesus, while living in a changing culture, and to personally model and mentor that kind of faith for successive generations. The church needs to listen to these individuals and to respond to their concerns with clear teachings of Scripture about God, Christ, and other doctrines, and to display adherence to such teaching in the lives of its members.<sup>47</sup> The Church needs to involve Millennials and all other members in this process.

## **II. ARE LUTHERANS CLEAR IN THEIR BELIEFS AND DO THEY HAVE A CLEAR BIBLICAL MESSAGE TO SHARE WITH MILLENNIALS AND OTHERS?**

Studies of young people and religion have found that growing churches are most often those that have firm clear beliefs or practices that differ sharply from the culture in which they live.<sup>48</sup> Now, one might say, “What does this have to do with us as Lutherans?” The answer to that question is this one: “Do we as Lutherans have beliefs that differ from our culture or that dovetail with the culture?”

### **A. 1998 LUTHERAN BROTHERHOOD SURVEY:**

To answer those questions, one needs to examine the findings of the 1998

Lutheran Brotherhood survey of Lutheran beliefs. How firm and clear are the beliefs and practices of Lutheran Christians, and how different are they from those of the culture in which we live?

48% of the Lutherans surveyed said that they agreed with this statement: “People can only be justified before God by loving others.”

57% agreed with this statement: “Only those who believe in Jesus Christ as their savior can go to heaven.”

60% of the Lutherans surveyed agreed with this statement: “The main emphasis of the Gospel is God’s rules for right living.”

56% believe that “God is satisfied if a person lives the best life one can.”

65% of the Lutherans surveyed agreed with this statement: “Although there are many religions in the world, most of them lead to the same God.”

Barely 50% believe that a child is “sinful at birth.”<sup>49</sup>

1/3 of those surveyed did not believe that “God is one divine essence but three persons.”

57% of the Lutherans surveyed said they “either never read their Bible on their own or they read it just once or several times a year.” 59% of the Lutherans surveyed said that “they never discuss the Bible or other devotional material in their home with friends or with family, or they do so just once to several times a year.”<sup>50</sup>

Less than 50% of those surveyed attended church services weekly.<sup>51</sup>

The survey concluded: “In short, it appears that for many Lutherans, little or no worship, little or no Bible study, and little or no faith discussion all contribute to a rudderless Lutheran faith.”<sup>52</sup> “Many Lutherans are no longer anchored to a core set of beliefs. On topics ranging from original sin, to the Trinity, to justification, to the gospel, to the place of Scripture in one’s life, many Lutherans tend to either misunderstand or disagree with the historic teachings of the Lutheran Church...The research suggests that more time and attention be given to addressing what it means to be Lutheran not only among those on the periphery of the church, but also among those who regularly participate in Lutheran worship services.”<sup>53</sup>

## **B. 2008 ELCA SURVEY:**

To further illustrate the shift that has occurred in Lutheranism, there is also the need to examine an ELCA study of the beliefs of its lay congregational leaders. The study is entitled “Lutherans Say...No. 6—The Religious Beliefs and Practices of Lutheran Lay Leaders in the ELCA.”<sup>54</sup> The surveys were mailed in June of 2008 and the report of the findings was issued in February of 2009. When compared to the

Lutheran Brotherhood survey, this survey was light on doctrinal questions, and heavy on issues that have to do with ethics and emotions.

One question in the 2008 survey asked about the importance of 14 items for “the United States’ foreign policy.”<sup>55</sup> There were questions about whether one’s faith would move one to vote, volunteer in the community, write letters to public officials, or participate in a political campaign.<sup>56</sup> There were 23 questions having to do with being worried.<sup>57</sup> There were 15 questions asking whether respondents agreed or disagreed with various thoughts and ideas about the state of Israel.<sup>58</sup> Some of these questions called to mind the criticism of Christianity because of its close association with politics.

Seventy percent of ELCA lay leaders agreed with this statement “It is possible for a faithful follower of any religion, including Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism, to find the truth about God through that religion.” In response to another religious question, 62% agreed with the statement that “Salvation is given freely by God but only to those who have made a decision to accept Jesus as their personal savior.”<sup>59</sup> This is good Armenian theology, but it is not orthodox Lutheranism—“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel...”<sup>60</sup>

Fifty-two percent attend a Bible study or prayer group less than once a month. Forty-six percent read religious books, newspapers, or magazines at least 1 or 2 times a week. Forty-one percent read their Bibles by themselves or with their families at least 1 or 2 times per week.<sup>61</sup> Recently some have raised concerns about universalism in official Lutheran statements and in study Bibles.<sup>62</sup>

The findings of these two Lutheran studies and other trends indicate some parallels to Millennial beliefs, as well as some serious problems for Lutherans today.

### **C. OTHER SURVEYS:**

Other surveys indicate similar problems, most notably in the area of the saving work of Christ. All of these surveys indicate that Lutherans have been effected by the “modern” trend for self-salvation. A Barna survey indicated that 54% of Lutherans responded with a “Yes” to this question, “Can a good person earn his way into heaven?”<sup>63</sup>

In another poll, 73% of the Lutherans surveyed agreed “that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others, he or she will earn a place in Heaven.”<sup>64</sup>

A group of predominantly ELCA Lutherans reached the following conclusion at a 1990 gathering entitled, “A Call to Faithfulness,” held at St. Olaf College in Northfield, MN. “There is a crisis of the gospel in our church as we face the modern secularized world. There is no agreement among us, nor in the ELCA, as to the specific gospel content of the church’s proclamation. This crisis has issued in a consequent collapse of the identity of pastoral ministry.”<sup>65</sup>

Another poll indicated that only 39% of ELCA Lutherans believe that one is justified by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ apart from the deeds of the Law.<sup>66</sup>

In another poll, 61% of Christian teens surveyed believed “that a good person can earn eternal salvation through good deeds.”<sup>67</sup>

A recent Barna study which indicated that 1/3 of the Christians surveyed believe that Jesus was sinful!<sup>68</sup> Another poll indicated that 53% of American teens believed “that Jesus committed sins while He was on earth.”<sup>69</sup>

A recent Pew Religious Forum survey on Religious Knowledge also illustrated problematic beliefs among Christians. Agnostics and atheists scored higher in religious knowledge than Christians. Of the Roman Catholics surveyed, only 55% believe that the bread and wine is Christ’s Body and Blood. Most disturbing was the statistic indicating that only 16% of all the Christians surveyed know salvation is by grace through faith alone, and only 28% of Evangelical Christians believe it.<sup>70</sup>

The above evidence indicates that many Lutherans do not have clarity in what they believe and do not have a clear message to share with Millennials and others.

### **III. LUTHERAN RESPONSES TO THE DOWNTURN IN RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE AND HOW DO THOSE RESPONSES RELATE TO MILLENNIALS?**

#### **A. RESPONSE A—GREATER EMPHASIS ON TEACHING THE SUBSTANCE OF THE FAITH IN SOUND CATECHESIS**

There have been voices of concern speaking about the lack of sound catechesis, some even calling it a crisis in catechesis. And there have been attempts at addressing that crisis. There have also been attempts at teaching critical thinking skills in order to train Christians in a godly use of human intelligence and reason.<sup>71</sup>

#### **B. RESPONSE B—LESS EMPHASIS ON SUBSTANTIVE CATECHESIS**

There is also an opposite trend towards imparting less religious or theological knowledge and placing more emphasis on ethics, feelings, and emotions.

The joint Lutheran study of confirmation’s theology and practice that began in the 1970s has come to fruition in many of the practices seen in Lutheranism today. Much of that has been catalogued by Jeffrey Truscott in his book, *The Reform of Baptism and Confirmation in American Lutheranism*.<sup>72</sup> Major theological and practical changes have occurred in the movement to early communion before confirmation, and in the further movement towards infant communion. Advocates of the practice of early communion before confirmation openly admit that it is the first step towards infant communion.

“In 1970, however, the Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation declared, in its infinite wisdom, that it was indeed proper and Evangelical for persons to participate in the Eucharist prior to their confirmation. ‘*Lex orandi!*’ To keep pace with this ‘new theology,’ our worship book changed too. Confession was no longer a precondition for reception of the Sacrament; the rite of confirmation was restored to the baptismal liturgy; Confirmation became ‘Affirmation of Baptism.’ The old traditional gap that had existed between Baptism and the Eucharist (and which had been filled by Confession, confirmation, and the age of discretion) had been eradicated. Our new theology and practice seemed to indicate that the Eucharist should be the natural and immediate consequence of

Baptism...hence, infant Communion. *'Lex orandi....Lex credendi!'*<sup>73</sup>

The current ELCA statement, *The Use of the Means of Grace*, says, "Infants and children may be communed for the first time during the service in which they are baptized."<sup>74</sup> This statement also encourages continued instruction as infants grow. But the question must be asked, if one communes baptized infants from the time of their baptism, what incentive is there for receiving instruction? And if some refuse instruction, do the congregation and pastor then no longer allow those persons to attend communion? Some Lutherans have raised this question in relationship to a refusal to commune an individual who has been baptized, since the Eucharist is the birthright of the baptized: "Does not refusing to commune them after their baptismal communion amount to an excommunication?"<sup>75</sup>

This author has visited with some Roman Catholics who have commented on the fact that after an individual is allowed to come to communion, a certain number of them never finish their course of religious education. What was the response when asked to complete instruction? "I am able to go to communion. I don't need to go to the CCD classes." This same syndrome also afflicts Lutherans.

This author experienced that trend while serving in Wisconsin. A Lutheran couple new to the community sent their children to our VBS. When visiting them, the author discovered that the husband had received no instruction in the faith before being baptized and admitted to communion. The pastor of their former Lutheran congregation spoke with the un-churched husband for about five minutes one Saturday and said that he could be baptized, admitted to church membership, and to communion the next day. No catechesis was ever given. When it was pointed out that some instruction would be necessary to conform with what Scripture teaches and so that he would know what God was giving him in the Sacrament, the couple did not return to the author's congregation.

The ELCA's *Renewing Worship* document envisions an affirmation of Baptism (confirmation) "by youth and adults who have received little or no Christian nurture/instruction following their baptism."<sup>76</sup> This continues the emphasis noted in LBW that reception of the Sacrament of the Altar before confirmation (Affirmation of Baptism) "should not be blurred by loading it down with such embellishments as public catechesis, vows, white robes, or group songs."<sup>77</sup>

The push for earlier and earlier communion before instruction and confirmation was a result of studies of Lutheran confirmation practices influenced by the ecumenical movement and the modern liturgical movement. This resulted in a pan-Lutheran study of confirmation that advocated lowering the age for first communion and encouraged the reception of the Lord's Supper before full instruction and confirmation. One of the more interesting statements against theological content in catechesis and in favor of earlier and earlier communion was the fact that the emphasis on theological or doctrinal instruction had this effect: "Facts began to overshadow feelings."<sup>78</sup>

Truscott said that the changes to Baptism and confirmation in LBW reflected the ILCW's desire to "move away from a 'Lutheran obsession with theology.'"<sup>79</sup>

The 1998 LCMS Convention Workbook contained the CTCR's response to a paper distributed in two circuits in the South Wisconsin District advocating infant

communion. This author has been sent another paper written by an LCMS pastor advocating infant communion.<sup>80</sup>

One of the essays written in preparation for the LCMS' new hymnal, *Lutheran Service Book (LSB)*, spoke about the fact that some LCMS congregations are communing children at younger and younger ages separated from the rite of confirmation, noting that the LCMS needs to regularly visit the issue of when to commune baptized children even if it continues to affirm the 600-year-old tradition "of *not* communing infants or very young children."<sup>81</sup> Why is there the need to do such examination of this issue? Because the study of confirmation and first communion conducted by the LCMS in 1986 indicated that 16% of those congregations responding communed baptized children before the completion of instruction and confirmation, and that 25% of the congregations allowed adults to commune before they finished their catechetical instructions. Fifty-two percent of the congregations responding indicated that there was the need to produce more materials for preparation for first communion before full instruction and confirmation.<sup>82</sup>

The preliminary materials for the service of first communion in *LSB* spoke in two ways about those who would be communed. First those materials said that those receiving first communion would have been catechized in the Six Chief Parts. But those same materials also said that before receiving communion the first time the individuals would have been examined by the pastor and would have been taught and learned something about the Lord's Supper.<sup>83</sup> Some have wondered whether the two phrases speak about the same thing, i.e., full catechization, or do they speak about two different approaches: full catechization before reception of communion and something less?

The discussion in Lutheranism about who should be admitted to communion, and when, has moved in the following progression: from (1) being baptized and taught the faith at home, in Sunday School, and in Catechism class, being confirmed, and then communed; to (2) being baptized and communed after being taught the faith in Sunday School and home and after brief minimal teaching about the Lord's Supper around the 5th or 6th grade level; to (3) being baptized as an infant and immediately being communed without any instruction; to (4) communing and then maybe being baptized.

### **C. RESPONSE C—CWOB:**

Now you might be saying, "What? Some Lutherans are communing those who have never been baptized, have never received any catechetical instruction, who don't believe in Christ as their Savior, who have no realization of their sin, and who aren't even Christian? Impossible!"

Not impossible. Communing total unbelievers is regularly being done in some Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, and other Christian congregations today. This is what is known as the "Open Communion" movement or the Communion Without Baptism (CWOB) movement. This movement believes that Christianity should be hospitable to all; thus all should be welcome at the Lord's Table. In fact, advocates of Communion Without Baptism ("Open Communion") believe that this is the way of Christ. He was welcoming and affirming to all regardless of their beliefs. Thus the

church today should also welcome all people and not exclude any, for to do so might scar people emotionally or offend them. To be hospitable, the church should welcome to the Lord's Supper the penitent and the impenitent, Christians and non-Christians, the baptized and the unbaptized, believers and unbelievers, those who have no knowledge of Christ, the Christian church, or the Lord's Supper as well as those who do. This perspective views both Baptism and the Lord's Supper as sacraments of initiation. It also views the catechesis of those baptized as being spiritual formation (how to live one's mission or vocation in life, how to live a good ethical life, how to have right feelings about God) rather than an education in Christian doctrine or theology.<sup>84</sup>

In October of 2010, a Japanese Pastor in a Japanese UCC congregation was removed from the ministry because he had been communing unbaptized people for a lengthy period of time and had refused to stop the practice after being asked not to do so beginning in 2007.<sup>85</sup>

And yes, Communion Without Baptism ("Open Communion"—communion the unbaptized nonbeliever) is also practiced in Lutheran congregations.

In commenting on infant communion in 1996, one Lutheran writer, Lyman Lundeen, said: "I am not very optimistic that the ELCA can do much to stop infant Communion. I suspect that the question of whether the Church should commune infants is becoming a moot issue. Few pastors are going to have the conviction or the strength that will respond to transferring families whose young children have been communed elsewhere: 'That's not the way we do it here.' Similarly, we can expect that some pastors will make it very clear that even Baptism is not necessary for reception of Communion. There are those doing that now."<sup>86</sup>

Lundeen's concerns expressed in the above paragraph were neither idle speculation nor hyperbole. The March 2005 issue of *The Lutheran* contained a column in the "My Turn" section from Pastor Olin K. Sletto. He writes, "Christ invites the unbaptized to receive the gift of grace in communion. . . . If the word from the pulpit is 'God's unconditional love,' then how can the pastor move from the pulpit to the communion rail and put a condition on that love? . . . . If God's love is truly inclusive, why would we want to exclude someone who wants to come and taste and smell God's love in the bread and wine?" Pastor Sletto believes that the invitation to the Sacrament of the Altar "should be open, unconditional and inclusive. Jesus would want it that way." Pastor Sletto offers communion to everyone, including the unbaptized.<sup>87</sup>

The sacramental practices statement of the ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), *The Use of the Means of Grace*, states: "When an unbaptized person comes to the Table seeking Christ's presence and is inadvertently communed, neither that person nor the ministry of the church need be ashamed. Rather, Christ's gift of love and mercy to all is promised. That person is invited to learn the faith of the church, be baptized, and thereafter faithfully receive Holy Communion."<sup>88</sup>

The October 2010 issue of *Forum Letter* had an article about the Rite of Reception celebrated by the Sierra Pacific Synod of the ELCA on the occasion of the recognition and reception of "seven openly gay pastors to the ministry of the ELCA." The communion service at that Rite of Reception invited "'everyone, without exception' to the Table."<sup>89</sup>

Further evidence that communion without Baptism remains a major concern for Lutherans was noted by the February 2013 *Forum Letter* which included this note in its *Omnium gatherum* section:

“If you thought it was just Lutherans and Episcopalians having some tension over offering communion to the unbaptized, you would be wrong. The Southern Baptist Convention officially stipulates. . . that both baptism and church membership should be prerequisites for being admitted to the Lord’s Supper, but a new survey shows that some 96% of pastors and congregations violate one or both of those standards. Only 35% of those responding restrict participation [in communion] to the baptized.”<sup>90</sup>

The progression is clearly visible: early communion leads to infant communion which leads to communing the unbaptized, the unbelieving, the impenitent, and those who have no faith in or knowledge of Christ, Christian doctrine, or the Supper.

And for those incorporated into the church under these circumstances, there is at best minimal religious education in the doctrines of the church. One Lutheran advocate of Communion Without Baptism wrote that congregations practicing “Open Communion” find that “it is notoriously difficult to move people from the table to the commitment of the font.”<sup>91</sup> Why should they commit to anything? They have been admitted to the Lord’s Supper without any conditions—even faith in Christ—so why should they submit to Baptism or to a program of instruction and education? Some “Open Communion” congregations baptize their new members quickly “with little preparation and encourage all to commune.”<sup>92</sup> Some even see Baptism as an “obstacle” to participation in the church.<sup>93</sup> Some say that “baptism before eucharist is always a mistake.”<sup>94</sup> This CWOB movement is part of a significant trend in the Christian church at large, and in Lutheranism as well, to provide less and less education in Scripture, less teaching about the church, church history, the catechism, and its Confessions, and to place more emphasis on feelings, emotions, ethics, and inclusiveness.

Some advocate the CWOB path as one that will attract Millennials and others to the church since CWOB illustrates the openness and inclusivity of the church. However, Bob Griffith disagrees. He believes that Millennials “expect the Church to initiate, guide, teach, equip, and send them” out for service.<sup>95</sup> His study leads him to conclude that Millennials are not responding to this emphasis on “hospitality” and “inclusivity.” Rather they want “community, fellowship” and diversity.<sup>96</sup> Offering CWOB “will not cause a re-engagement of Millennials with” the Episcopal Church, or any other church, because such a practice fails to provide the example of a profoundly “vibrant and significant” Christian faith. CWOB will have “little significance” in attracting Millennials to the Christian faith.<sup>97</sup> What the church should be doing is diligently and clearly teaching by word and example the profound truths of the faith. Christians should also exhibit their faith in their daily lives and cultivate cross-generational relationships.

#### **IV. WHAT DO OUR CONFESSIONS SAY ABOUT RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTION AND EDUCATION?**

What is the historic Lutheran practice in the area of Christian catechetical education? In his preface to the Small Catechism, Luther expressed these concerns after the church visitations (1528–1529): “The common people . . . have no knowledge whatever of Christian teaching, and unfortunately many pastors are quite incompetent and unfitted for teaching. Although the people are supposed to be Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, they do not know the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments, they live as though they were pigs and irrational beasts. . . . How will you bishops answer for it before Christ that you have so shamefully neglected the people and paid no attention to the duties of your office?. . . you do not take the slightest interest in teaching the people the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, the Ten Commandments, or a single part of the Word of God. . . . I therefore beg of you . . . my beloved brethren who are pastors and teachers, that you take the duties of your office seriously, that you have pity on the people who are entrusted to your care, and that you help me to teach the catechism to the people, especially those who are young . . . . Young and inexperienced people must be instructed on the basis of a uniform, fixed text and form. . . . This was well understood by our good fathers. . . . We, too, should teach these things to the young and unlearned. . . . Begin by teaching them the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer . . . . If any refuse your instructions. . . they should not be admitted to the sacrament, be accepted as sponsors in Baptism, or be allowed to participate in any Christian privileges. . . . In the second place, after the people have become familiar with the text, teach them what it means. . . . You should also take pains to urge. . . parents to rule wisely and to educate their children. . . .”<sup>98</sup>

“The Ten Commandments in the plain form in which the head of the family shall teach them to his household.”<sup>99</sup>

“...those who come to the sacrament [of the altar] ought to know more and have a fuller understanding of all Christian doctrine than children and beginners at school.”<sup>100</sup>

“Now when these three parts [The Ten Commandments, The Creed and the Lord’s Prayer] are understood, we ought also to know what to say about the Sacraments which Christ Himself instituted, Baptism and the holy Body and Blood of Christ...”<sup>101</sup>

“As we treated Holy Baptism...so we must deal with the second sacrament [Holy Communion] in the same way, stating what it is, what its benefits are, and who is to receive it. All these are established from the words by which Christ instituted it. So everyone who wishes to be a Christian and go to the Sacrament should be familiar with them. For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and to administer it to those who know not what they seek, or why they come. . . as in the case of Baptism, we shall first learn what is of greatest importance, namely, God’s Word and ordinance or command, which is the chief thing to be considered.”<sup>102</sup>

Melanchthon echoes Luther’s words: “In our churches the use [of the Sacrament of the Altar] is more frequent and more devout. It is the people who use it, and this only when they have been instructed and examined.”<sup>103</sup>

“Every Lord’s Day many in our circles use the Lord’s Supper, but only after they have been instructed, examined, and absolved. . . . Among our opponents there is no catechization of the children at all, though even the canons give prescriptions about it. In our circles the pastors and ministers of the churches are required to instruct and examine the youth publicly, a custom which produces very good results.”<sup>104</sup>

Note the emphasis placed on parents teaching children the faith in the home and the importance of the church teaching both parents and children. This is a co-operative effort. Church and home need to work in tandem. The relationships cultivated in the home and at church as the faith is being taught and modeled, as one generation models the faith and mentors the faith to another generation, help build defenses against the invasion of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, life-styles contrary to Scripture, and the loss of faith. That same emphasis is taught in Holy Scripture.

## V. WHAT DOES GOD’S WORD SAY?

Exodus 12:21–27 (NKJV)<sup>105</sup>

“21 Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel and said to them, ‘Pick out and take lambs for yourselves according to your families, and kill the Passover *lamb*. 22 And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, dip *it* in the blood that *is* in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that *is* in the basin. And none of you shall go out of the door of his house until morning. 23 For the LORD will pass through to strike the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and not allow the destroyer to come into your houses to strike *you*. 24 And you shall observe this thing as an ordinance for you and your sons forever. 25 It will come to pass when you come to the land which the LORD will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service. 26 And it shall be, when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’ 27 that you shall say, ‘It *is* the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.’ So the people bowed their heads and worshiped.”

Deuteronomy 4:9 (NKJV)

“9 Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren,”

Deuteronomy 6:1–9 (NKJV)

“1 ‘Now this *is* the commandment, *and these are* the statutes and judgments which the LORD your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe *them* in the land which you are crossing over to possess, 2 that you may fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged. 3 Therefore hear, O Israel, and be careful to observe *it*, that it may be well with you, and that you may multiply greatly as the LORD God of your fathers has promised you—‘a land flowing with milk and honey.’ 4 ‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD

our God, the LORD *is* one! 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. 6 ‘And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.’”

Psalm 78:1–8 (NKJV)

“1 Give ear, O my people, *to* my law;  
Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.  
2 I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings of old,  
3 Which we have heard and known,  
And our fathers have told us.  
4 We will not hide *them* from their children,  
Telling to the generation to come the praises of the LORD,  
And His strength and His wonderful works that He has done.  
5 For He established a testimony in Jacob,  
And appointed a law in Israel,  
Which He commanded our fathers,  
That they should make them known to their children;  
6 That the generation to come might know *them*,  
The children *who* would be born,  
*That* they may arise and declare *them* to their children,  
7 That they may set their hope in God,  
And not forget the works of God,  
But keep His commandments;  
8 And may not be like their fathers,  
A stubborn and rebellious generation,  
A generation *that* did not set its heart aright,  
And whose spirit was not faithful to God.

Psalm 119:9–16 (NKJV)

“9 How can a young man cleanse his way?  
By taking heed according to Your word.  
10 With my whole heart I have sought You;  
Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments!  
11 Your word I have hidden in my heart,  
That I might not sin against You.  
12 Blessed *are* You, O LORD!  
Teach me Your statutes.  
13 With my lips I have declared  
All the judgments of Your mouth.  
14 I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,  
As *much as* in all riches.

15 I will meditate on Your precepts,  
And contemplate Your ways.  
16 I will delight myself in Your statutes;  
I will not forget Your word.”

Proverbs 22:6 (NKJV)

“6 Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.”

Matthew 28:18–20 (KJV)

“18 And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. 19 Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, 20 teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the world. Amen.”

Luke 1:4 (NKJV)

“4 that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed (*κατηχηθης*).”

Acts 18:25 (NKJV)

“25 This man (Apollos) had been instructed (*κατηχημενος*) in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John.”

1 Corinthians 11:23–34 (KJV)

“23 For I received of the Lord that which I also delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus, the *same* night in which He was betrayed, took bread: 24 And when He had given thanks, He brake *it* and said, Take, eat; this is my body which is broken for you; this do in remembrance of me. 25 After the same manner also *he took* the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in My blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink *it*, in remembrance of me. 26 For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till He comes. 27 Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink *this* cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. 29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. 30 For this cause many *are* weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.”

Galatians 6:6 (NKJV)

“6 Let him who is taught (*κατηχουμενος*) the word share in all good things with him who teaches (*κατηχουντι*).”

Ephesians 6:1–4 (NKJV)

“1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 ‘*Honor your father and mother,*’ which is the first commandment with promise: 3 ‘*that it may be well with*

*you and you may live long on the earth.*' 4 And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord."

2 Timothy 3:14–17 (NKJV)

"14 But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, 15 and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

These passages from Scripture and the quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are the biblical and confessional basis for our faith and congregational practice. They strongly emphasize thorough education in Christian doctrine for young and old alike. And that such education should precede attendance at the Lord's Table.

## **VI. POSSIBLE APPROACHES FOR REACHING OUT TO MILLENNIALS AND FOR ADDRESSING CURRENT RELIGIOUS TRENDS:**

How can the Church best share the cardinal truths of Christianity and God's love in Christ with Millennials and others in the twenty-first century?

### **A. A COMMON WITNESS:**

One thing to be done is for all religious people (Millennials and others) to work together to provide a common witness against the secular trends in culture and society. Christians, Muslims, Jews, and adherents of other religions need to work together to address moral issues like gay "marriage," divorce, homosexuality, abortion, hooking up, poverty, hunger, pornography, domestic violence, and terroristic violence enacted in the name of God.

Common or similar ground needs to be found so that fruitful productive interreligious dialogue can occur to reduce tensions between major faith systems and help promote mutual respect even though there are deep theological differences. There are also people without faith who have similar or the same concerns on many issues. As Christians we need to link arms with them in a common witness in the civic realm just as we link arms with our fellow religionists in the religious realm.<sup>106</sup> Continuing religious violence is counterproductive to having the world view religion as a positive element in society. Abdal Hakim Murad wrote that in the current climate religious people "are called, it is evident, to prove to the world that we are a force for good."<sup>107</sup>

### **B. SOCIAL MINISTRY:**

Christians need to be involved in social ministry—offering help to those in need, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, the imprisoned, the lonely, the widowed, the orphaned, and the dying, helping those afflicted with AIDS, as well as responding

to disasters and tragedies with love and compassion. Thus, Christians are enabled to put their faith into action. Such actions carried out by thousands of Christian social ministry agencies and individual Christians helps put to rest the criticisms of the Church that see it as only helping Christians and ignoring those outside the faith. (1 Pt 2:11–25; 3:8–18; Mt 25:31–40) Millennials desire to put their beliefs into action and the Church should help and enable them to do so.

### **C. LOVING GOSPEL OUTREACH:**

Christians are called by God to love even their enemies, for it ultimately is only God's love in Christ, not the hammer of the law, but the gospel of God's love in Christ that will change anyone. The gospel changed Saul into the Apostle Paul. (Acts 9) In the years that this author taught in Kazakhstan, he lived and worked with dedicated Christians who formerly had been atheists and communists. The gospel changed them. It is truly the power of God unto salvation for all!

Christians should guard against becoming negative, hostile to the world, and dismissive of experimenting with new and different ideas and methods of reaching people with the gospel. Biblically guided innovation in the areas of teaching the faith to Millennials and to all generations should be pursued so that the church would continue to touch hurting, struggling people with the love and compassion of Christ. Christians, especially Millennial Christians, need to be building relationships with those outside the faith to help people without faith to see a truer picture of Christianity, which will also afford opportunities for evangelistic witness.<sup>108</sup>

### **D. THE USE OF MEDIA:**

The Reformation was born when one of the greatest changes in communication was invented—the printing press. Luther used the printing press to spread the gospel and to win souls for Christ.

Today, we are living through another massive shift in communication. We have moved from the age of print to the age of the visual and the digital. Many directions today contain few words—they are mostly pictures.<sup>109</sup> And in the current changing cultural and communication climate, parents and the church need to realize that Millennials and many other people do less reading of printed texts and their attention spans are shorter. The means of communication are different today; hence, the church needs to make diligent use of every possible means in order to communicate the gospel—be that Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, texting, podcasts, blogging, iTunes, YouTube videos, music videos, movies, plays, books, eBooks, and the like. The church's education processes should make use of these medias and be willing to use whatever else God might allow to be invented.<sup>110</sup> This is an area in which the skills, talents, and insights of Millennial Christians can be excellently employed. This is their culture. Millennials have grown up in it. The technology has been in their hands since they were small children. They are at home with this technology. Unleash them to use it to touch the lives of their fellow Millennials and all others with the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ.

### **E. APOLOGETICS:**

Christians need to be boldly defending the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3) and engaging the world with clear, biblical, reasoned argumentation. There is also the need for training Christians in the art of apologetics and for writing apologetic books and other materials more attuned to the increasingly nonverbal age in which we live.<sup>111</sup> The atheists have a significant, vocal, and evangelistic presence on the net. Christians should also have a significant apologetic and evangelistic presence on the net.<sup>112</sup>

An excellent example of an apologetic presence by Millennial Christians is the rise of Christian journals on secular college campuses. A number of them are part of the Augustine Collective, “a network of independent, student-run Christian journals on college campuses. While the Collective emphasizes the joint pursuit of faith and reason, each journal has its own distinct vision and aesthetic. Just as every college campus is unique, so every journal is different. We celebrate our unity and diversity in Jesus after the model of the early church—‘Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ’ (1 Cor 12:12).”<sup>113</sup>

### **F. STUDY SECULARIZING TRENDS AND LEARN HOW TO COMBAT THEM:**

Christianity in Europe and America should pursue diligent study of the secularistic trends afoot in the Western world today. Pious statements about things getting better, and the fact that the gates of hell will never prevail against the Church (Mt 16:18), should be tempered with the study of church history, especially the darker ages of church history. The church needs to be engaged in God’s work of preserving His Church against the gates of hell and the encroaching inroads of atheistic secularism. Diligent investigation of the possible relationship of secular modernization and the advent of religious decline should be pursued. Christians need to examine current secular cultural trends and devise religious answers that will impact those influenced by such trends. Christian church bodies should be working together to find answers to that and other related questions. Christians need to understand the secularizing trends and work diligently to map out a godly strategy to combat them.

There are social and cultural processes that are moving secularization forward but there is not always a clear vision of who or what the primary driver is. Various agents and social processes of the secularizing trends can be identified, such as the new militant atheists, materialism, and religious indifference. These and other factors need to be vigorously addressed.

The situation in the United States is a bit different than in Europe, but it behooves Christians in America to diligently study what has happened and continues to happen in Europe so that they might be better equipped to identify similar secularizing trends and to fight the secularizing battle it is already in and—from the evidence above—is not winning. After studying the secularizing trends in Europe, the church needs to study secularization here in the United States. It needs to find some effective biblically sound methodologies to stem the tide of secularization and loss of membership especially among the young. Diligent Spirit-led study of the

culture is mandatory. Though it is not as bad as it is in Europe, religion here in the United States has a serious and growing credibility gap especially among the young.

It would appear that in spite of some obvious successes, the American mix of Christian education (Sunday School classes, catechism classes, parish parochial schools, Christian colleges, and seminaries) in the last 60 or more years has not been able to stem the rising tide of the influence of atheistic secularism in society and in the church. This is in large part because of the de-emphasis on teaching doctrinal substance. In times past the church was accused of turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6). Today the world seems to be turning the church upside down.

Secularizing trends have given the West the demographic problem seen in lower birth rates, troubled family stability, an increasing trend to individualism in life and spiritual beliefs, and a devaluing of religious beliefs among other things. Churches need consciously to study these trends, and then with the help of God and the guidance of His Spirit, they need to develop sound biblical, theological, and pastoral strategies to address these damaging cultural trends. It is the prayer of this author that his church body eagerly pursue this kind of study for the benefit of the Millennials and all other present and future generations.<sup>114</sup>

#### **G. THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL:**

The religious community also needs to engage in serious study of the effects of the Frankfurt School on society and culture, not only in the United States but throughout the world. The Frankfurt School pursued and dispensed a neo-Marxist interdisciplinary social theory called Critical Theory. The Frankfurt School's main figures are Max Horkheimer, Gyorgy Lukacs, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, William Reich, and Jurgen Habermas. These individuals widely influenced social thinking and social life through their neo-Marxist critique of Western civilization, which was disseminated in their prolific writings and classroom teaching. Many are of the opinion that their work significantly contributed to much if not all of the social upheaval that occurred in Western societies in the latter part of the twentieth century: the denigration of the traditional family, religion, traditional values, beauty in art and music, as well as the rise of speech codes, political correctness, issue politics, the reshaping of morals and ethics, and significant changes in the understanding of human sexuality.<sup>115</sup>

#### **H. DEFEND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND ITS PRESENCE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE:**

There is also the need to defend the place of religion in the public sphere. Religious freedom is increasingly under attack in the twenty-first century.<sup>116</sup> Religious people of every stripe need to band together when the beliefs and practices of one faith are being attacked. A joint religious response is important and necessary when an attack is made on one religion's ability to practice the tenets of its belief system; for when one religion's beliefs are attacked and limited, then the ability of all faith systems to practice their beliefs is being attacked.

## **I. UNDERSTAND THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH:**

As we look at the fact that many in the Millennial age category have left the church, we also need to be reminded of the fact that the genuine gospel is an offense to the ways of the world (Mt 13:21, 57; 21:33–46; 24:9–14; Lk 7:23; Jn 6:60–65; Rom 9:33; Gal 5:11; 1 Pt 2:4–8). Many young people have bought into the ways of the world. The world has changed the moral climate by declaring that which is good to be bad and by declaring that which God’s Word calls sinful to be good. Thus sin is popular. A godly morality is not. Being religious is not a popular thing today. When we look at what we should be doing to counteract the exodus of youth and young adults, we need to avoid becoming one with the world as we work in the world.

Christians also need to come to grips with the reality that some who have left the Church have left because they have been evangelized and converted to alternative beliefs. Those beliefs may be conformity to the ethics, morals, and life-styles of the world, or to alternative religious beliefs like Wicca or Buddhism, or even to unbelief.<sup>117</sup>

There are many tools that can be used to reach out to those struggling and who have left, but all of them need to keep Christ, His Word, and His justifying grace at the center of what Christians preach, teach, confess, and live each and every day. Christians need to be all things to all people in the hope of saving some (1 Cor 9:19–22). We are to live in the world but are not to be like the world. We also need to avoid thinking that if we just come up with a better solution to the problem, or work harder, or find some magic bullet, then we will be successful. No! Our success hinges on God’s Means of Grace, the work of the Holy Spirit, on the work of God!

Tied with the reality of the gospel being an offense to the ways of the world is the biblical truth that the Christian Church is and remains a remnant Church. This truth, seen already in the Old Testament, is continued in the New Testament (1 Kgs 12:23; 2 Kgs 19:31; 25:11; Is 10:20–22; 37:32; Jer 23:3; 39:9; 40:11, 15; Ez 14:22; Mi 5:3; Zep 2:9; Rom 9:27; 11:5). The Church needs to resist thinking that she is always going to be popular, with people flocking to her doors, with the world saying and thinking nice things about her. The Christian Church has faced persecution and opposition since its inception. After His powerful preaching recorded in John 6, many of Jesus’ followers left Him because they resisted and rejected the truth of what He preached (Jn 6:60–71). Christ Himself was persecuted, suffered opposition, and ultimately died on Calvary’s cross. Christ said that since they did these things to Him, the world and His enemies will do the same to His followers (Mt 10:16–21; 24:9–28; Jn 15:18–16:4). In the midst of this life the Church will always be a remnant Church, carrying the cross of opposition, suffering, pain and hardship (Mk 8:34–38; Rv 12; 13).

Some have described the twentieth century as the century in which more Christians have died for their faith in Christ than in all the centuries before. Western Christians know little of this opposition to the faith, and it is not often a subject of discourse; but a great number of Christians daily suffer violent persecution in many parts of the world. Rupert Shortt writes about the persecution of Christians in Egypt, Iraq, Pakistan, Nigeria, India, Burma, and China.<sup>118</sup> It exists in other countries as well. Journals like *The Voice of the Martyrs* chronicle the widespread persecution of Christians throughout the world. Western Christians should be praying daily for their

fellow Christians who are suffering intense persecution throughout the world.

If current trends continue, religious people in the West may soon experience a cultural climate that is not only opposed to the morals taught by religious faith systems, but one that will become increasingly antagonistic to religion and its moral practice. It is possible that, in the lifetime of the Millennials, Christianity and other religious faiths may be seen as opponents of the common good. Politicians and other cultural leaders may increasingly view Christianity and other religions as opposed to the good of society. Religious education may increasingly be viewed as bad for children and bad for the society at large. Christian congregations need to train parishioners how to live biblically counter-cultural lives in a world increasingly opposed to their beliefs.

The Church needs to recognize the danger in replacing the preaching and teaching of God's Word, the gospel, and evangelization, with political activism. The left- and right-hand kingdoms need to be carefully distinguished. The mission of the Church is to save souls, to win people for Christ, and to nurture that faith, godly living, and service to and in the world. Christian Millennials are an important resource for addressing the absence of many of their contemporaries from the Church and in providing insight and possible courses of action to witness to their fellow Millennials who are unchurched.

#### **J. THE PROPER DISTINCTION BETWEEN LAW AND GOSPEL:**

In our preaching and teaching one of the most important things we can do is to clearly distinguish between the Law and the Gospel—the Law points out sin, the Gospel forgives sin. The Law speaks of what we do, the Gospel of what God in Christ has done and continues to do for our salvation. That proper distinction between Law and Gospel enables believers to be clear as to what justification is.<sup>119</sup>

#### **K. CLARITY IN THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION:**

The true gospel needs to be at the heart of the church's proclamation: "Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight" (Rom 3; 4).<sup>120</sup>

As noted earlier, many Lutherans and many other Christians today lack clarity about what the gospel is, what justification is. God's saving work in Christ is mixed with our sanctified response; thus, many Lutherans have begun to trust partially in Christ and partially in their own deeds, works, and obedience to God for their salvation. This is one of the greatest challenges that Christianity as a whole, and Lutheranism in particular, is experiencing today; and this problem is a major part of the church's difficulties in the area of the retention of both young and old.

When this clear, blessed, justifying grace of God is muddied up, then people believe they are saved in part by their holy living, their avoidance of sin, their obedience to God, their correct teaching, their praying, their many hours of work at church, being faithful to their spouse, using only a certain acceptable style of worship, etc. In this way legalism takes over the church: you are a good Christian if

you avoid sex before marriage, if you are not homosexual, if you don't cheat on your taxes, don't drink, drive drunk, etc. The church needs to avoid being turned from its purpose—preaching and teaching the Word and saving souls. The pursuit of causes and societal change are not the main purpose of the church's existence in the world.

When the Law replaces the Gospel as the way of salvation, some individuals conclude that their lifestyle makes them a good person. Some no longer believe or feel that God loves them, or that He can or will redeem them because even they recognize that their lifestyle is not what it should be. Because they are angry with themselves, they become angry with God and with others—parents, Sunday School teachers, pastor, etc. When Christianity is seen as a religion for those who do “good,” many, especially the broken and the hurting (those struggling with their sexual identity or with AIDS, the divorced, the pregnant out of wedlock, those struggling with drug, alcohol, or sexual addiction and many others), then leave church in despair. Hope in Christ is dashed and Christ and His loving gift of salvation are lost.

One of the latest Barna studies indicates that at least one-fourth of the 65 million un-churched adults in the U.S. avoid church because of their negative experiences with people in the church—pastors or parishioners.<sup>121</sup> Of his group only around 30% believe in salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ or that Jesus lived a sinless life here on earth. When Christ's justifying work is lost, people despair of hope and see no help or need for Christ, the Church, God's Word, and God's gift of salvation—and souls are lost.<sup>122</sup>

The continued magnitude of the Christian church's struggle with a correct understanding of justification is illustrated by a recent post from Ed Stetzer entitled, “Evangelicalism Now: Five Things Evangelicals Need to Face the Next 10 Years.”

The first of the five things he listed is quoted below!

“1. A clear understanding of the gospel.

Too many have assumed it, but we need to teach it. The gospel is not you do, it's Jesus did. People don't need to be taught to turn over a new leaf—they need to receive and live out a new life. That new life is from Jesus' death on the cross, for our sin and in our place. Don't build a message that would still be true if Jesus had not died on the cross.”<sup>123</sup>

#### **L. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS:**

People also, at times, leave church because they want substance and they get fluff! They want serious relationships with other Christians and get pious platitudes. Intergenerational events are needed and essential for the retention of the young. The mentoring of kids in catechetical instruction by older adults is an excellent way of bridging the gap. Relationships with older youth and younger youth are helpful as well. Thus, there is the need for joint activities with high school and junior high youth, and with adults as well—especially young Millennial adults who are sound in the faith to act as Christian role models.

The church needs to engage in serious intellectual expositions of the faith once delivered to the saints so that it is able to wrestle alongside those beset by doubts and uncertainties about their faith, addiction to drugs, confusion about their

sexuality, and many other issues. How church members respond to these gut-wrenching concerns has a bearing on the response of those struggling. A response that includes scorn, ridicule, sarcasm, or other demeaning attitudes will cause deep if not irreparable harm. Godly Christian love, compassion, and empathy are needed—the compassion of the Christ Who loves the broken and sinners like us: tax collectors, prostitutes, homosexuals, lepers, the broken and the hurting, even those possessed by demons (Mt 9:10–13; Mk 1:40–45; 5:1–20; Lk 7:36–50; Jn 8:1–11; 1 Cor 6:9–11).

### **M. STUDY CHURCH HISTORY:**

The Church needs to engage in serious prayer for the conversion of the lost,<sup>124</sup> for a resurgence of the faith, and for a return to greater orthodoxy in its preaching and teaching. The diligent lifestyle of prayer, godly living differently than the world around it, and a loving witness to the faith were used by God to turn the world upside down in the early days of the church. (Acts 17:6) A serious study of how the early church lived in the midst of a pagan, religiously pluralistic age antagonistic to its existence should also be a top priority for Christianity today, for there are many parallels between these two periods of history.

This means a serious study and exposition of the historical nature of the Christian faith and the times through which it has existed. Many today are extremely existentialistic, living for the moment, having little if any realization of the fact that there is nothing new under the sun (Eccl 1:9–11). Many things that are touted as being new are really a revival of what has already transpired in history; they simply reappear dressed in slightly different clothing. There is much to be learned from the church's past biblically reasoned response to similar problems and difficulties, and much that can be used and applied to current points of contention in areas like abortion, homosexuality, religious pluralism, governmental opposition to the faith, and persecution of the faith. Early Christian apologetic writings and defenses of the faith in the areas noted above should be studied for help in responding to these same issues in the twenty-first century.<sup>125</sup>

### **N. MENTORING IN THE HOME AND AT CHURCH:**

In the home, there is a need for daily devotions, reading the Bible together, educating in the faith, discussing the sermon, writing of sermon reports, parents helping children with Bible readings and Catechism readings, journaling, etc. These things reinforce the fact that matters of faith and religion are important. Yet some parents give an opposite example to their children when they ask the pastor why their kids need to be in church every Sunday during the months of Catechism instruction, or why there is the need to write sermon reports or to be in class each week. After all, isn't going to church once a month surely enough? And memorizing Bible passages and the Catechism? How can this be relevant for my child's life today?

A number of years ago this author attended a seminar at which the presenter expressed grave concern for the future of the Christian Church. In the course of his work, the presenter assisted many faith communities. He had been in many religious homes. He stated that he could almost always tell he was in a Jewish or Muslim home because there were religious objects in the home (pictures, candles, books),

and there were distinctive religious conversations, prayers, and rituals. Often there was distinctive clothing. But he noted that in many of the Christian homes he visited he saw little or no overt display of anything religious, such as pictures of Jesus, crosses on the walls, prayers at meals, devotional time, and religious conversation. The presenter was concerned because from his perspective the Jewish and Muslim parents were religiously mentoring their children in their homes, while many of the Christians appeared not to be.

Mentoring and handing the faith from generation to generation entails being steeped in God's Word. Each successive generation should be proclaiming the gospel, sharing the forgiveness of sins, so that the young are being led by the Spirit to trust Christ's saving work. The church needs to do this week in and week out for Millennials and all others as well. As the Means of Grace are being administered, the Holy Spirit is at work granting faith, strengthening that faith, and helping people to see the connection between their everyday life, job, education, homework, leisure time, the Christian church and faith in Christ.<sup>126</sup>

Pulpit and hearth need to work together, to be on the same page based on Scripture and the Confessions. For when pulpit and hearth work together to clearly share the love of Christ in Word and deed, then the Holy Spirit has a more solid foundation with which to spur spiritual growth and maturity, interconnectedness within the Body of Christ, and a deeper faith in Christ and His saving grace for Millennials and all others.

## **CONCLUSION**

It would be easy to grow discouraged and disheartened when looking at the material above. However, man's adversity is God's opportunity. In the church's relationship to Millennials, difficulties and opportunities exist side by side. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit there are opportunities to be seized, witnesses to be made, occasions for learning and growing. The Millennials in the church are one of her best resources in addressing the problems noted above.

The church needs to listen carefully to Millennials and others so what is awry in her life can be repented of, and a more godly path can be followed through the work of God's Holy Spirit. Millennials also need the same careful self-examination vis-à-vis Scripture concerning their views and lifestyle.

The church may best connect with Millennials where there are the greatest points of religious contact. In these areas the Spirit is actively at work. Millennials believe that the older generation is superior to theirs in the area of moral values. They are reported to have an adherence to absolute standards of right and wrong. The worth of absolute biblical values needs to be innovatively shared with Millennials and lived by the church. The church needs to clearly communicate the difference between what is right and what is wrong—and do so with love and compassion for those who have stumbled and fallen. Christ died for all sinners. Though they may be less religious than preceding generations, many Millennials still believe in God's existence, in life after death, heaven, hell, miracles, angels and demons. Many still pray daily. Spirit-led outreach to Millennials should begin with these points of contact. And there is the absolute necessity of a clear teaching and preaching of the doctrine of justification to Millennials and to everyone.

Millennials desire to put their beliefs into action. The church needs to emphasize the calling and vocation of each baptized Christian, which begins in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and continues all through one's Christian life. There are many forms of service in the church. There are God-given reasons and purposes for each individual life as it is lived here on earth. In thanksgiving to God for the free gift of salvation in Christ, Millennials and all Christians have many opportunities to walk worthy of the high calling received in our Baptism (Eph 4:1ff; Col 1:10; 1 Thes 2:12).

There is also the need for Christian acculturation at church and in the home. The information in the studies noted above informs Christian leaders that they can no longer assume that all those sitting in the pews believe the teachings of the Church, are reading their Bibles, etc. The evidence above shows that the inculcation of the faith to the present Millennial generation is needed, as well as imparting that faith to the present and next generations. There is the need for constant catechesis of those already in the faith. The church also needs to study the culture in which it exists to avoid being overcome by the culture. The church will best be able to penetrate that culture with the gospel as the Spirit leads her to study and understand it and those living in it.

Spirit-led growth and maturity in the faith will assist Millennials and all Christians to avoid being tossed about by every wind of doctrine, human craftiness, and the devil's deceitful schemes (Eph 4:14). By God's grace, Millennials and many others are not only active members of the Body of Christ, the Church, but will also be kept faithful to death and receive the crown of life (Rv 2:10).

SDG

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> This is an exhaustively annotated essay that includes numerous footnotes and explanatory notes that occupy literally as much space as this essay. For that reason, we have posted these valuable resources on the Lutheran Society for Missiology's Web site ([www.lsfmissiology.org](http://www.lsfmissiology.org)).

# It Is About Us, Not Them

Timothy Sternberg

**Abstract:** Resolution 1-10 of the 2010 Convention of the LCMS has identified a core problem of why so many individuals are unaffiliated with the Christian faith today. The challenge to the present-day church lies in Paul's self-examination in 1 Corinthians 9. Paul's ministry began with who his audience was and focused on becoming all things to all people by meeting people on their field of battle, standing beside them and shining the light of Truth into their dark space. Four points of Christian practice are suggested which provide realistic examples of Paul's habits in our day and age.

Without intending to do so, Resolution 1-10 of the 2010 Convention of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has identified a core, if not *the* core, problem of why so many individuals are unaffiliated with the Christian faith, including the LCMS, today. By using the words 'these generations' and 'reach them',<sup>1</sup> the LCMS has revealed that it is an institution of old,<sup>2</sup> white<sup>3</sup> people who are on the inside looking out at a world passing them by.<sup>4</sup> Had Resolution 1-10 used terms like 'our generation' or 'reaching our lost/searching brothers and sisters' they would have been able to show 'them' a point of commonality rather than a point of separation, a spirit of wide-armed love rather than a spirit of head-scratching bewilderment.

Surely the Resolution was meant in the best Christian hope of salvation for all people.<sup>6</sup> Encouragingly, the church, through the Resolution, decided to call for work on the more difficult of the two options it faces at this current point of abandonment. The easier choice is to turn away from the generations not now attending church and focus instead on the children born after the year 2000. The challenging choice is to seek to save those who are currently wandering in the mire of this sinful world.

What the church does not seem to be aware of is that the challenge is not within the people who are unaffiliated with any faith. It is not they who are challenged, who need to move toward the church, who need to conform to the traditions of the LCMS.<sup>7</sup> No, the challenge is a much more severe one, a much more painful one, a much more transformative one. The challenge is not to apply the dreaded six-letter word to 'them' and to 'that generation' but to apply it humbly and courageously to the church and her quickly-passing membership.

There are definitive reasons why we are in the position of needing to discuss the issue of mission work among North American residents, but this article does not seek to enumerate them. Instead, we may point out that the Bible-derived theology of the church is certainly not a (or any) reason why we are here now. For

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the past two thousand years, and more clearly in the last five hundred years<sup>8</sup>, the Holy Spirit has used the Scripture-based teachings of the church to win souls from every generation and ethnicity and from every culture and society around the globe. The message proclaimed to the early church by the apostles of the good news of Jesus Christ living, crucified, and risen for our justification (Gal 1) is as valid, powerful, and pure today as it was the first moment the Savior proclaimed, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mk 1:15)

The challenge to the present-day church lies in this self-examination of the apostle Paul—a reflection that has been forgotten, neglected, or dismissed by ‘this present generation’ of church members:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. (1 Cor 9:19–22, ESV)

Note in this personal reflection of this great missionary the use of the words ‘them’ and ‘those.’ These are the same words used in Resolution 1-10, but with one very substantial and crucial difference. While the Resolution used well-meaning verb phrases like ‘strive to understand’, ‘actively communicate,’ and ‘effective means to reach,’ it missed the technique and substance of the world’s foremost missionary. Were we to apply the verbiage and methodology of the Resolution to the words of Paul, it might read something like this:

Because we are free from all, we resolve to study the people who don’t come to church in order that they might. For the Millennials we must find ways to talk to them. For Generation X we must find ways to reach them. To those under the law (though we are not ourselves under the law) we must find a way to show them the Gospel. To those outside the law (though we are not outside the law of God but under the law of Christ), they need to be more like us. The weak need to become like us. All people need to become like us that they might be saved.

Do not misunderstand me. This restatement of Paul’s words with the words of the Resolution is not a mocking or disparaging critique. Nothing about the Resolution, the words of Paul, nor the current and dire situation in which the church finds herself is remotely humorous; nor does ridicule have any place in this discussion. An honest examination of the Resolution finds that it placed the dreaded six-letter word in the realm of the ‘them’ and the ‘those.’ Significantly, Paul placed the six-letter word in his own lap; he himself acted upon this word; he himself lived this word; he himself sought after this word and embraced it. In a word, Paul had to CHANGE. Using five different examples, Paul summarized his mission work to the Generation ‘X’, ‘Y,’ and ‘Z’ of his day by recalling that he made *himself* different (CHANGE) from what he was in order that he might be similar to those who were

not like him—not that his theology changed! In changing himself, ‘those’ and ‘them’ found someone who ‘understood them,’ someone who could ‘communicate with them,’ someone who ‘reached them’ by entering their world and leading them out—not by just studying them or calling to them from inside the church.

A resolution in line with Paul’s habits in mission work would read like this:

*Whereas,* (and whereas . . . ) therefore be it

*Resolved,* That congregations ~~strive to understand better~~ **these generations** ~~and the effective means to~~ **reach them**; become as those who are of the Millennial generation that they might win them; and be it further

*Resolved,* That congregations be encouraged to ~~actively communicate the Gospel message in a manner that connects with~~ **these generations**; become all things to all people, that by all means we might save some; and be it finally

*Resolved,* That ~~LCMS World Mission spearhead the effort to assist congregations in reaching~~ **these generations** ~~with the Gospel.~~ the shepherds of the flock be ever so diligent in their work of teaching and preaching the Bible along with emulating the life of their Savior who touched lepers, ate with sinners, rescued prostitutes, and met people continually outside of the synagogue.

So what does it look like to ‘become a Millennial’? How can we CHANGE in order to ‘save some’? The first place of departure for the church is to cease thinking that we can accommodate ‘them’ long enough so that they might come around to our way of doing things. The methodology of Paul did not include making the Gentiles into Jews in order to have them conform to the worship practices in the local synagogue. Paul did not begin with who he was; he began with who his audience was, and Paul ended up where his audience was, not back with himself. The second place of departure is from the idea that involvement in the world makes a person ‘of the world’ (Jn 17:14–18). Becoming all things to all people is not about theology such that the Biblical teachings need to be culturally conditioned or systematically altered to appeal to any secular ideology. Becoming all things to all people is about meeting them on their field of battle, standing beside them while understanding their perspectives (no matter how incorrect) and their challenges and shining the light of Truth—Matthew 5:14—into their dark space.

The following four points seek to provide realistic examples of Paul’s practices in our day and age. Each has been discussed in other contexts, but discussion has resulted in little more than good intentions.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, each point will offer more clarity on what a life now in service to Christ looks like to the end that what have been the habits in the church would be abandoned and that a new life in Christ would arise to the glory of God and the salvation of many.

## **1. Know who you are.**

Christians don’t know the Bible. This statement, broad as it may sound, is statistically supported. Christians will never fully know the Bible because they are

sinner. Whether by imperfect mind or imperfect will, knowledge and understanding of the Bible is a lifelong occupation; or better said, it is a lifelong preoccupation. Therefore, the intentional and explicit pursuit of any pastor, and every congregation, is daily to drown the individual in the Bible. As a statistical fact, one can drown in the research and polling<sup>10 11 12</sup> that testifies to the near total lack of Bible literacy both in the church and outside of it.<sup>13</sup> Neither do Lutherans know what it means to be Lutherans.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, we may conclude that in churches across the country, the Bible is rarely presented according to its style and memorized in useful and repeatable ways. If it were, and we are presuming here the efficacy of the Word of God, more of 'them' would be in houses of worship on a regular basis. Were Lutheran theology taught in applicable ways, as opposed to more systematic and inaccessible ways, the 30-year decline in the LCMS would perhaps be reversed.

How is this done? How do we teach people the Bible? How do we teach people how to learn who they are in Christ Jesus? The answer is not in doing more of the same in different ways, as if putting a sermon on Facebook is somehow a generator of interest in either God or the local parish. The answer is not what we want (especially as Lutherans) to hear. The answer requires CHANGE, a purposeful discounting and discarding of 'the way it has been done' for another way. The answer takes courage to act upon because it will discomfort the comfortable, anger the apathetic, and require involvement from the indifferent.

Briefly, the way to teach Christians both the Bible and how to know who they are is to use the format (or genre) of the Bible. The Bible is a story, a narrative.<sup>15</sup> We don't tell the Bible as a story anymore<sup>16</sup> because stories take time to move through (and God forbid the sermon be 20 minutes and the service more than an hour). We don't tell Bible stories anymore because we don't know them ourselves; we have to bury our heads in the book and read from it instead of knowing the story so well we can tell it (act it) while looking in the eyes of our listeners.<sup>17</sup> Yet people love stories! Stories work; they change attitudes, perceptions, and lives. Stories drive our lives, our culture, our entertainment. And when you go to church today, what do you get? A story? Hardly. Why? Because stories are hard to tell; and even more difficult to tell well. A well-told story has visual, emotional, physical, sensory, and spiritual investment. Stories are not sermons (at least as sermons are preached in churches today). Stories take work, lots of work to tell well. And there are lots of stories to learn and countless ways to apply them in the variegated situations that people find themselves. But learning the stories, learning how to tell them well, and learning how many ways they can be used requires . . . CHANGE. It's not how we've done it—but it is how the BIBLE does it.

Does this mean that we cast off our theology for the sake of the stories of the Bible? Yes. And No! The proclamation of justification, sanctification, the explanation of Law and Gospel outside of (or before) the knowledge of the Bible is like giving a winning lottery ticket to a compulsive gambler. (See the discussion in 4. below about how Paul held off on deep theological insight depending upon his audience.) Yet it is not an either/or situation. Theology governs how, when, and why a Bible story is told. Theology identifies the sin and sickness that needs to be forgiven and cut out; but it does its work, not with the systematic text, but with the

narrative of God. Further, and to be perfectly clear, this work is not: (1) Tell Bible story, (2) Tell Moral of Story, (3) Tell Everyone to be Good People. This work is about creating a Christian person and a Christian community through the use of narrative such that identity is derived not only from the meaning of the story but the telling (and retelling) of the historical event.<sup>18</sup>

## **2. Get out there.**

**Evangelism.** This is not evangelism. Getting out there is about being God's child where God has offered you a presence. Consider Jesus for a moment. Jesus went everywhere. He went to church (the synagogue and temple), He went to the lake, He went to the park, He went to the blue-collar worker's house, He went to the home of the rich. He walked in the city, He walked in the country, He slept in beds, He slept in dirt, He ate what was given to Him, and He ate what He found on the trees He walked by. He met people as they were working, as they came home from work and on weekend trips to the countryside. He went to parties, funerals, and festivals. He even went to foreign areas. In summary, He was where we are. He listened to people talk about their lives, their problems, their health issues, their ideologies, and their politics. His feet were dirty, His hands were dirty, and He probably bathed once a week. In summary, He was where we are.

So what needs to CHANGE? The key word here is 'out.' Christians are 'there.' They 'get there' every day because they have jobs, families, club memberships. They go shopping, they take walks, they sit in movie theaters. But have they let 'out' that they are fundamentally different, that they are motivated by totally different things, that they are Christians? No, they haven't. How can we tell? Because the true test is persecution.<sup>19</sup> When a Christian 'comes out,' he is persecuted and insulted. Jesus is clear on this point; it is not 'if' but 'when' you are reviled for His name that you are blessed and you have cause for celebration and gladness.

Jesus not only went, He was 'out.' He was laughed at when He healed, ridiculed when He taught, rejected when He loved, spurned when He obeyed, abandoned when He sacrificed. This is the life of a child of God in the place where God has offered them a presence. (See Paul's examination of his own life in 2 Corinthians 11:16–33.) And this is what nary a Christian is prepared for. Christians need to be prepared for this life, and it begins with knowing who they are. It continues with practice—in the safe community of the church—on the skills necessary to be 'out' and the skills to handle insults and rejections. These are skills of the mind, heart, soul, and strength rooted in the narrative of the Word of God. And skills must be practiced (1 Cor 9:24–27) to be mastered. The disciples had years of practice from the best teacher in the universe. Shouldn't the church offer at least something similar?<sup>20</sup>

## **3. Bring Christ to them.**

Don't give them a Bible. Don't send them a link to your church Web site. Don't offer a gift. Instead, bring Christ and the church to them.

Let's say a Millennial, for some reason, actually comes to your church. He is a stranger in a foreign land: different customs, different words, different expectations. What is a hymnal? It is a him-nal. It is a book everyone else is taking

out of the rack in front of them and singing/reading something out of. And what is its purpose in this moment of the Millennial's life? To make him/her feel out of place, uncomfortable, uninitiated—in a phrase, 'you don't belong.' But pretend the Millennial has tough skin and he/she waits around. What is an Epistle? It sounds like a medical instrument—probably one that you don't want to know what it does. And what is with the stand up, sit down, stand up, sit down? Aren't we supposed to cheer when we stand up? That's what happens at sports games, concerts, really good movies.

Now, let's say a Christian, one of those old, white, LCMS Christians, for some reason, actually goes to where the Millennials hang out. What's the little TV in everybody's hand? Why are they always staring at it? It doesn't make a sound, but they press on it with their fingers constantly and then laugh or grimace. And how is it they never carry money? They wave their little TVs or swipe a card and walk away without even so much as a receipt. And why are they always watching and making videos? Can't they just talk to each other?

The fact is that there is a generation gap. The fact is also that Christ knows no generation gap. Generation-ality has no place in the Bible, because the grave concern is sin and the great consolation is Christ Jesus. We, the people of faith, bring Christ to 'them,' be they young or old, Eskimo or Eurasian, WoW gamer or WWII vet, because each one has a hole in his heart the size and shape of Jesus Christ. If a Millennial needs a video, shine the light of Christ there. If they can't handle "Epistle," say "letter" (or really long FB post) and let Christ shine there.<sup>21</sup> If they don't carry money, set up a donation link so they can support the ministry where they feel Christ is moving them. If they are more used to singing along with someone than going it alone with a room full of people, then get a soloist in front of a microphone and let Christ be praised there.<sup>22</sup>

These are the types of willing habitudes which Paul adopted in order to save some. "To the Jews I became as a Jew." "To those outside the law I became as one outside the law." What does this mean? It means that Paul was willing to adopt customs, approaches, language, systems not his own, not traditionally his, in order that 'they' might receive the Law and the Gospel of God. The conforming which must be done in the Christian church is not to 'timeless treasures of liturgies and hymns,' but to the image of God's Son (Rom 8:29). The captivity that must be done in the Christian church is not to the traditional methodologies and practices—no matter how valuable and correct they might be—because captivity belongs to Christ (2 Cor 9:5).

#### **4. Lead them out of worldliness into Godliness.**

Have you ever wondered why preschoolers don't take the same classes as seventh graders in the same classroom? Have you ever wondered why your tech-savvy teenager isn't given a job running Google's server rooms?

Why do churches put everyone in the same room and give them the same spiritual food? It's really no wonder that fewer people come to church nowadays if what they get in church is solid food they are not ready to eat. Paul's example<sup>23</sup> serves this well:

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. (1 Cor 3:1–2)

Leading people out of worldliness into Godliness is a process, and it has stages.<sup>24</sup> Similar to learning in school or learning a trade or a craft, there are levels of understanding and achievement.

This point is an appeal for a programmatic approach in the church, one that goes far beyond the current three stages (children’s Sunday School, Confirmation, Adult Bible Class). This point embraces all aspects of the life of a Christian, including education, worship, sermon preparation and delivery, ‘evangelism,’ vocation, righteousness, the two kingdoms/realms, parenting, elder leadership, and so on. Whether a church-wide approach or a locally grown one is best, it is impossible to say now because this CHANGE is so new—but so necessary—to today’s Christian church. Yet, this point is the culmination of points 1, 2, and 3. ‘Knowing who you are’ is a multi-stage process which knows little age segregation. ‘Getting out there’ follows next but should only be exhibited after a process of simulated experiences with multiple degrees of depth and breadth. ‘Bring Christ to them’ is the reciprocal effect of Knowing and Getting where (unsaved) people are engaged in the idea of coming to the local church to experience the community of the saved and are placed in appropriate levels of worship, study and simulated Christian living.

Resolution 1-10 was intended to spur study and reflection on the serious issues facing the Christian church today. This study and reflection is properly directed inward to the end that the church turns from keeping well-meaning traditions to the work of saving lost souls by becoming “all things to all people, that by all means [we] might save some.”

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Resolution 1-10, first, second, and third Resolved.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Age by Protestant Denomination,” 2007,

<http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/table-age-by-denomination.pdf>. Nearly 60% of the LCMS is older than the generations mentioned in the Resolution.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Race by Protestant Denomination,” 2007,

<http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/table-ethnicity-by-denomination.pdf>. Over 90% white.

<sup>4</sup> The fact that the LCMS has a ‘Black’ ministry and a ‘Center for Hispanic studies,’ to name just two, testifies to the white/German heritage and membership of the church.

<sup>5</sup> Doris Nhan, “Census: Minorities Constitute 37 Percent of U.S. Population,” *National Journal* (May 27, 2012), <http://www.nationaljournal.com/thenextamerica/demographics/census-minorities-constitute-37-percent-of-u-s-population-20120517>. Over half of babies born in America are non-white. About 40% of the American population is ‘minority’ (non-white). There are over 50 million ‘Hispanics’ in America, about 1/3 of these under the age of 18.

<sup>6</sup> Yet the best hopes reveal a church that has been left behind for over 30 years, as a quick glance at the LCMS’s statistics on baptisms, confirmations, attendance, and membership reveals. *Lutheran Annual* 2013, 775.

<sup>7</sup> It is bittersweet to note that while the amendment to include “using the timeless treasures of the church’s liturgies and hymns” was defeated, it also true that the amendment garnered 40% of the vote.

<sup>8</sup> *LW* 35:117–118.

<sup>9</sup> Here we disagree with Mahatma Gandhi who is purported to have said, “Before the throne of the Almighty, man will be judged not by his acts but by his intentions. For God alone reads our hearts.”

Contrastingly, we hold to Matthew 25 and 2 Corinthians 5:10 where God judges according to the love of Christ lived out in our lives.

<sup>10</sup> Hosanna Ministries, *Bible Literacy and New Technologies in the Church*, (Albuquerque, NM: 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Barna Group, "Six Megathemes Emerge from Barna Group Research in 2010," Barna Group, December 23, 2010, <http://www.barna.org/culture-articles/462-six-megathemes-emerge-from-2010>.

<sup>12</sup> Collin Hansen, "Why Johnny Can't Read the Bible," *Christianity Today*, May 2010, under <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/may/25.38.html>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> While this statement is anecdotal, this author can assure the reader that after participating in a dozen congregations across the nation, speaking with numerous pastors, and teaching Lutheranism to hundreds of students, he knows whereof he speaks.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this topic, see *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* by Robert Kolb (Baker, 2012). Also helpful is "Reading Scripture badly: The technological threat to biblical literacy" by Murray Hogg, *Christian Perspectives on Science and Technology* 8 (2012), ISCAST Online Journal..

<sup>16</sup> The three-year lectionary omits the following Bible stories (so theoretically, if a person only went to church services in the LCMS and the pastor did not deviate from the lectionary, such a person would NEVER hear these stories told or preached on): Noah and the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Jacob and Esau's birthright, Joseph's whole life—including dreams, Potiphar, rise in Egypt and rescue of his family—Job, Ruth and Boaz, the plagues in Egypt, Aaron and the golden calf, Balaam, the fall of Jericho, Eli, King Saul, David and Goliath, David and Bathsheba, Absalom, Joab, Solomon (his prayers only are included), Elijah and the prophets of Baal, Daniel and the lions' den, three men in the fiery furnace, Jonah and the big fish, Ananias and Sapphira, the conversion of the Philippian jailer, Paul before Felix and Agrippa, as well as any selection from Judges, Esther, Ezra, Song of Solomon, and Hosea.

<sup>17</sup> The author's seminar, "Evidence of a Good Story," helps Christians understand why it is hard to (re)tell Bible stories, both because of the difference between Western mindset and Eastern composition and because of the modern techniques employed in story and character creation.

<sup>18</sup> Again, see *Luther and the Stories of God: Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* by Robert Kolb (Baker, 2012).

<sup>19</sup> A helpful book in this regard is *Revolution in World Missions* by K. P. Yohannan.

<sup>20</sup> While this may appear to be an appeal for a programmatic approach, and while that is certainly a component, the thrust here is about intentionally simulating conditions in the church that Christians are most likely to experience outside of church while offering them a safe environment in which to explore approaches, responses, feelings, theology, prayer-life, resources, etc., to the end that identity in Christ is solidified.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Dost, "Surfing Shifting Sands of Contextuality" *Missio Apostolica*, XX, no. 2 (2012), 110. This article has a good discussion on other terms which the church should seek to 'reload' for the sake of the world.

<sup>22</sup> This is not accommodation. Accommodation means 'to not change' but to 'appear to do so in order to be welcoming.' This point intends real change, e.g., not saying "Epistle" ever again, not passing the plate ever again, always using a soloist/song leader.

<sup>23</sup> We might even say "Paul's pedagogy."

<sup>24</sup> See the Acts 17 sermon by Paul, in which he never mentions Jesus the Son of God crucified for sin. Although there is no more important teaching, as Paul well knew, the people he spoke to were so worldly that they were not ready for this plain teaching of salvation.

# The Church that *Is*, Not Just the Place *Where*

Joshua Gale

**Abstract:** Speaking as a member of the Millennial generation, Rev. Joshua Gale discusses the implications of this generation's coming of age and how the church can respond. What Pastor Gale advocates is a call to shift toward our substance as Lutherans while reawakening the understanding of vocation and mercy.

The Millennial Generation, also referred to as Generation Y, is the replacement generation of our time. They are picking up where the aging and retiring Baby Boomer Generation leaves off, taking the responsibility of our society.

Having been born in 1981, I am one of these Millennials. In fact, both my parents and I straddle the line between generations. My mother and father are essentially the youngest of the Boomers even as I am among the oldest of the Millennials. This status affords a certain perspective. While Boomers statistically stand aloof from technology, my young parents readily adopted it in our household. And while I am just young enough to have grown up with technology, I am just old enough to have learned to type on a typewriter and to write in cursive in extensive penmanship classes. I also managed my money from a physical checkbook with real checks that had to be written by hand; and I can still remember when MTV played music videos on our 13-channel, no remote, barely color TV.

As such, we Millennials are a study of contrasts, particularly an older Millennial such as me. I wrote this article first by hand in long-form notes the way I learned in grade school, cranked out the major sections on a 70-year-old manual typewriter, and finalized it on a MacBook Air before releasing it to the editors. This is often the style of my generation, even giving birth to the hipster movement with its ironic and anachronistic tastes. Therefore, we Millennials on the older side of the generation have grown up with our feet straddling a chasm that resulted from a seismic shift between us and our parents, between antique and cutting-edge.

This shift is a reordering of sorts. It's common knowledge that the Boomers were anti-establishment. They came of age in a time where you were known for what you were against. Though my childhood was pretty traditional, this stance influenced my parents' style when it came to raising me. They probably didn't know it, but they taught me to be a free-thinker, to challenge cultural norms, and to make the world a better place in their own way.

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I am not unique in this. People in my generation are set apart by their belief that they can, as individuals, change the world. We feel we can make a unique impact on the planet. We also feel that we don't need an organization to do that. Our parents, though they may have settled down later in life, taught an entire generation the value of non-affiliation. We're taught that an organization shouldn't define who we are. A clear sign that this is the case is the recent trend giving rise to a phenomenon called The Nones, that is, a rise in people who record no official religious affiliation, which brings us to the central question of this article:

How does the church cope?

That is, how can an organization attach itself to my generation that prizes un-attachment? I came to age in the "Hook-Up Culture," where "friends with benefits" is the optimal relationship status. This is the same culture that gave us Facebook, along with its multiple options for relationship statuses from "married" to "in an open relationship" to "it's complicated."

With the Millennials, every relationship is complicated; and the church is not immune to this complication, a reality that it sought to make sense of through a similar non-attachment and, most notably, through recreation. Thus, while I'm among what sociologists call the Millennials, I'm also among what can be called The Youth Group Generation. Our Boomer parents wanted to mold our kind of non-attachment into one that mirrored theirs, often keeping the church at arm's length through para-church organizations and activities. We had pizza parties that had some Bible study thrown in, topped off with card games or discussions on the camping trip.

What we knew of church were the things that appealed to children, and so, too often for us, church is childish. Even worse, church is seen by us as a social club for disaffected adults with no real connection the world outside its four walls. We were raised to look outside ourselves into the world while we thought the church curved into itself. A Millennial will choose his coffee based on the amount of good produced by his decision. And the church, to whom Our Lord entrusted the care of others, is expected to be at least equally concerned for others.

Millennials crave substance and a connection to the world outside the church building. As such, we actually believe in objectivity as much as we desire social change. When we wanted certainty in a world that was changing with the speed of technology, we were greeted with subjectivity and "whatever it means to you" kinds of answers.

Now, we are left to create the answers with underdeveloped tools. The future of the church is falling to my generation, a group of people who were taught not to care about the institution and to make it into their image. While our parents' generation saw a proliferation of new Christian denominations to identify with their viewpoints, my generation is attracted to the outskirts of denominationalism through the centrifugal force of a frantic, spinning nucleus of a church that is trying to build the ship as it sails it.

So, where does the church go from here? I'm going to answer this, not as a sociologist or an older pastor offering his viewpoint confirmed by scientific studies, but as a person within my generation who knows what my peers are saying about the church. Unfortunately, the real question being asked is: What should the church

become to attract Millennials? This Millennial's answer: Wrong question. We have enough uncertainty. The real answer lies not in questions of programs—this is the way our parents think. The real answer lies in what is the church to *be*. How is the church to live? Give us substance, beauty, and truth.

Directly from a Millennial, this is how we answer those questions.

### **Millennials and the Incarnational Model**

First, to maintain the attention of my generation, the church should live outside its doors while being connected to what is on the inside. Word and Sacrament are the lifeblood of the church and its source and summit. At the same time, we are motivated by the grace we receive there to be active in the daily lives of our community. If you want to reach Millennials, you need to be on their turf and allow them to see that Our Lord has entrusted to us the care of the poor and needy.

The attachment with my generation is more of a side-door evangelism than a meet-and-greet at the front door. We are passionate about seeing a better world, and the church can appeal to that by being what Our Lord has called us to be. You're more likely to be respected by Millennials while feeding the hungry than preaching from the pulpit. But it's as you feed the hungry that they are exposed to what the church believes, teaches, and confesses. That is authenticity—to practice what we preach, in other words, to be merciful as we preach a merciful savior.

The fact is, we hate being sold something. The church for too long has offered gimmicks to entice us to darken their doorstep. The church wanted us to come onto their turf, where things are nice and orderly and controlled, so that we could be assimilated into them. For example, extensive time is spent on identifying and recruiting people who would be good greeters. Pastors are graded on their ability to keep the people already in the church happy and their ability to, essentially, preach to the choir and be nice to the visitor in the back row. If only that energy and attention given on the inside were spent on identifying needs in the community and recruiting people to help meet those real, human needs.

But the battle has been lost in those places where the greeter at the door with a bulletin is thought of as on the front lines of evangelism. And even when it seems to be won and people my age join the church, often it only serves to illustrate the revolving door of church membership where people come and go. Putting a thin veneer on the church to make it seem palatable only neglects the real, beautiful, substantive, and divine reality we already have.

But this come-to-me evangelism has been in place for quite some time. In the last few decades, designations for the two dominant themes of church models have been condensed to “attractional” and “incarnational.” These two descriptions, though recent and derived from Evangelicalism, are helpful in describing how a church sees itself functioning in the community, and how it may be perceived by the Millennial Generation.

The first “attractional” model has been the prevailing theme of church life for the majority of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, and even extends back to the revivalism of previous centuries. It is based on the theory that, given good enough reasons, people will bring themselves and/or their family to the church, and may eventually join. This outside-to-inside movement of recruitment is

the heart of the attractional model. Modern American Evangelicalism, with its program-saturated and performance-oriented structure, is based on this model.

This was a productive model for much of the last century, since the American culture until recently was saturated with church life. Within my own city of Philadelphia, depending on the region, it was likely that someone was raised inside of either the Roman Catholic Church, an Anglican or Episcopalian church, or to a lesser extent a mainline Protestant denomination. The person was likely baptized, heard sermons, and was accustomed to prayer, though many exceptions exist now that larger segments of the population are forsaking church while having children. Even if they didn't have a Christian upbringing, schools made use of prayer, and Christian-themed songs and messages were prevalent in multiple contexts in the past.

Having been exposed to the Word of God in some fashion to create faith, a person could grow within the myriad of church options that began to develop quickly, solidifying their territory from the beginning to the middle of the twentieth century. It was during this time that the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod flourished and saw much growth. Indeed, the other denominations also saw substantial gains.

But as rapidly as the church was growing, the culture was becoming less and less Christian, and church loyalty was no longer something passed down through the family, even as churches sought to limit their denominational distinctiveness. The diminished Christian spirituality dealt a major blow to the large, expensive, institutional church that we were taught to dismiss, and the damage continues unabated. And with the diminished spirituality, brick-and-mortar church buildings are no longer the draw they once were; and the phrase, "I'm not religious, I'm spiritual," is almost our culture's established creed. Therefore, the attractional model of the institutional church has ceased to be effective in the field it once dominated.

Those attractional church models that have weathered the storm of the Millennials' rise to adulthood have done so with varied results. And while the attractional model still remains, when it is a church's exclusive focus, it is most successful at gathering Christians from other denominations, that is, until they find another church with a greater attraction. In other words, it attracts those already attracted to what the church is offering.

Therefore, to develop a church that has at its core an attractional model is to misinterpret our times and lose my generation. Whole groups of Millennials are emerging with little Christian influence in the midst of society's subjective, moralistic quasi-spirituality. Institutions are considered antiquated by many of us Millennials who favor activism over denominational party spirit and who also lack respect for a church that isn't involved in its community. These younger generations are now having families, and the church will lose more ground and continue to stand aloof if we do not understand the current mind of our cities with their people, and how this mind is connected to Lutheranism in word and deed.

The second model, gaining more traction in the last decade and set against the attractional model, is the "incarnational" model. Where the attractional model seeks to bring people into the front door of the church, the incarnational model attaches the church to the world outside its doors in a very substantial way, namely, a

presence in our cities and neighborhoods. Through this presence, the church is able to learn about the needs of those in the area and respond in a tangible way.

The designation “incarnational” has limitations that shouldn’t be ignored. Namely, altars and pulpits are often neglected to be more true to the model, though this need not be. Our presence should be anchored by our altars and pulpits in both proximity and identity.

For example, an incarnational model such as the one I use in Philadelphia is much lighter and maneuverable than the attractional model, and requires less in brick-and-mortar resources, but builds its presence on the locatedness of a congregation. Mission work in a community decays into merely activism or social work without an altar and a pulpit from which to extend itself.

As its name indicates, the incarnational model is more interested in community presence than programs, but again this does not mean that it discounts the Body of Christ, church services, and other marks of a congregation. As such, it is less sheltered than an attractional church, can use buildings in a more useful way, and can integrate into cultures where unbelievers are cut off from Christianity. In short, it is comfortable outside of its institutional boundaries and gives Millennials the chance to use their activist mind-set to meet the needs of those around the church.

For example, as a Lutheran pastor in Philadelphia, I spend my days sitting with homeless men and women, drug addicts, prostitutes, pagans, homosexuals, and hundreds of unbelievers that had not been contacted by Creedal Christianity for many years. Since these people were not coming into a church, the incarnational model brought witness and mercy to them in flesh and blood, outside of the walls of the church building, though not detached from it. And if we are going to continue to be salt and light in Philadelphia, we must go where decay and darkness reside—and not wait for it to come to us.

The connection the Millennials have with the church may first be on the outside, even while the locatedness of the congregation remains. So the future of the church with my generation will not be internally programmatic but externally active. The fact is that a member of my generation is more likely to volunteer to help you feed the homeless than he is to walk into your church service one Sunday morning. But it is there in his service with you that he is connected to what the church teaches and practices.

God’s blessings to us of brick and mortar can and should be used as a launching place for mission, as a hub of our outreach efforts, and the end point of evangelism—but more importantly, the location of the church building is where the gospel is preached and the Sacraments are administered.

We should be aware that the days of the attractional model of the church—the days of “If you build it, they will come”—are over. Pastors do not occupy the same status in the culture they once enjoyed; likewise, their congregations are no longer the culturally relevant institutions they once were. This should be interpreted as a good thing. It is a blessing of our times that the church has to rebuild thoroughly as a community—and as mercy-oriented group.

## **A Return to the Doctrine of Vocation**

Second, and related to the first point of a non-programmatic church, the church should cease to be simply a place where we go. Rather we should return to the understanding of the church, the body of believers, as also active in the individual vocations of those believers. Where Christians go, there is the church to show witness and mercy, beginning with those close to us. What takes place in our vocation is fruit of what happens in the Divine Service.

We might not have many churches of our denomination here in Philadelphia, but where we go, where we live, where we work, where we interact with the community and our family, there the church is active. The church is active in works of mercy for those we meet and also in the mundane things, like changing diapers, caring for our spouses and our neighbors.

Millennials instinctively understand a church that is always the church, not just on Sundays, and not just for the salvation of souls but also for their temporal wellbeing, which drives us to care for issues of the here and now. Our individual vocations will guide us to where we show mercy.

Millennials understand the mission of the church as incarnational. We won't simply preach a Jesus who eats with sinners without eating with them ourselves. We don't talk about a Jesus who had compassion for us without living out our compassion for others. We don't hold out a Jesus who loved us without loving those around us. This is where vocation comes into our understanding, since our vocation is given to us for the good of the world.

### **Millennials and Hospitable Outreach**

Third, as the church seeks to identify with Millennials, it should combine a renewed understanding of Christian vocation mentioned above with the incarnational life of the church that identifies with the issues of the community, giving birth to hospitable outreach. Hospitable outreach treats the church as a place of refuge from the world.

The Millennial Generation wants to be active in the community and wants to see the church buildings with their services as places of refuge. While doing what Christians do, they will have contact with what Christians believe as we preach to and pray with those to whom we are ministering.

In this way, the church will bring people into its own work. And in our interaction on this level in the community, we will be put into contact with many unbelievers. So we don't need culturally relevant services and self-help messages for people to start their week. We will be "the church that is" instead of simply "the place where," allowing people to do what Christians do while they are introduced to what Christians believe. And these two are inseparably linked; we serve all because of our theology of who Jesus is and what He did for us.

There is an old adage in sales: "Telling is not selling." The same is true for the church. If we preach a merciful Jesus, that mercy should be reflected in the actions of the church. Many in our culture feel they have heard the message of Jesus, but have not seen it. An incarnational mission strategy will allow us to interact with people instead of telling them something and then leaving—or worse, simply inviting them to church, thinking that our job is done for evangelism.

So, why a mercy-oriented church, centered on Word and Sacrament? Because that is what the church is, and it is instinctively grasped by Millennials. We should not be the church that simply has mission as its side project. And the actual preaching of the gospel will not be a side project, either. Both go hand-in-hand while providing the substance and community awareness the Millennial Generation so greatly craves.

## Book Reviews

AFTER THE BABY BOOMERS: *How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. By Robert Wuthnow. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007. xviii + 298 pages. Paper. \$27.95.

This issue of *Missio Apostolica* recognizes that, even though the so-called “Baby Boomers” have dominated discussion of religion in America, the next generation deserves attention. As the author, sociologist Robert Wuthnow, puts it, “But things have changed. Baby boomers are no longer the future of American religion. As they grow older, they are rapidly becoming its past. The future now rests with younger adults” (1), that is, “in the hands of adults now in their twenties and thirties” (2). Wuthnow has studied religion in America for decades, and he relies on the data and expertise he has acquired to produce this extensive work. As the title indicates, he focuses on those who come “after the Baby Boomers.”

The book lives up to expectations as a sociological study and gives solid and detailed information about the lives and attitudes of younger adults on matters like worship, congregational membership and involvement, spirituality, politics, and the Bible. His research backs up such common perceptions as that young adults are proportionately fewer in worship services, and that those who are are more likely to be married. But his research also yields less obvious findings, such as that, for most young adults, religion is *not* a “purely *private* affair” (119) and that they are *not* markedly less orthodox in their religious beliefs than young adults of the recent past (100).

The book offers and defends a helpful characterization of a younger adult’s approach to religion—*tinkering*. A tinkerer is one who makes and fixes things as best he can with whatever is at hand. “A tinkerer does not go to the store and look for exactly the right part that will fix his plow. Instead, he...goes to the junk pile and finds an old piece of angle-iron and a tin can to cut up, and uses his skills as a craftsman to piece together a makeshift solution” (14). That is how many young adults arrive at their religion and spirituality, concludes Wuthnow. “They are amateurs who make do with what they can. Hardly anybody comes up with a truly innovative approach to life’s enduring spiritual questions, but hardly anybody simply mimics the path someone else has taken” (14).

The book also highlights a particular way in which churches in the United States could serve a vital neighborly service to young adults. Wuthnow finds, as many anecdotes and personal experiences already suggest, that today’s younger adults are taking much longer to “settle down,” that is, to marry, have families, make a home, enter a career. They *do*, but often years later than in earlier generations. It means that these life-changing events occur when nearly all support from social and cultural institutions no longer exist for them. “We provide day care centers, schools, welfare programs, family counseling, colleges, job training programs, and even detention centers as a kind of institutional surround-sound until young adults reach age 21, and then we provide nothing” (216). This lack goes with other kinds of

uncertainty and loss, and so it is no wonder that so many are religious “tinkerers.” Of course, churches will want to appreciate this. But more than this, it shows a way in which churches might be good neighbors. Wuthnow is right:

Religious congregations could be a more important source of assistance and support for young adults than they presently are. Instead of investing so heavily in programs for children and the elderly, they could focus more intentionally on ministries to young adults. They could be less content to provide activities for married couples with children and work harder at programs for single adults with questions about marriage, work, and finances, or with interests in serving their communities or building relationships (216).

*After the Baby Boomers* is recommended without hesitation as an introduction to some important prospects for American churches. Since it is conducted with “religion” in mind, this study does not address many questions and topics pertinent specifically to churches, but to complain about that amounts to wishing that a different book had been written. Of course, I *do* wish for this different book, but that is my problem and not Wuthnow’s. But the look that *After the Baby Boomers* provides is thoughtful and stimulating in its own right.

Joel Okamoto

YOU LOST ME: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...And Rethinking Faith. By David Kinnaman. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011. 254 pp. Hardcover. \$17.99.

The title stings us who assume participation in the institutional church, traditional congregations and denominations, is the natural expression of our Christian faith. *You Lost Me* tells why many 18- to 29-year-olds have left the institutional church. It’s not that they’ve necessarily left Christianity. Some have, but others are finding new, and to their minds more genuine, more authentic ways to follow Jesus Christ. *You Lost Me* is a sequel to *unChristian*<sup>1</sup> by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, the result of a Barna survey of 16- to 29-year-olds who never were in the church. That survey showed non-Christian young people view us as hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, anti-homosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental.<sup>2</sup> Surveying a similar age group, but this time those who left the church, Kinnaman found similar “disconnections”: overprotective, shallow, anti-science, repressive, exclusive, and doubtless (92–93). The book is easy to read, can be picked up and put down repeatedly, almost every reading leaving you with something unsettling about how we “do church” in our traditional ways.

Young people leaving church is nothing new, and someone is sure to say, “They’ll come back.” Maybe not this time. Kinnaman:

I argue that the next generation is so different because *our culture is discontinuously different*. That is, the cultural setting in which young people have come of age is significantly changed from what was experienced during the formative years of previous generations. In fact I believe a

reasonable argument can be made that no generation of Christians has lived through a set of cultural changes so profound and lightning fast (38).

And those high school youth who are active in your congregation? Don't take comfort from them. "Overall, there is a 43% drop-off between the teen and early adult years in terms of church engagement. These numbers represent about eight million twenty-somethings who were active churchgoers as teenagers but who will no longer be particularly engaged in a church by their thirtieth birthday" (22).

*You Lost Me* has pointers toward hope. David Kinnaman concludes each chapter with thoughts about better retention. The challenges to parents, grandparents, church workers, and leaders are, to my mind, at least three. First is our attention to the machinery of the institutional church really inertia? What difference are our meetings and programs making? Second, can we act on what's needed without alienating more traditionally-minded people who are sincere in their Christian walk and served by the status quo? Our remedies should not create another set of stumbling blocks. Third, both old and new expressions of the faith must be about Jesus Christ, not about institutional preservation. "And they were astonished at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (Mk 1:22). For us who are embedded in the institutional church, *You Lost Me* is Jesus' call heard anew, "Follow me!"

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30.

Dale A. Meyer

ALL THINGS SHINING: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age. By Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly. New York: Free Press, 2011. xi + 256 pages. Paper. \$15.00.

Nietzsche was a problem. He was a problem for modern man because of his clarity and his honesty about the situation. He saw how so many lived in a world where there is no longer a firm foundation for anything and when there are no longer unmistakable reasons to do anything. From this, he concluded that "God is dead," and he claimed that "We killed him." Nietzsche remains a problem because he shows us today that we have to ask ourselves how to deal with the consequences of living amid so much uncertainty.

American philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly address this problem. They find proof that Nietzsche was right about the death of God in the "burden of choice." Choice has long been assumed to be a good thing. Choices give man the impression that he is at the center of the universe. Every man determines the meaning of his own life. But Dreyfus and Kelly see that choice becomes a heavy burden to many people. What kind of burden? "In the most basic case it amounts to profound questions: How, given the kinds of beings that we are, is it possible to live a *meaningful* life? Or, more particularly, where are we to find the significant differences among the possible actions in our lives?" (12).

This burden certainly is a problem for many young adults, including today's Millennials:

At a certain stage in life these questions can seem unavoidable. The college students we teach everyday, for example, cannot keep from asking them. When they wonder whether they want to become doctors or lawyers, investment bankers or philosophers, when they try to decide whether to major in this or that, when they ask themselves whether they want to advocate liberal or conservative positions, or associate themselves with a place of worship, or remain faithful to their boyfriend or girlfriend back home—all of these questions ultimately seem to lead them back to the basic question: On what basis should I make this choice? (12).

How then can one respond to the burden of choice? Dreyfus and Kelly reject both denial and surrender. They reject the response of a willful self-confidence which ignores this burden, and they also reject the addictive loss of control in which a choice is never made. Furthermore, they refuse to accept any kind of monotheism as an answer. Slogans like "Let Go and Let God" are not for them.

In fact, they conclude that monotheism has been the root of the problem. For them, "monotheism" stands for any attempt to find a unified meaning for all of life. The central chapters of the book take readers on a journey of selected Western classics from Homer to Melville, seeking to show how monotheism arose in antiquity, how it defined life for centuries, and how it has now failed. But this has left us with the burden of choice. The developments one can see unfolding in Western literature make it seem inevitable that today we struggle with the question, "How is it possible to live a *meaningful* life?"

The answer that Dreyfus and Kelly propose agrees neither with the postmoderns, i.e., that each of us is responsible for "generating out of nothing whatever notion of the sacred and divine there can ever be," nor with the premoderns, i.e., that "we are purely passive recipients of God's divine will" (57). They reach back even further for the answer. They contend that we may find satisfying meaning in our lives through a proper understanding of the Homeric world. Polytheism is their answer.

Yet it is not a polytheism of any particular set of gods. Their polytheism is based on the objects of the world, the things already in our lives. Just as "monotheism" stands for any attempt to find a unified meaning to life, so also "polytheism" stands for finding meaning as it emerges here and there in the flow of our lives. The meaningful life is not one in which everything reveals a single meaning, but a life whose many meanings are appreciated. Hence the title of the book: *All Things Shining*. It is a call to discern the many things that "shine" with meaning. These things are already around us. There are already moments and events that can draw people outside of themselves show the meaningfulness of life.

An example is the first cup of coffee in the morning. For many, drinking coffee is just the morning routine. But, contend Dreyfus and Kelly, this could be a meaningful ritual by caring about what one is doing. This caring comes out in asking why coffee and not tea; by considering how the coffee is made; by thinking about the cup you drink out of; by looking at where and when you drink it; by noticing those you drink with. These skills need to be cultivated, but when once one does, "then one

has a ritual rather than a routine, a meaningful celebration of oneself and one's environment rather than a generic and meaningless performance of a function" (219). Nearly any life, they contend, is filled with meaningful opportunities.

Dreyfus and Kelly, in an accessible but compelling way, make an argument for basing the meaning to life on the world in which people already find themselves. Their attempt to take Nietzsche seriously, their analysis of the modern age, and their answer to the meaning of life may all be worthwhile ventures in coming to terms with the experience of life for many today, especially younger people.

Yet for Christians, the answer to Nietzsche must be found elsewhere. The answer to the meaning of life in a post-Nietzschean world is found in the First Article of the Creed and in the fact that Christ the Lord is risen from the dead. The eschatological reality of Jesus' immanent reappearance in this world and the establishment of His kingdom that will have no end dictates the meaning of life. I, after all, am nothing but a creature and will serve eternally as the Father's creature when His Son comes to judge the living and the dead. This book, however, reminds us that we have not been effective in bringing this out in our message, and that we have contributed to the "death of God" that marks so many lives today. It also calls on us to preach the whole gospel—the story of God from creation to new creation—and to lead lives that reflect faith in God the Creator and in Jesus Christ who is coming to judge the living and the dead.

J. J. Stefanic

*Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't.* By Stephen Prothero. New York: Harper One, 2008. 371 pages. Paper. \$14.95.

Many in America believe that Sodom and Gomorrah were married. Some think that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. Others believe that the epistles were the wives of the apostles. These and other examples illustrate a growing biblical illiteracy in America. Though there have been few scientific studies, those that have been done illustrate the fact that religious illiteracy increases the younger a person is. And this religious illiteracy occurs in America, a country that is highly religious.

In contrast, many European youth "can name the twelve apostles and the Seven Deadly Sins, but they wouldn't be caught dead going to church or synagogue themselves. American students are just the opposite. Here faith without understanding is the standard; here religious ignorance is bliss." (1)

In this book, Stephen Prothero, chair of the religion department at Boston University, sets out the facts of religious illiteracy and brings forward some proposals to address it. His experience with the religious illiteracy of his students was one of the factors prompting the writing of this book.

Prothero is not the only college professor to raise concerns about biblical illiteracy among his students. A survey of freshman English college professors at secular institutions revealed that a great number of them wish all their students had a reading knowledge of the Bible before entering college; for without a working knowledge of the Bible, it is almost impossible for their students to understand the

vast corpus of Western literature.<sup>1</sup>

For Prothero, religious literacy has a direct impact on one's ability to be a good citizen of America and an intelligent citizen of the world.

Waco, the Iranian revolution, the rise of global Islam, and the 9/11 attack all illustrated the need for Americans to have some religious literacy. During much of the latter part of the twentieth century, many intellectuals wanted what Richard John Neuhaus called a "naked public square," devoid of religion. Prothero believes that America is neither "post-Christian" nor post-religious. Prothero provides a plethora of facts demonstrating that religion continues to permeate American society as well as political conversation. He illustrates his thesis with the debates on stem cell research, abortion, capital punishment, global warming, intelligent design, homosexual rights/marriage, business ethics, and international politics. Such debates illustrate the fact that in America, church and state have never been totally separated. For example, clergy serve as functionaries of the state as well as the church when they perform weddings.

*Religious Literacy* sets forth the case that teaching about religion (not proselytizing for a particular faith) is constitutional and necessary. The book also posits the idea that the academic study of religion is "an essential task for our educational institutions." The purpose of such "teaching should be civic," meaning that its purpose is "to produce citizens" who will have enough knowledge of Christianity and the world's other religions so that they will be able to "participate meaningfully...in religiously inflected public debates." (22) Religious literacy is important for Americans who serve in government positions—especially overseas.

Advocacy for teaching about religion and its presence in the public square are the reverse of the trend in the latter part of the twentieth century, when religion was almost totally dismissed in any secular educational forum and was almost totally absent from American textbooks.

A member of this reviewer's congregation taught a high school history course during the latter part of the twentieth century. One day he asked for information about Luther and the Reformation because the textbook from which he was teaching said so little about it. It described the Reformation by saying that Luther had a disagreement with the Catholic church that led to the Reformation. Nothing more! This same textbook described the Pilgrims as people who came to America in hope of finding a better life. In contrast, Prothero marshals a great deal of evidence showing that early American textbooks were very religious.

Though America is by law and its constitution a "secular" state, it is religious by choice. The recent influx of immigrants from many parts of the world has broadened America's religious fabric to include animists, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Taoists, to name just a few.

Prothero identifies three groups of believers in America—the confessionalists, the experientialists, and the moralists. The smallest group is the confessionalist. They are in the minority because "theology has ceased to be remembered" by many. (150) The "historic teachings of the [Christian] church...have faded from Christian consciousness." Confessionalists are voices "crying in the wilderness." (151) Prothero is describing the LCMS with these words. Prothero believes that the majority of American Christians are experientialists, who encounter

God via the emotions, and moralists (values Christians), who see faith as a set of moral principles—being either for or against homosexuality, abortion, homosexual marriage, and the like. For both groups, religion is not a set of beliefs; rather, it is something you do or experience or a moral position with which you agree or disagree. Hence distinctive beliefs are forgotten. Respect for differing beliefs is on the wane because few know what they believe or what others believe. What matters is feeling and doing. Respect is given those who feel and do what I feel and do. Others are anathematized.

Prothero believes that the collective memory of beliefs can be rescued by having religion taught in the public schools and in colleges; he advocates the academic study of the differing beliefs of many religions. Courses should be taught with no attempt to advocate one faith over another. Many questions are left unanswered by his proposal.

Prothero maintains that the downward slide in American religious literacy is primarily the fault of believers and not anti- or non-religious people. In support of his thesis, Prothero provides a lengthy history of Christian leaders' watering down the religious contents of textbooks and other educational materials in the name of unity. The lowest common denominator of belief was used to promote agreement on content. Solid religious content in religious education came to be replaced by feelings, personal values, and ethics, resulting in the dumbing down of the faith of American Christians, especially the youth, and contributing to the religious illiteracy afflicting most Americans. Prothero's book illustrates the failure of much of the religious education in the United States to teach the substance of the faith to the next generation.

Prothero is not the first to raise concern about biblical illiteracy in America and religious education in America. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton carefully documented the beliefs of American teens. Like Prothero, they discovered that American Christian teens are either experientialists or moralists, believing that the essence of religion is doing good and feeling good. Their conclusions are sobering.

"It's unbelievable the proportion of conservative Protestant teens who do not seem to grasp elementary concepts of the gospel concerning grace and justification. Their view is: be a good person."<sup>2</sup> Only a small minority of American teens are learning the traditional content and character of the Christian faith. Smith and Denton found that

another popular religious faith, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, is colonizing many historical religious traditions and...converting believers in the old faiths to its alternative religious version of divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness... [A] significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity's misbegotten stepcousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. This has happened in the minds and hearts of many individual believers and, it also appears, within the structures of at least some Christian organizations and institutions. The language and therefore experience of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification,

sanctification, church Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States at the very least, to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward. It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather more subtly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith,

i.e., Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.<sup>3</sup>

Other authors have raised concerns about the corruption of Christian teaching: Michael Horton, ed., *The Agony of Deceit: What Some TV Preachers Are Really Teaching*; Michael S. Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church*; Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*.

Cathy Mickels and Audrey McKeever have also raised concerns about the dumbing down of Christian youth by teaching materials that are experiential and values-oriented and lack the impartation of biblical knowledge or content.<sup>4</sup> Lutheran pastors have long expressed concerns about the growing resistance of parishioners toward substantive content-based catechetical instruction, even describing the difficulties as a crisis. More is at stake here than having religiously well-informed citizens in a democracy. The eternal well-being of blood-bought souls can be lost through indifference and the neglect of a substantive religious education. Baptized souls need spiritual food to stay spiritually alive in Christ. That food comes in the sacraments and in the Word of God preached and taught.

The latter part of Prothero's book (185–292) features “A Dictionary of Religious Literacy,” somewhat patterned after E.D. Hirsch's *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. The entries are quite good, but several need revision. He wonders if Adam and Eve were married (194). He states that Christian Baptism is based on John's Baptism of Jesus rather than on Jesus' institution of Christian Baptism in Matthew 28 (199–200). He identifies the Jehovah's Witnesses as a “Protestant denomination” (217). There are also some concessions to a more critical view of the Christian faith. These caveats aside, the dictionary will assist Americans in becoming better educated religiously, enabling them to engage knowledgeable in religious conversation. Furthermore, a religiously educated population will be better American citizens. Prothero has no desire to reignite the war for the Bible in schools. His desire is to encourage teaching about religion in public schools, which is allowed within the parameters of the American Constitution, so that the chain of religious memory will continue to exist in American citizens.

This excellent book should be read by every religious (and non-religious) person in America. All should take Prothero's religious literacy quiz (293–294) to see how well they do.

Christian congregations are encouraged to engage in a study of this book. Pastors should diligently read it and then examine the content of their catechetical instruction. Boards of education in Christian congregations should be required to read and study this book and adjust their programs of religious education accordingly. Lutheran Christians especially should study the findings of this and other books and then carefully examine the content of their catechetical and other religious education. Does the instruction truly impart knowledge, as well as apply it

to life, so that faith is strengthened and students are assured of the forgiveness of sins and of God's justifying love and grace in Christ? In addition to taking Prothero's quiz, perhaps Lutheran pastors should write a quiz of their own dealing with distinctively Lutheran beliefs and administer it to the members of their congregations to discover the state of Lutheran Christian knowledge and the depth of faith in their parishes.

Lutheran Christian education should be firmly centered in God's love in Jesus Christ (the gospel/justification) and the other truths of Holy Scripture so that the faith once delivered to the saints is taught, believed, and lived for generations to come. Simply doing what is "fun" is not sufficient for instructing the next generation in the truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For the church, Prothero's book calls to mind God's Word:

Give ear, O my people to my law; incline your ears to the words of my mouth . . . which we have heard and known and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from our children, telling to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength and His wonderful works which He has done . . . that the generation to come might know them . . . [and] that they may arise and tell them to their children that they may set their hope in God and not forget the works of God (Ps 78:1-7 [NKJV]).

"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prv 22:6 [KJV]).

The continued preaching, teaching, and reading of Holy Scripture is one of the ways by which the Holy Spirit continues to help the baptized Christian "know the certainty of those things in which" they "were instructed [catechized]" (Lk 1:4).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Marie Goughnour Wachlin, "The Bible: Why We Need to Teach It; How Some Do," *English Journal* 87, no. 3 (March 1998): 31-36.

<sup>2</sup> "What American Teenagers Believe: A Conversation with Christian Smith," *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* 11, no. 1 (January/February 2005): 10.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 171.

<sup>4</sup> Cathy Mickels and Audrey McKeever, *Spiritual Junk Food: The Dumbing Down of Christian Youth* (Mukilteo, WA: Winepress Publishing, 1999).

Armand J. Boehme

TRANSFORMING WORLDVIEWS: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change. By Paul G. Hiebert. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. 368 pages. Paper. \$24.00.

Worldview is a complex concept that has gained much attention in recent years. The idea of worldview is not limited only to one's knowledge of geography, history, and tradition. It is the way one sees the entire world. Understanding the concept of worldview is crucial, then, to understanding how people think, act, and believe. A worldview has dramatic implications for missions and ministry. The

complexity of the concept is also growing, because it is closely related to the concept of culture. As we now live in a more pluralist, “glocal” society, our view of culture has changed. Where culture was once seen as something more ethnic and regional (limited to foods eaten, languages spoken, clothing worn, etc.), culture today is recognized as being much more complex (not merely taking into account these exterior elements). Accordingly the concept of worldview has become more complex, as well.

In *Transforming Worldviews*, Paul Hiebert covers this pertinent and important topic. In the first chapter, Hiebert discusses the concept itself. After noting various understandings, Hiebert proposes that we understand worldviews as models for both reality and action: “worldviews are both models *of* reality—they describe and explain the nature of things—and models *for* action—they provide us with the mental blueprints that guide our behavior” (28). Thus, worldview directly affects not only how things are, but also how things will be. A worldview directs how one interprets events, how one reacts to those events, and how one views the role that event plays in his or her life.

After defining the concept of worldview, Hiebert defines some various traits that are common within all worldviews. As one reads through this chapter, one gains an appreciation for the complexity of the subject. Many factors affect one’s understanding of a worldview: views of time, space, and geography; the symbols or stories used to express a worldview; the effects of a worldview on behavior and actions. Because there are so many factors and variables, studying worldview is not easy. Within one society, there could be several different worldviews. If one equates “worldview” with “culture,” one realizes that there may be several different cultures in his or her own backyard.

Because worldviews can be complex, one must be careful in using broad brushstrokes in defining specific worldviews. Hiebert, while being sensitive to this fact, does attempt to define some specific worldviews, placing worldviews within six different categories. They include small-scale oral societies, peasant worldviews, the modern worldview, the postmodern worldview, the glocal worldview, and a biblical worldview. In the following chapters, Hiebert attempts to describe common traits of each worldview. Small-scale societies tend to be more organic and holistic (106). Peasant worldviews tend to be focused on maintaining a more exclusive community (124–125). A modern worldview is very human-centered and focuses on rationalism (148 ff.). A postmodern worldview is very individual-centered and focuses on experience (211 ff.). A glocal worldview is heavily influenced by diversity. A biblical worldview is centered on orienting one’s view of the world from the teachings of Scripture.

Hiebert then explores how one can move people towards a biblical worldview. The goal here is to learn how to move others with sensitivity to the variety of worldviews that people hold. These others include who would call their worldview “biblical” but actually hold aspects of other worldviews, whether they be modern, postmodern, etc., that contradict a truly biblical worldview. Hiebert suggests a few approaches to take in transforming worldviews. First, he discusses examining worldviews (319–320). One cannot minister to someone from a different worldview if one doesn’t first understand that person’s worldview. That means that one must

intentionally study various worldviews. Second, Hiebert discusses being exposed to other worldviews (321). To understand a worldview, one must experience it. This means getting outside of one's comfort zone and meeting people where they are. Third, Hiebert discusses creating living rituals (322 ff). Here, he emphasizes the power of ritual in teaching a worldview. Through the repetition of ritual, a specific worldview ceases to be an external thing to be studied and instead becomes an operable way of thinking and living one's life. Thus, using ritual can be an effective way of moving people into biblical worldview.

As one can see, Hiebert raises a very important issue when discussing evangelism and mission. We all hold a variety of worldviews. To share the gospel effectively, we must learn to be sensitive to the variety of worldviews that people hold. We must also recognize which portions of our own worldviews are biblical and which ones are not. In doing so, we lessen the risk of substituting our own cultural values for biblical values, removing an obstacle that could otherwise interfere with effectively sharing the gospel with people of other cultural backgrounds/worldviews. Finding people of varying cultures and worldviews is not difficult. We need not travel overseas to find someone of a different culture or worldview. We don't even have to travel outside of our neighborhood. Thus, understanding the role worldview plays in how we think and act is crucial in effectively sharing the gospel in today's pluralistic world.

Tim Wells

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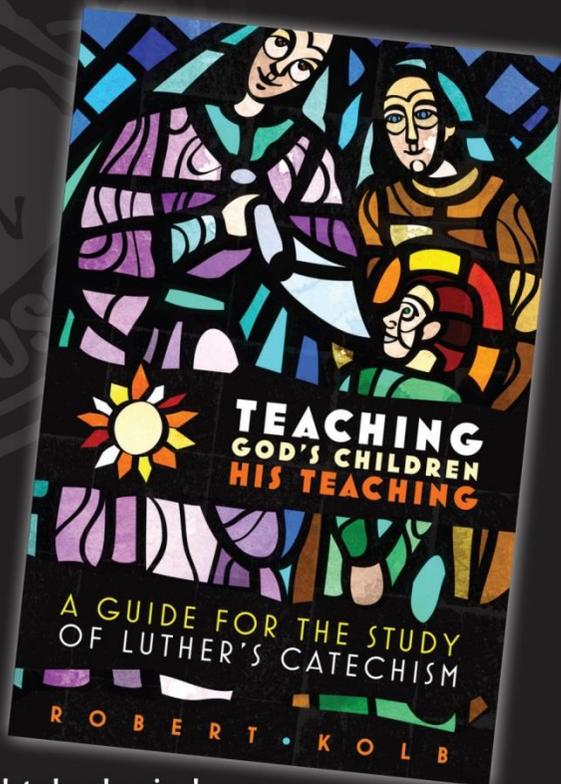
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# LIVING IN GOD'S NOW

## Plenary Conference Presentation by Rev. Dr. Jon Diefenthaler

Lutheran Church Extension Fund Annual Conference, Orlando, Florida  
November 18, 2012

*I tell you, now is the time of God's favor,  
now is the day of salvation. (2 Cor 6:2)*

At the service of thanksgiving held at my home church for my years of service as a District President, they brought in a pretty-good preacher named John Nunes (President and CEO of Lutheran World Relief). But it was the choir that said it best through their anthem, "Ain't Got Time to Die." Maybe you know of this wonderful, old spiritual: "Lord, I keep so busy workin' for the kingdom, ain't got time to die....Lord, I keep so busy servin' my Master, ain't got time to die." It's the way I see it; I "ain't got time to die." For whatever the period of life may be for me or for you, it's an opportunity to live in "God's NOW."

This thought, I believe, is echoed in the theme of this conference, based on the words of St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:2. "I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation." Like the Israelites in their exile to whom the prophet Isaiah first spoke, right now for us and the rest of humanity is the time of "God's favor." For instead of letting us reap the eternal and well-deserved consequences of everything that is wrong with us as much as with anybody else, God was and remains determined to bring about restoration. It's the reason God gave us His Son. For our "salvation," Jesus went to the cross to die and was raised from the grave on the third day. It's why God has chosen us in the LCMS, as much as the church at Corinth, to carry on this same saving work of Jesus in today's broken world. We are, in fact, as the apostle states in the verses immediately preceding 2 Corinthians 6:2, "Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." (5:20) There are two words in the Greek for "time." One is *chronos* as in "chronology"; it refers to one tick of the clock after another. *Kairos* is the other; it points to a special or favorable moment, one filled with significance. "Just at the right time" (*kairos*), St. Paul writes elsewhere, "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law" (Gal 4:4-5). Because God's Son, Jesus, is risen from the dead, is ascended on high, and is at this moment seated at "the right hand of God the Father Almighty," every moment in time since the first Easter Sunday, every moment for each of us and for the church, which is His body in world, is not just *chronos*. It is *kairos*, filled with opportunity, in one way or another,

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to further the work Jesus began here on earth. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow or maybe next year! No, according to St. Paul, “now is the day of salvation.”

If you look at the rest of 2 Corinthians, you will see that this is the conviction by which this same apostle lived out every day of his life. The sun did not shine all the time for St. Paul, any more than it does for us. There were hardships, moments of adversity, and severe criticism. “Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death,” as he writes in the opening chapter of this letter. “But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” (1:9). It’s why I believe that it makes no difference if we are just getting started, retired, and somewhere in between. You and I are always “living in God’s NOW.”

For this reason, the past must remain the past. It cannot be reinvented or be substituted for the present. I like to tell people on occasion that it took me twelve years of study to become an LCMS pastor. I started out as a high school freshman at Concordia in Milwaukee, followed by two more years of junior college there, two years of Senior College in Ft. Wayne, and four years of seminary in St. Louis. But that “system” for preparing our pastors is no more. I did go back last year for my 50th high school reunion. It was great to see old classmates, especially those who had not continued on the twelve-year track and had pursued other vocations instead. But the campus on which we spent four years together now belongs not to Concordia, but to the Potawatomi tribe of Native Americans who run a very successful casino operation in Milwaukee.

It’s no longer the “church” culture in which I grew up, nor the one I was groomed to serve after those twelve years of study. Most people on the block of my boyhood went to church, and those that did not still knew somehow that this was where they probably ought to be on Sunday. Today, less than 20 percent of the people in any American community attend worship on a regular basis. Most of the others, moreover, do not think “church” is where they might need to be at any time. No matter who the pastor is, what the building looks like, or how good the program of activities may be!

The first community in which I was called to serve as a pastor in 1975 had many of the same cultural features of my boyhood. Downtown Waynesboro, in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, had drug stores with real soda fountains, and all the stores on Main Street closed on Wednesday afternoons because Wednesday was “church night” in so many congregations. Public schools still conducted Christmas pageants, and on the wall of the cafeteria of the high school that my children attended, there was a generic prayer of thanksgiving to God. When I left some 20 years later, most these elements of this “church” culture, including the prayer in the high school cafeteria, had disappeared.

Some use the term “post-Constantinian.” Others describe it as a “post-church” culture. Either way, the terrain on which Christians and their churches are operating in North America today has shifted dramatically. In the old “church” culture, Christians were the “insiders,” and those who were not Christians were the “outsiders.” We had the reins. We were in control. In the “post-church” culture of today, the opposite is the case. Those outside the church are the “insiders.” They are in control and hold the reins, and we are the “outsiders” in this culture. The supreme spiritual irony of our time is that while most of us are much better versed when it

comes to talking about “church” than we are about Jesus, many in the great unchurched mass around us are much more interested in Jesus than they are in anything connected with “church.”

This “post-church” culture in North America is the “now” in which we are living today. What I want to tell you is that it is also “God’s NOW,” and that because it is, it is a moment filled with opportunity for us to carry on the work of Jesus in our broken world. Right now, as the deterioration of the old “church” culture continues on its merry way, it is *kairos*, a favorable time, a “day of salvation” for us and for the church that we love.

Transitions are seldom easy. Resurrections are always preceded by deaths. It’s hard to face the truth that being a churchgoer is no longer sufficient and that trying to get other people to come, as we do, to church will not work as it once did. But what I see coming out of the process is a much stronger, more vital and authentic, everyday Christian faith and a witness in each of our lives, as well as through the church, to whom Jesus truly is and what He promises to all the world.

The LCMS, as I see it, has been a denomination well suited for the old “church” culture. We have done a superb job of carrying on Martin Luther’s fight among Christians who still seem to believe that one can be saved by “works” rather than through faith in what God out of His grace did for us through Jesus’ death on the cross. We have emphasized that Christians are both “saints” and “sinners,” *simul justus et peccator*, and have become pretty adept at fingering the “sinner” in each of us because of the forgiveness that God freely provides for us because of that same cross of Jesus Christ. The sermon could, and often did, end at this point. For much attention to the saintly side of the equation was not as necessary or critical when we were living in a more friendly “church” culture. But that’s not where we are today!

At the same time, the LCMS, in my estimation, is a denomination that is supremely suited for the “post-church” culture in which we are now living. By and large, we just don’t know this very well as yet. The effective doctrinal tools and teachings are all there for us to pick up and use as we seek to reach out to people who are much more interested in Jesus than they are in “church stuff.” For example, we have Luther telling us in the Small Catechism, which some of us memorized, that the daily significance of being a baptized child of God is not only that the “Old Adam” must be “drowned” and put to death every day through contrition and repentance, but that the “new person” that the Holy Spirit empowers us to be must arise on Monday through Saturday, as well as on Sunday, and start living before God in “righteousness and purity forever.” What he is talking about is not just the “sinner” that we remain, but the “saint” that we are called to be. This is the “little Christ” through whom others around us may catch a glimpse of Jesus through what we do or say. I believe it’s all there for us Lutherans, and it is *kairos*, high time, that we tap into this area of what we believe, teach, and confess.

More than this! God has given us the Scriptures, His inspired Word for us today. If you want to learn how to live and to make a difference in a post-church culture, read 1 Peter. It’s a virtual handbook in this regard. To Christians living on the “outside” of their culture in Asia Minor, the apostle writes: “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against the soul.” We have no credibility in a post-church context if we live like

almost everyone else. And so he says, “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits you.” (1 Pt 1:11–12)

If you experience some “push-back” or suffering, as Peter went on to say in his letter, don’t back off or think of running away to Canada. Instead, “show respect to everyone...honor the king,” whether you like him or not, voted for him or not, because the One to “fear” is God (2:17). Pin your hope, not on the outcome of an election, but on “Christ as Lord,” the One who is now seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty and who is coming again to judge the living and the dead. Being this kind of person of faith and hope, in this highly partisan and divided land in which we live, will make you stand out and will get the attention of people. So, “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have,” says Peter. “But do it with gentleness and respect.” (3:15)

What might the church, perhaps your LCMS congregation or mine, look like in this new cultural context in which we find ourselves today? One answer came to me in a *kairotic* moment this past September, as I visited a building on the campus of a Lutheran seminary that is being completely renovated as a Civil War museum. Schmucker Hall will open next spring in time for the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. This same four-story building stood right in the middle of the first day of fighting on which there were more casualties on both sides than during Pickett’s charge on the third day at Gettysburg. As I got to stand in the cupola at the top where Union General Buford was posted, I realized that on that fateful day in July of 1863 the real world came crashing in upon the church. Maybe Professor Schmucker was preparing a lecture. Perhaps some of the students were learning the finer points of Lutheran worship or practicing their chanting of the liturgy. Who knows? In any event, on that day in 1863, this same building and everybody in it were totally transformed.

Schmucker Hall became a field hospital for the wounded of the both the North and the South. Everyone at the seminary, as well as people from the Gettysburg community, stopped everything else they were doing and focused on the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of their fellow human beings. Every floor was stacked with bodies. Who you were or what side you were on did not matter. If you needed love and support as you were dying, or care as you tried to recover from your amputated leg or arm, you received it in this church structure with no questions asked.

It’s the kind of intersection at which our congregations need to be today. Interestingly, when the museum project was initially broached, the venerable faculty at the Gettysburg seminary was against it. The possibility of having 80,000 people a year from all over the world on their campus was bound to be too disruptive and to interfere with their process of pastoral formation. But in due time, and after considerable persistence and patience on the part of the project’s lay leadership, they began to see the opportunity to step into “God’s NOW” and to give public witness to the gospel in settings like this one. It also caused them to re-evaluate the whole of their seminary curriculum from this standpoint.

I am so very glad that John Denninger is now in my seat as Southeastern District President because he already understands the outreach adjustments we will need to consider in this post-church cultural context. He is also a leader who knows that he cannot ask our congregations and workers to consider doing anything that he is unwilling to try himself.

Once he was elected, and had to leave the wonderful congregation he had served as senior pastor, John realized that all of the days and hours he had spent at his church prevented him from really knowing the people in his neighborhood, many of whom were suffering the same life-and-death problems as the parishioners he had faithfully tended. So John and his wife, Connie, invited the neighborhood to their home for a “get-together” on the Labor Day weekend in order to begin a process of deepening their relationships with these folks from “outside” their church. More than 30 people came. This brand-new district president does not know where this outreach journey will take him and Connie. But for now, “Trappers Place” (the street on which he lives) is the parish he is also serving along with the Southeastern District, and he is convinced that it may well be the “now” in which God wants him and others in our district to start living.

“Now is the time of God’s favor,” the apostle Paul tells us. It is not yesterday or 25 years ago. Nor is it next year! “Now is the day of salvation.” It does not really matter what the season of your life or mine may be, because it is *kairos* rather than just *chronos*, a very ripe opportunity to live in “God’s NOW” and to carry on the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. So, if to retire means to die, I “ain’t got time” for it. And neither do you!

## What is the Lutheran Society for Missiology?

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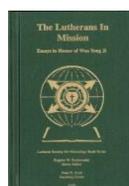
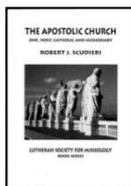
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## *A Note to Educators and Church Leaders*

We encourage sharing all the articles presented in this journal, in accordance with our Mission Statement that says, “*Missio Apostolica* serves as an international forum for the exchange of ideas and discussion of issues.”

LSFM will be creating a space on its Web site ([www.lsfmissiology.org](http://www.lsfmissiology.org)) where PDFs of individual articles will be available for download, in addition to a PDF of the entire issue.

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If you would like an article from a previous issue to share, please simply contact LSFM by e-mail ([LSFM@csl.edu](mailto:LSFM@csl.edu)).

## *A Note to Future Contributors*

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*Missio Apostolica* publishes studies of missiological issues under discussion in Christian circles across the world in the twenty-first century. Exegetical, biblical, theological, historical, and practical dimensions of the apostolic mission of the church are to be explored in these pages. (See the mission statement below.) While current issues are centered around a theme, the editorial committee encourages and appreciates submissions of articles on any missiological topic.

Contributors can familiarize themselves with previous issues of *Missio Apostolica* at the Lutheran Society for Missiology's website ([www.lsfmissiology.org](http://www.lsfmissiology.org)). Click on the Publications link to view PDFs of previous issues for free.

**Book reviews:** LSFM also welcomes book reviews. Submit reviews of no more than 500 words. E-mail Dr. Joel Okamoto ([okamotoj@csl.edu](mailto:okamotoj@csl.edu)) if interested in writing a review.

### **Mission Statement**

Grounded in the mission of the Triune God and guided by Lutheran theology, *Missio Apostolica* serves as an international forum for the exchange of ideas and discussion of issues related to proclaiming the Gospel and confessing Jesus Christ globally, with attention to both theory and practice and to the specific challenges posed by cultural and religious contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 243–255.

<sup>2</sup> Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today*, trans. Edwin Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 184–186.

<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Priest, Terry Dischinger, et al., “Researching the Short-Term Mission Movement,” *Missiology, An International Review* 34 (2006): 431–450.

Direct quotations exceeding four manuscript lines should be set off from the text in an indented paragraph, without quotation marks. Omissions in a quotation should be noted by ellipsis, with an additional period to end the sentence.

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### **Preparation and Submission**

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## *Consider Contributing to the November 2013 Issue on Missional Communities*

Greetings in the Name of our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Lutheran circles in the West are discussing and implementing a new structure called “missional communities.” The roots of missional communities are usually traced to the activities of St. Thomas Crookes parish in Sheffield, England, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Under the leadership of Mike Breen, who became the senior pastor at St. Thomas Crookes in 1994, the concept and form of missional communities matured and eventually spread across the United Kingdom and Northern Europe. During the last decade, it entered the United States, where it has been embraced by many denominations, resulting in an impressive number of active missional communities.

Perhaps the largest and most influential missional community is SOMA in Tacoma, Washington, led by Jeff Vanderstelt, a community that is approaching a thousand members. Their success, along with *Tangible Kingdom*'s Hugh Halter's following, is helping to sell out many conferences on missional communities. The Verge: Missional Communities Conference in 2010 was sold out weeks in advance, and the largest gathering of church planters in North America, Exponential, sold out in 2013 and has for several years given missional communities a strong presence in its schedule. Many Lutherans have attended these conferences, heard and discussed these ideas, and introduced missional communities as an effective model for reaching out to many who were not active in a traditional church. While not all missional communities are successful, the concept has proven itself as an effective model for reaching the Millennial Generation, Baby Boomers who believe but are not active in a church, and others who resonate with the incarnational and missional values of missional communities.

Missional communities are slowly becoming part of the Lutheran landscape. LCMS Districts are supporting the model, as are individual congregations, as a legitimate way of outreach and church planting. As the number of missional communities grows, it is becoming clear that there needs to be some theological reflection about the model, in part because most of the literature and those active in the larger movement have theological positions that run contrary to the Lutheran understanding of church and ministry. For example, most missional communities reject the need for church buildings and ways of organizing a congregation. Most missional communities by design are led by a mature layperson who may or may not be connected with an ordained pastor. The organizational value

is one of low control along with high accountability. The administration of the Lord's Supper also varies in how it is practiced, who may administer it, and when and where it is given and shared. These differences and others require Lutherans to create a hybrid model, bridging the gap between how missional communities are promoted by Evangelicals and are practiced by Lutherans.

The November 2013 issue of *Missio Apostolica* seeks to explore these and other issues introduced with this new model of doing ministry. We are seeking theologians, scholars, practitioners, historians, church leaders, laity, and others willing to write and wrestle with the issues raised by the missional communities movement. Serious theological reflection on missional communities is needed if this opportunity for reaching the lost is to be successfully used by Lutherans. We prayerfully ask you to consider weighing in on this important topic. Consider responding to questions such as the following:

- What aspects of the missional communities form of church are in harmony with the Lutheran understanding of “Church and Ministry?” What aspects of missional communities are not? What would a Lutheran missional community look like? How does missional communities differ from previous trends, including the house church movement, small group/home Bible studies, cell groups, etc.....?
- Would the history and practice of utilizing “circuit riders,” who oversaw several congregations in earlier days in the U. S., be an applicable model for providing pastoral oversight of several missional communities? What would that look like today?
- Most missional community models of church within Evangelical circles use lay leadership, while Augsburg XIV reads, “Concerning church order they teach that no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called.” How is this tension navigated between lay leadership and pastoral oversight so that AC XIV is faithfully maintained with a network of missional communities? (One could also explore AC V, VII, VIII, XIII, and XXVIII.)
- Is it possible to launch missional communities from existing Lutheran churches? Has it been done successfully? What does that look like?
- How does the Lutheran understanding of the “priesthood of all believers” play into missional communities?
- What are the greatest challenges facing missional communities within the Lutheran tradition? What are some of the blessings of missional communities that are celebrations of the Lord’s work through this model of ministry?

These are just a few of the many questions that might be addressed regarding the important topic of missional communities for the November 2013 issue. If you have an article on a different topic for submission, the editorial committee is more than willing to publish articles that differ from the central theme. Scholars and practitioners are encouraged to submit articles on any missiological topic from a Lutheran perspective. The editorial committee will review and attempt to publish as many articles as possible up to our print limitation. With the blessing of an electronic platform ([www.lsfmissiology.org](http://www.lsfmissiology.org)), the editorial board is also able to

publish other articles online, with the author's permission. The conversation on missional communities is important, and we hope that you will prayerfully consider submitting an article. For twenty years, the Lutheran Society for Missiology has been unique in producing a journal written through a Lutheran lens focusing on the crossroads of theology and practice of mission. "Missional communities" is just such a crossroad topic that offers an opportunity for missiological discussion and exchange of ideas. The English congregation that birthed missional communities experienced more than 500% growth in less than five years. Can missional communities be implemented to such effects in the Lutheran context? If you are inclined to submit an article, you are encouraged to contact the editor of *Missio Apostolica* with your article idea.

We hope you will contribute your valuable insights to the conversation on this critical topic.

The submission deadline is September 15, 2013.

Yours in Christ,  
Dr. Victor Raj  
*Missio Apostolica* Editor  
and  
Rev. Jeff Thormodson  
LSFM Executive Director