2018

Palatable and Profitable: Making the Sermon More Useful as a Catalyst for Millennials' Spiritual Growth

Frank E. Weller
Bethel University

BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BETHEL SEMINARY SAN DIEGO

PALATABLE AND PROFITABLE:

MAKING THE SERMON MORE USEFUL AS A CATALYST FOR MILLENNIALS' SPIRITUAL GROWTH

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY DEGREE

IN MISSIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

BY

FRANK WELLER

SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA

MAY 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am profoundly grateful for the many people who helped make this project possible. The congregation and elders of South Lansing Christian Church have been supportive and encouraging. Wally, Josh, Jennifer and Walter have shown patience, compassion and understanding time and again, without which this project could not have been completed. Several people helped with proofreading, including George Brown, Emily Blakely, Stephanie Lowman, Steve McCourtie, Abby Weller and Dennie Olson. Interviews and book summaries were transcribed by Joy Baade, Debra Stauffer, Jennifer Batdorff and Sherri McCleese. Jenny Ritter assisted with data coding. Jason Esposito provided encouragement and wisdom from someone who has experienced a Doctor of Ministry thesis project. Special thanks to Chris VandeLinde, Tyler McKenzie, Scott Kenworthy and Trevor DeVage for their willingness to share their wisdom.

I also want to thank Abby, Caleb and Jonah, the three Millennials in my life who were the inspiration for this project. I am proud of you and am humbled that God chose me to be your dad. The world is better because you three are in it. I want to thank my parents, Larry and Judy, for their steadfast support. They understood the sacrifice of time this project required and selflessly encouraged me to persevere.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Tracy. Words are inadequate to communicate how blessed I feel to be able to share this life at your side for more than thirty years, and the excitement I feel to be able to walk, together, toward the life ahead.

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

The problem this project addressed is the limitation of the sermon as a catalyst for spiritual growth in Millennials due to the static nature of the sermon as a means for communicating the gospel and the significant differences in the Millennial cohort compared to previous generations. In response to this problem the researcher studied the principles of contextualization exhibited in the sermons of Peter and Paul recorded in Acts. He reviewed literature related to the unique characteristics of Millennials, including how they learn and interact with faith, and the missiological concept of contextualizing the gospel to cultures where it is unfamiliar. The researcher interviewed three preachers identified as communicators whose sermons are effective in fostering Millennials' spiritual growth, and he surveyed Millennials in those three churches to determine if the way they experience their preachers and their sermons matched their preachers' intentions. With the findings extracted from the data the researcher identified five principles preachers can adopt to increase the effectiveness of their sermons in fostering spiritual growth in the Millennials who listen to them.

Sunday morning in America is a cross-cultural experience for most Millennials and they cannot hear the gospel unless it is contextualized to their unique generational characteristics. This project sought to provide preachers with tools to better enable them to preach more palatable and profitable sermons for the Millennials who fill their pews.

For Dad
Larry Lee Weller

INTRODUCTION

At more than 80 million strong, Millennials make up the largest generational cohort in American history. Shaped by their unique images and stories and reared in an environment of technological innovation, Millennials learn differently, communicate differently, and experience faith differently than previous generations. With such considerable differences between Millennials and their Baby Boomer and GenXer parents, the Church has struggled to adapt. This is particularly true with respect to the sermon as a catalyst for faith development. Since the Reformation, the sermon has remained largely unchanged as a means of fostering spiritual growth.

Millennials are a more concentrated version of their postmodern parents with their rejection of absolute truth, suspicion of authority, approbation of pluralism, and deconstruction of culture. When they stand behind their pulpits on Sunday morning, pastors no longer preach to the home team. Bible teachers can no longer assume their congregations hold a shared set of beliefs and practices. Instead, preachers must become zealous cultural investigators who learn all they can about the people to whom they speak, and then contextualize the gospel to their listeners.

As a father of three Millennials and pastor of a church with an increasing proportion of Millennials, the researcher is personally invested in learning how to preach more effectively to the researcher's children's generational peers. Since 2013 the church at which the researcher preaches, South Lansing Christian Church, has intentionally focused on the faith development of the next generation. The church has invested time,

money and staff resources in connecting with Millennials. By doing so the church hopes to leverage the ability of their Millennials to act as indigenous missionaries to the 17,000 Millennials who live within three miles of the church's campus, and the 57,000 students at the nearby university.

William Barclay wrote, "The way to spread Christianity is to be Christian."[1] Millennials are more naturally able "be Christian" among their peers because they are unencumbered by the cultural barriers that separate Millennials from other generational cohorts. Using the sermon as a means to foster Millennials' spiritual growth, preachers disciple those who are Christians, and increase their church's ability to reach the growing number of Millennials who claim no faith of any kind. This project seeks to identify principles preachers can incorporate into their preaching so their sermons will more effectively foster the sort of spiritual growth in Millennials that can catalyze their ability to reach their lost generational peers.

[1] William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, Vol. 2*, (Louisville, KY: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 179.

CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM OF CREATING SERMONS THAT CATALYZE MILLENNIALS' SPIRITUAL GROWTH

The Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed by this project is the limitation of the sermon as a catalyst for spiritual growth in Millennials attending an Independent Christian Church, due to the static nature of the sermon as a medium of communication, and the significant differences in Millennials from previous generations. In response to this problem, the researcher reviewed sermons recorded in Acts 2, 3, 4, 13, 14 and 17 to determine principles which Peter and Paul used in contextualizing the Gospel to the time and place where the sermons were delivered. The researcher reviewed literature related to the unique characteristics of Millennials, Millennials' spiritual lives, how Millennials learn, and the missiological concept of contextualizing the Gospel to non-Christian cultures, including contextualizing the sermon for Millennials. The researcher interviewed preachers who are effectively preaching to Millennials to determine how they write, prepare and deliver more palatable and profitable sermons that lead to spiritual growth in those 18-35 years old. The researcher surveyed Millennials who attend the churches where those interviewed preach in order to learn their perspective on what is effective and what is ineffective, with respect to the sermon as a catalyst for spiritual growth, and then the researcher articulated a series of principles which homileticians can incorporate into their preaching to make their sermons more effective in the spiritual growth of Millennials.

Definition of Terms

Traditionalist:[2] a person before 1943. Popularly referred to as "The Greatest Generation."

Boomer or Baby Boomer: a person born between 1943 and 1960.

Generation X: persons born between 1961 and 1981.

Millennial: a person born after 1981, so named because the first Millennials turned 18 years old in 2000. According to the Pew Research Center, the youngest Millennial was born in 1981 and the oldest was born in 2001.[3]

Delimitations

This project was limited to studying Millennials. Jean Twenge, author of *Generation Me*,[4] defines a Millennial as anyone born between 1982-1989. Haydn Shaw broadens the definition of Millennials to include those born between 1981-2001.[5] Thom and Jess Rainer define Millennials as being born between 1980-2000.[6] While views differ on the birth-year boundaries of the Millennial generation, the aforementioned authors all agree Millennials are the largest generational cohort in American history with somewhere

---

[2] There is considerable discussion regarding the precise boundaries of these four generational cohorts. The researcher selected the most commonly cited date ranges.

[3] Haydn Shaw, *Generational IQ: Christianity Isn't Dying, Millennials Aren't the Problem, and the Future is Bright*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2015), 5.

[4] Jean Twenge, *Generation Me – Revised and Updated: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – And More Miserable Than Ever Before*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 6.

[5] Haydn Shaw, *Sticking Points: How to Get Four Generations Working Together in the Twelve Places They Come Apart*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishing, 2013), 92.

[6] Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2011), 2.

between 76 million and just less than 80 million live births, depending which definition is used. For the purposes of this project, the researcher focused on Millennials as a cohort, irrespective of the boundaries used by other researchers.

The research in this project is limited to sermons preached at the weekend gatherings of Independent Christian Churches (the more centrist stream of the Restoration Movement, a nineteenth century ecumenical association of churches). The preachers selected for inclusion in this project were nominated by leaders within the Restoration Movement, and recognized by those leaders as preachers whose sermons effect spiritual growth in the Millennials to whom they preach.

The research was limited to Millennials who attend the churches in which the preachers selected for inclusion in this study preach. This project did not include unchurched individuals, nor de-churched individuals.

The biblical/theological review was limited to sermons preached by Peter in Acts 2, 3 and 4, and by Paul in Acts 13, 14 and 17. While other New Testament preachers and their sermons could have been considered, for example, Stephen before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7 or Phillip teaching the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, Luke records only one sermon for each of them. Since the researcher desired to understand how the church's earliest preachers contextualized the gospel to different assemblies, Peter's sermons on, and shortly after, the Day of Pentecost, and Paul's two sermons from his first missionary journey along with his Areopagus sermon from Acts 17, were selected for in-case and cross-case analysis to determine how Peter and Paul contextualized their messages to the assemblies in which they preached.

Assumptions

The study assumed that the sermon will not disappear anytime soon. The sacred word, transmitted by God directly to his prophets, priests, apostles and, in later times through his written Word, has been proclaimed for millennia. Moses preached in Pharaoh's court; Peter preached in the Temple; Paul preached at the Areopagus. Each Sunday, preachers throughout the world preach from lofted pulpits in cathedrals, from music stands on gymnasium floors, and from beneath shade trees on the savannah plain. Sermons are broadcast publicly and whispered in secret. They are published on the Internet and shared from person to person.

The study assumed Millennials do not find sermons particularly useful to growing their faith. Barna Research asked Millennials, "What, if anything, has helped your faith or spirituality grow?" "My pastor's preaching" did not make the top ten.[7] Yet, 40 percent of those who identified a home church cited, "preaching and teaching [as the] … most consequential considerations for choosing a church."[8] Preaching is important to Millennials, but they do not cite their pastors' sermons as especially effective in growing their faith.

The study assumed that spiritual growth matters to followers of Jesus. Spiritual growth is not an option for the Christ-follower. The word, "disciple" means learner. "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and the people"

---

[7] Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, 23.

[8] Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, 26.

(Luke 2:52).[9] His lifelong growth is an example for those who choose to follow Him. The progression in Peter's command in 2 Peter 1:5-8 indicates Christians are expected to grow:

> Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God wants his followers to grow to be like his Son, Jesus. Preaching God's Word is a key means through which a preacher contributes to his or her listeners' spiritual growth. The Apostle Paul asked, "How can they hear without someone preaching to them" (Rom. 10:14)?

The study assumed that, if preaching does not lead to Millennials' spiritual growth, it is not the fault of Scripture. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16). God's Word is powerful. God's Word is "alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). If Millennials are not experiencing spiritual growth as the result of their preachers' sermons, the fault must lie elsewhere, and not in God's Word.

The study assumed the power of preaching is not rooted in eloquence or masterful delivery. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, "When I came to you, I did not come with

---

[9] Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, (Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society, 2011).

eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God" (1 Cor. 2:1). Though inarticulate delivery can be an obstacle that diminishes the effectiveness of a sermon, a polished delivery devoid of God's Word might be palatable to the listener, but will lack the power to transform lives.

Subproblems

The first subproblem was to explore the contextual approach Peter and Paul took in the sermons they preached to their respective audiences in Acts 2, 3 and 4, and Acts 13, 14 and 17. The researcher determined how their approaches varied based on their audiences' different cultural contexts and theological foundations.

The second subproblem was to review literature related to the unique characteristics of Millennials, their spiritual lives, how they learn, and the missiological concept of contextualizing the Gospel to non-Christian cultures, including contextualizing the sermon for Millennials.

The third subproblem was to interview preachers who are effective in connecting with Millennials to determine how they write and deliver more palatable and profitable sermons which lead to spiritual growth in 18-35 year olds.

The fourth subproblem was to survey Millennials who attend the churches of the aforementioned interview subjects to learn if their perspective of their pastors' effectiveness matched the interview subjects' perspective as to what made his sermons palatable and profitable.

The fifth subproblem was to synthesize the collected data into a series of principles which preachers can incorporate into their preaching to make their sermons more effective for Millennials' spiritual growth.

The Setting of the Project

The setting of the project consists of three Independent Christian Church preachers in three Midwestern states.

Case One: Chris VandeLinde

Chris VandeLinde is the 39-year-old lead pastor of Cornerstone Christian Church (CCC) in Shiloh, Illinois, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. Cornerstone is an Independent Christian Church birthed out of a congregation established in 1905. In 2000, three churches merged to form one congregation. In 2006, what was then known as Chapel Hill Christian Church changed its name to Cornerstone Christian Church and moved to a new campus. VandeLinde arrived at CCC in 2015. The church averages 1,300 attenders each week. Millennials make up approximately 40 percent of CCC's membership.

Case Two: Tyler McKenzie

Tyler McKenzie is the 31-year-old lead pastor of Northeast Christian Church (NECC) in Louisville, Kentucky. Northeast is an Independent Christian Church founded in 1977. The church's founding pastor served the congregation for nearly three decades before retiring and handing the reigns to McKenzie in 2015. The church has an average weekly attendance of 3,300 people; one-third are Millennials.

Case Three: Scott Kenworthy

Scott Kenworthy is the 36-year-old lead pastor of Owensboro Christian Church (OCC) in Owensboro, Kentucky. The church is a multigenerational church of

predominantly blue-collar families. Kenworthy became the lead pastor four years ago. The church's attendance is 1,850 people in its three weekend services; 20 percent are Millennials.

The Importance of the Project

The Importance to the Researcher

The researcher is the father of three Millennials, ages 26, 25 and 22. They have dozens of unsaved friends whom the researcher cares about reaching for Christ; the researcher desires that they and their churched peers grow in their faith. The researcher also teaches homiletics to aspiring preachers, most of whom are Millennials, at a local Christian college. The researcher pastors a church with a growing group of younger Millennials, cares deeply about Millennials and longs to see them grow in their faith.

The researcher cares about the Church. Millennials will lead the Church into the second half of the twenty-first century. Millennials are equipped with better technology, more access to information and better means of communication than any other generation in history. That, along with the sheer size of the Millennial cohort, positions them to have an oversized impact on the world. Investing in this generation significantly leverages the researcher's ability to make a difference.

The Importance to the Researcher's Context

Reaching the next generation is a significant priority for South Lansing Christian Church (SLCC). In 2013, the congregation adopted reaching the next generation as one of three foci in its three-year strategic plan. Since that time, the church has made changes to implement that focus including reaffirming it in 2016. In 2015, SLCC hired a young adults' minister and restructured its student ministries to help Christian high school

students transition to college with a vibrant faith, and to help college students with no faith background become Christ followers.

SLCC believes Millennials are best positioned to reach Millennials with the gospel. More than 17,000 Millennials live within three miles of the church's campus. One-third of those have no faith involvement of any kind. Michigan State University, located ten minutes from the church, includes students from 133 countries among its 50,344 undergraduate and graduate students.[10] Helping Millennials who are part of SLCC grow their faith better equips them to evangelize their classmates. Sermons that are palatable and profitable for Millennials further that purpose.

The Importance to the Church at Large

Aside from the length of sermons and recent technological additions like the use of PowerPoint and video clips, most present-day preachers' sermons have changed very little from their Reformation era counterparts. To their credit, many preachers have embraced the aforementioned changes in an effort to make their sermons more palatable to Millennials. But are their sermons more profitable? Millennials need palatable and profitable preaching which will lead to spiritual growth.

While there is significant research relating to how Millennials communicate and learn, as well as their spirituality, little study has been devoted to how Millennials perceive and profit from the sermon. By articulating a series of homiletic principles to foster spiritual growth in Millennials, the researcher hopes to increase preachers' ability

[10] "MSU Facts," Michigan State University, accessed October 22, 2017, https://msu.edu/about/thisismsu/facts.html.

to write and deliver sermons that are more palatable and profitable for the Millennials in their congregations.

The Research Methodology

The research was qualitative in nature with a multiple-case study as the primary research model. The primary data (interviews and surveys) was analyzed using within-case and cross-case analysis. Case study was selected as the research methodology because of the flexibility it afforded the researcher in learning from the experiences of other preachers who are committed to helping Millennials take the next steps in their spiritual growth.

Data was acquired by selecting three cases based on nominations from denominational leaders. Nine Restoration Movement leaders were surveyed and asked to submit a list of Independent Christian Church preachers whose sermons are especially effective in fostering Millennials' spiritual growth. The researcher received 17 names of individuals from the Restoration Movement leaders.

Each of the 17 nominees completed a survey used by the researcher to select three individuals for study. The selected individuals completed a second, more comprehensive survey. The researcher developed an interview protocol and interviewed each of the subjects. Finally, the researcher created a survey and administered it to Millennials who attend the churches the selected preachers serve.

The researcher created coded transcripts from the interviews. The researcher analyzed and coded the data collected from the surveys provided by the preachers studied, as well as from the Millennials in their congregations.

Secondary data was collected by examining theological resources related to sermons preached by Peter in Acts 2, 3, and 4 and Paul in Acts 13, 14 and 17. The researcher also reviewed literature relevant to: (1) the unique characteristics of Millennials, (2) their unique spiritual commonalities, (3) how they learn, and (4) the missiological concept of contextualizing the gospel to the culture which the preacher seeks to penetrate, including literature related to how preachers can contextualize the sermon for Millennials.

CHAPTER TWO: A BIBLICAL–THEOLOGICAL VIEW OF THE GOSPEL CONTEXTUALIZING OF PETER AND PAUL

Introduction

The Church began with a sermon. Peter stood before an eclectic assembly on the Day of Pentecost and preached the gospel. The Holy Spirit moved among the congregation and all those assembled heard the message in their own language. Drawing from the Psalms and the prophet Joel, Peter expounded upon the person of Jesus Christ, demonstrating he was the long-awaited Messiah who had been promised to Israel. Three thousand people responded to Peter's sermon; the Church was founded.

Preaching was ubiquitous in the first church. Acts 2:42 records that the early church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." The apostles preached; so did their disciples, including Stephen, Philip and Barnabas, who joined the Apostle Paul on his first missionary journey. As the church scattered, the preaching of the gospel scattered with it, resulting in the expansion of the kingdom of God. Preaching was central to that expansion. Peter and Paul – the two apostles whose sermons are most frequently recorded in Acts – shape our understanding of preaching more than any other New Testament preachers.

Their sermons also demonstrate a growing awareness among the apostles of the need to contextualize the gospel to their listeners. As the kingdom of God expanded to include Jews from outside Judea and Galilee, and also Gentiles, Peter and Paul

demonstrated the cultural sensitivity to preach sermons that were palatable and profitable for their diverse audiences.

The need for the preacher to contextualize the gospel to his audience is as critically important today as it was in Paul's day. N.T. Wright wrote,

> The greatest question, of course, which hangs over all Christian thinking and speaking in our day, and which poses an equal challenge to systematic and practical theology, is: how can we speak truly and appropriately of God within a world that has forgotten most of what it thought it knew about God and has distorted much of the rest?[1]

The sermons of Peter in Acts 2, 3 and 4 and Paul in Acts 13, 14 and 17, provide some answers to Wright's query.

Peter's Sermons in Acts 2, 3 and 4

Peter's Pentecost Sermon in Acts 2

John Stott noted that the book of Acts might more accurately be titled the *Book of Acts and Addresses* because it contains as many addresses as it does acts. There are nineteen sermons in the book, excluding the speeches given by Jewish and Gentile officials. The bulk of those addresses are delivered by Peter, who preached eight, and Paul, who preached nine sermons.[2] Peter and Paul demonstrate in their sermons an awareness of the contextual challenges they faced with their respective audiences.

There is some debate about whether or not Luke's record contains the actual addresses of Peter and Paul. Stott notes they most certainly are not verbatim recollections. If Luke's record of Peter's Pentecost sermon was verbatim it would have

---

[1] Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978-2013*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 208.

[2] John Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990), 69.

only lasted three minutes,[3] and it is the longest of Peter's sermons in Acts. Craig Keener contends Luke wrote summaries of the sermons Peter and Paul preached.[4] Observing that Luke's writing is typical of ancient historiography, Keener notes, "For ancients, a speech in keeping with a speaker's character and with what the speaker was likely to have said on an occasion would be authentic whether any memory of the speaker's exact words on that occasion were available or not."[5]

Peter's sermons, even in the summarized form in which they have been received, demonstrate an awareness of the cultural distance between him and his listeners.

In *The Forgotten Ways*, Alan Hirsch modifies the E-Scale missiologist Ralph Winters used to help evangelists quantify the cultural distance Christians need to span in order to share the Gospel with an individual or group. Hirsch's Missional Scale assesses "just how far away a people group is from a *meaningful* [italics in original] engagement with the gospel."[6]

---

[3] Stott, *Acts*, 69.

[4] Craig Keener, *Acts – An Exegetical Commentary, Vol. 1*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 260.

[5] Keener, *Acts*, 271.

[6] Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 56.

Table 2.1 Alan Hirsch's M-Scale Adaptation.[7]

m0-m1	Those with some concept of Christianity who speak the same language, have similar interests, are probably of the same nationality, and are from a class grouping similar to yours or your church's. Most of your friends would probably fit into this bracket.
m1-m2	Here we go to the average non-Christian in our context: a person who has little real awareness of, or interest in, Christianity but is suspicious of the church (they have heard some bad things). These people might be politically correct, socially aware, and open to spirituality. This category might also include those previously offended by a bad experience of church or Christians. Just go to the average local pub/bar or nightclub to encounter these people.
m2-m3	People in this group have absolutely no idea about Christianity. They might be part of an ethnic group with different religious impulses or some fringy subculture. This category might include people marginalized by WASPy Christianity, e.g. the gay community. But this group will definitely include people actively antagonistic toward Christianity as they understand it.
m3-m4	This group might be inhabited by ethnic and religious groupings like Muslims or Jews. The fact that they are in the West might ameliorate some of the distance, but just about everything else gets in the way of a meaningful dialogue. They are highly resistant to the gospel.

In their sermons recorded in *Acts of the Apostles*, both Peter and Paul demonstrate an ability to bridge the cultural distance that separates them from their audiences.

> When we read Paul's sermons, we marvel at his adaptability, as he addresses Jews in the synagogue of the city in Antioch (chapter 13), pagans in the open air at Lystra (chapter 14), philosophers on the Areopagus in Athens (chapter 17), and the elders of the church of Ephesus in Miletus (chapter 20). Each is different and each is appropriate.[8]

[7] Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 56-57.

[8] Stott, *Acts*, 72.

Though Peter's sermon in Acts 2 had less cultural distance to traverse than Paul's sermons to Gentiles, his Pentecost audience still presented him with challenges. Peter's congregation included Jewish pilgrims from many nations, including

> Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs (Acts 2:9-11)

who had assembled in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

Despite the differences in culture and languages, Peter understood his audience had one thing in common: they were all Jews. Some of them, perhaps many, were aware of the events of the preceding weeks: Jesus' triumphal entry into the city, his subsequent arrest, trial and crucifixion, as well as the claims of his followers that he had risen. While he may have needed to inform some of his audience about the events of the preceding weeks, there were no barriers of race or religion between Peter and his listeners. Taking advantage of this, Peter intentionally connected with the congregation:

> Luke makes clear in subtle ways that Peter has established the necessary rapport with his audience to convince many. For instance, notice the progression in the way Peter addresses his audience. Both "men Jews" (or Judeans); (v. 14) and "men Israelites" (v. 22) are formal, but in v. 29 we have "men brothers," to which the audience responds in kind with the same intimate address in v. 37. "The successive salutations show Peter progressively winning over his audience."[9]

By beginning his sermon in Acts 2 with the words, "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem," Peter demonstrated an awareness of their cultural immediacy. He quoted the Old Testament prophet Joel. This connected with his Jewish audience. He referred to his listeners, in verse 22, as "Fellow Israelites." There was almost no cultural

---

[9] Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 139.

distance between speaker and listener. They were of the same faith and the same family. The only distance Peter had to cover was the previous weeks' events concerning Jesus of Nazareth. The last time many of the pilgrims listening to Peter on Pentecost had been in Jerusalem would have been for the previous Passover, at which time the entire city was abuzz with the trial, condemnation and crucifixion of Jesus.

The events the congregation was witnessing were the fulfillment of the prophet Joel. And Jesus, Peter told the assembly, was the fulfillment of that which David prophesied about in Psalm 16. Familiar with this Psalm, Jews would long have wondered about the mystery embedded in it. Ascribed to David as having been written by him and as referring to him, how was it possible David was able to write, "you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay" (Ps. 16:10). His tomb was in Jerusalem, so David could not have been speaking about himself. Peter told the assembly that David was prophesying about Jesus, whom Peter made clear was the fulfillment of Psalm 16.

Peter referred to another familiar Old Testament passage, Psalm 110. Some of those listening to Peter on Pentecost must have recalled that Jesus questioned the Pharisees with this same Psalm just weeks earlier:

> While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."' If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions (Matt. 22:42-45).

The same Psalm Jesus used to vex the Pharisees, Peter declared, is fulfilled in Jesus.[10]

Peter's sermon began by explaining the phenomena the people observed: the sound of rushing wind and the miraculous ability of each to hear Peter speaking in their native language. He concluded his sermon with an indictment: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36). Upon hearing this, the assembly was convicted and asked, "Brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37)

> Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:38-39).

Peter's sermon in Acts 2 is consistent with the apostolic pattern for preaching to Jewish congregations:

- "An affirmation that the time of the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies had come.
- "A rehearsal of the ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.
- "An appeal to relevant Old Testament Messianic prophecies whose fulfillment in these events are evidence Jesus himself is the Messiah.
- "A call to repentance."[11]

Peter's Colonnade Sermon in Acts 3

Sometime after the Day of Pentecost, Peter and John ascended the temple mount for the time of evening prayer. Richard Longenecker suggests that the strong connective between the preceding pericope and this one, which the NIV renders as "one day," indicates "that the story originally circulated among Christians separately and for its own

---

[10] Gareth Reese, *New Testament History: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts*, (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1976), 69.

[11] Reese, *Acts*, 58.

sake."[12] As they entered the temple courts and passed through the Beautiful Gate, they encountered a man who had been lame from birth. He was seated, begging for alms and "when he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, 'Look at us!' So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them" (Acts 3:3-6). Though Peter and John had no money for the man, they commanded him in the name of Jesus to walk. The beggar was healed instantly and made his way into the Court of Women, clinging to the two apostles.

The exuberance of the healed man drew the attention of the temple worshippers and soon a crowd assembled around the apostles, providing them an opportunity to preach. Peter began his sermon in Acts 3 the same way he did his Pentecost address: by acknowledging the Jewish heritage he and his listeners shared. Calling them "fellow Israelites" (Acts 3:12) he declared that Jesus was glorified by the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, "the very same God the Patriarchs had known and worshipped. It was important to show that it was the same God that the Old Testament Scriptures spoke about."[13]

Jesus, Peter told them, is the "Holy and Righteous One" for whom they had been hoping and praying. The title Peter attributed to Jesus was familiar to his listeners. It was a "combination of the Old Testament title of God … and the prophetic term 'the

---

[12] Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with The New International Version: Acts*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 89.

[13] Reese, *Acts*, 158.

righteous one,'" which "seems to be a messianic designation in intertestamental Jewish sources."[14]

As he did in the Pentecost sermon, Peter declared the guilt of his audience in a damning accusation. With repetitive rhetoric, Peter assigned the blame for Jesus' death to his listeners: "*You* handed him over to be killed, and *you* disowned him before Pilate … *You* disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. *You* killed the author of life" (Acts 3:13b-15a, emphasis added). One can imagine Peter's listeners recoiling as the indictment was spoken. If Peter's allegation was harsh, he nevertheless offered his listeners reconciliation instead of the punishment they must have felt they deserved.

> Though he has just accused them of being guilty of an enormous crime, yet Peter shows tenderness as he addresses them still further [as fellow Israelites]. Peter is not brow-beating his audience or trying to club them into submission. He has exposed their opposition to all good and decency in no unsparing terms, but his tone is one of compassion and his aim is to win his listeners to Christ.[15]

They acted in ignorance, Peter allowed, as had their leaders. This was significant for observant Jews. The Old Testament detailed two kinds of offenses: presumptuous sin and unwitting sin. If one committed a presumptuous sin (a sin of commission), such a person would be cut off from Israel. But if one sinned unwittingly (a sin of omission), she could obtain forgiveness through making sacrifice. Peter told the assembled congregation they were guilty of the latter. His concession was reminiscent of Jesus' words on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). "Peter is saying that their sin of denial of Jesus was a sin of ignorance, and therefore there

---

[14] Witherington, *The Acts*, 181.

[15] Reese, *Acts*, 162.

was forgiveness for it. Their ignorance did not excuse them, but it was grounds for calling them to repentance."[16]

As he did in his Acts 2 sermon, Peter called for repentance, a call that was not unfamiliar to Peter's listeners. Witherington notes,

> There is another mitigating factor as well: God's divine plan was at work in Jesus' death. The call for Jews to repent and/or turn back to God is familiar in the prophetic literature. The background to the appeal here goes back to the prophetic call, in particular the recent call of the Baptist and then of Jesus.[17]

In Acts 3, Luke/Peter expanded upon the eschatological theme introduced via the Joel prophecy in Acts 2, noting that the Messiah will return: "Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21). This Messiah was the one the prophets foretold. Returning again to ground that was familiar to his Jewish audience, Peter told the crowd, "Moses was not the only prophet … who spoke of the coming Messiah. From the prophet Samuel on, there had been an unbroken succession of God's spokesmen promising that the Messiah was coming."[18]

Peter's reference to Old Testament leaders must have resonated with the temple crowd. To further validate Jesus as Messiah, Peter appealed to Israel's great lawgiver, Moses. He referred to Samuel, their greatest judge and the founder of the school of prophets. And he affirmed they were heirs of the covenant which God made with

---

[16] Reese, *Acts*, 162-163.

[17] Witherington, *The Acts*, 183.

[18] Dennis Gaertner, *The College Press NIV Commentary: Acts*, (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1993), 92.

Abraham, declaring Jesus was the fulfillment of that covenant: "And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed'" (Acts 3:22-25).

Peter's sermon in Acts 3 powerfully affected the crowd and disturbed the temple leaders. The priests and the captain of the temple guard, along with the Sadducees, seized Peter and John and incarcerated them to await arraignment the following morning. Nevertheless, Luke recorded, "But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand" (Acts 4:4).

Peter's Sanhedrin Sermon in Acts 4

Peter and John, and presumably the formerly lame man, spent the night in jail awaiting examination before the Sanhedrin. While the text does not specifically say the nameless beneficiary of the miracle was arrested, his leaping and shouting would have drawn the attention of the temple guards for whom keeping order in the temple precincts was paramount.[19] That he was present at the questioning of Peter and John lends weight to the idea he shared the two apostles' fate.

Luke does not record the apostles' reaction to their overnight confinement. Though they might not have known it at the time, it is unlikely they were yet in any significant danger:

> It needs to be borne in mind that incarceration in antiquity was often not a means of punishment, but rather a means of holding a suspect until a trial could be held or a judgment rendered. In fact, in a first-century Jewish setting custody seems never to have been seen as a means of punishment.[20]

---

[19] Gaertner, *Acts*, 94.

[20] Witherington, *The Acts*, 190.

The next day they found themselves standing in front of the Sanhedrin, the powerful Jewish body of seventy-one Sadducees, Pharisees, priests and landed gentry who ruled on disputed matters of religion and served to keep the populace in and around Jerusalem so adequately pacified as to satisfy their Roman occupiers. As Peter and John were brought before the court, "memories of the trial of Jesus must have flooded the apostles' minds. Was history to repeat itself? They could hardly expect justice from *that* [italics in original] court, which had listened to false witnesses and unjustly condemned their Lord."[21]

If Peter and John were afraid, Luke did not record it. Just weeks before this examination before the high court, Peter fled from the high priest's courtyard after denying even knowing Jesus. How ironic it must have seemed to him to be standing his ground in the presence of Caiaphas, the high priest and his father-in-law, Annas, who had served as high priest prior to being deposed. Though Caiaphas was the president of the Sanhedrin before which Peter and John stood, Annas was the power behind the scenes.[22] Annas' son Jonathan who would one day be high priest, was also present,[23] and the courtroom contained "a majority of members from the Sadducean party, supporting the chief-priestly interests, and a powerful minority from the Pharisaic party, to which most of the scribes or professional exponents of the law of Moses belonged."[24] Though the

---

[21] Stott, *Acts*, 96.

[22] Gaertner, *Acts*, 94.

[23] Longenecker, *Acts*, 98.

[24] Frederick Fyvie Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 91.

parties who made up the Sanhedrin had their differences each had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo threatened by Peter's preaching.

Their complaint against Peter and John was two-fold. First, they had presumed to teach the people in the temple courts, a vocation which was reserved for the teachers of the law, those trained in the rabbinic school and authorized by the temple authorities. "Second, Peter and John were … 'proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.' This probably means they were attempting to prove from the fact of Jesus' resurrection … the doctrine of the resurrection … which the Sadducees denied."[25]

The examination of Peter and John centered on the issue of authority. The judges "had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: By what power or what name did you do this?" (Acts 4:7). The Sanhedrin did not deny the healing of the crippled man took place; the evidence of it stood before them. Rather,

> The main question they have for the apostles is, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (v. 7). The members of the Sanhedrin are not concerned with the miracle of healing itself, but with the source of power that gave rise to the healing. The question betrays their real concern, namely that *their* [italics in original] authority has been challenged.[26]

As they formulated their response Peter and John must have recalled what Jesus told them: "When they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matt. 10:19-20). As Jesus promised, Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit and issued a scathing condemnation of the court telling them, "It is

---

[25] Longenecker, *Acts*, 95-96.

[26] Jerome F D Creach, "Between Text and Sermon: Acts 4:1-31," *Interpretation* 66, no. 3 (July 2012): 307.

by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed" (Acts 4:10).

Peter identified Jesus Christ of Nazareth as his master, a proclamation that was lost on the Sanhedrin. He stated without hesitation that Jesus was the long-awaited Anointed One. And though he and John were under indictment it was Peter who tried the Sanhedrin, accusing them of murdering the Messiah. As he did in his colonnade sermon, Peter referred to the psalms, this time Psalm 118:12, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Peter assigned the role of the builders to the Sanhedrin, laying the blame for Jesus' death at his accusers' feet: "The stone you builders rejected, which has become the chief cornerstone."

> In letters they will write years after this, both Peter and Paul will make reference to this prophecy and apply it to Christ. It was the Messianic Psalm, and Christ himself referred to it as He was speaking to these very Sanhedrin members on the great day of questions a few weeks before. Jesus spoke of them as being builders who rejected the cornerstone right after He had told the story about the wicked husbandman who killed the son of the vineyard owner – a very thinly veiled allusion to what they were doing to Him![27]

There was another irony present in this exchange. The Sanhedrin recognized Peter and John as common men without training or rabbinic education. They were, thus, entitled to protection from punishment until they were made aware that the crimes of which they were accused were actually punishable offenses.

> Jewish law … held that a person must be aware of the consequences of his crime before being punished for it. This meant that in noncapital cases the common people – as distinguished from those with rabbinic training, who, presumably, would know the law – had to be given a legal admonition before witnesses and

[27] Reese, *Acts*, 179.

> could only be punished for an offense when they relapsed into a crime after due warning.[28]

Peter began his assignation of guilt to the Sanhedrin with the words, "know this, you and all the people of Israel" (Acts 4:10a). Peter put the Sanhedrin on notice that "the authorities are now living in the age when ignorance is no longer an excuse, and now that they have been told the source of this miracle, they are responsible for what they know."[29] The Sanhedrin's intent was to place Peter and John on notice that teaching in the name and authority of Jesus was forbidden and would, in the future, result in punishment. Yet here the religious authorities themselves were given notice from "unschooled and ordinary men" that they could no longer claim ignorance. They were told that they reject the truth of Jesus' identity to their own peril for "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

There was little missional distance between the apostles and the Sanhedrin. Peter, John, and the council members shared the same language, heritage and religion. All parties in the exchange were intimately aware of the events surrounding Jesus in the previous weeks, albeit from starkly different points of view. Peter used an image the scholars of Israel knew well – the cornerstone from Psalm 118 – to bridge the distance between his listeners and the gospel. In this situation, as is possible whenever one preaches, Peter's sermon had little effect on the unbelieving Sadducees and the hard-hearted Pharisees who threatened the apostles before releasing them unharmed.

---

[28] Longenecker, *Acts*, 96.

[29] Witherington, *The Acts*, 194.

Peter's Preaching in Acts 2, 3 and 4 Compared

The book of Acts begins with Peter preaching three sermons: on the Day of Pentecost (2:14-40), to the crowd assembled in the Temple (3:12-26), and before the Sanhedrin when called to account for preaching to Temple worshippers (4:8-12). Each of these sermons expounded on the theme that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah promised by the Jews' spiritual ancestors. Each sermon was explicit in its message: just as the prophets foretold, this Jesus, whom God had glorified, was rejected by you, God's chosen people, unjustly executed, resurrected and "exalted to the right hand of the Father." Stott notes the essential message of these three sermons was "you killed him, but God raised him."[30] While Peter's exhortation to the Sanhedrin did not result in any conversions, the apostles' preaching to the Jewish Pentecost pilgrims and those assembled in the temple some time later resulted in 5,000 people becoming followers of Jesus.

Longenecker notes Peter's first two sermons (Acts 2 and Acts 3) are very similarly structured:

> Peter's sermon in Solomon's Colonnade is in many ways similar to his sermon at Pentecost (2:14-41). Structurally, both move from proclamation to a call for repentance. The Pentecost sermon, however, is finished and polished, whereas this one is comparatively roughhewn. Thematically, both focus on the denial and vindication of Jesus of Nazareth. But the Colonnade sermon expresses more of a remnant theology than the one at Pentecost. It shows a more generous attitude toward Israel, coupled with a greater stress on the nation's responsibility for the Messiah's death, than does the Pentecost sermon; and it makes explicit the necessity of receiving God's grace by faith.[31]

---

[30] Stott, *Acts*, 97.

[31] Longenecker, *Acts*, 91-92.

The Pentecost sermon and the colonnade sermon also have similar arcs. Each begins with a miraculous event. In Acts 2 there is the sound of a rushing wind and the apostles speak in foreign tongues. In Acts 3 a man with a congenital disability is spectacularly healed. In each pericope a crowd gathers in amazement and Peter seizes the opportunity to preach. In each sermon, Luke

> takes the miraculous event as its text and interprets it in such a way as to glorify Christ, whom his hearers had killed, but God had raised, as the apostles had witnessed. … In each case Peter concluded his speech with an appeal to the crowd to repent, so that they might receive the promised blessings.[32]

Peter's sermons in Acts 2, 3 and 4 relied on familiar foundational texts from the Old Testament. Peter's Pentecost sermon quoted from Joel's apocalyptic vision. Peter's listeners connected this with their understanding of Jewish eschatology. As Peter intended, they recognized they were living out the days of which the prophet Joel spoke. Peter's exhortation in the Temple some days later referred to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He quoted Moses and mentioned Samuel, along with "all the prophets." To make his assertion perfectly clear, Peter quoted the Torah's messianic prophecy from Genesis 22. Abraham had just offered his son, Isaac, on an altar when God told him, "Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed." When arrested and brought before the rulers, elders, teachers of the law, the High Priest and his family, Peter again returned to the Psalms as he proclaimed Christ's divinity before the entrenched skeptics of the Sanhedrin.

Although it is improbable Luke's record of Peter's sermons is verbatim, the respective lengths of what Luke recorded in Peter's first three sermons reveal how well

---

[32] Stott, *Acts*, 89.

Peter understood the three audiences to whom he preached. Acts 2 was the lengthiest of the three sermons (583 words in the *New International Version*). In attendance were "God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). Many of these pilgrims were unlikely to have benefitted from the religious training that came from living in close proximity to the temple. Still others were not as familiar with the events involving Jesus in the previous weeks, and thus Peter's sermon was more in-depth. Some days later, presumably after many of the diaspora Jews had returned home, Peter preached in the temple. His congregation most likely consisted of Jews who lived in or near Jerusalem. His message was considerably shorter (347 words). When Peter preached to the Sanhedrin, his message was relatively brief (114 words).

Peter intuitively understood what Ralph Winter articulated in his cultural distance scale (see Table 2.1).[33] Winter's assertion is that people's receptivity to the gospel is affected by racial, cultural and contextual differences, which can act as barriers to the gospel. Diaspora Jews had greater cultural distance from the gospel than Jews living in and around Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin, spiritually resistant as they were, had few racial, cultural and contextual differences from the bearer of the gospel, in this case Peter, and therefore required less backstory in Peter's message.

Peter's contextualization of the gospel to the three respective audiences in Acts 2, 3 and 4 demonstrates that the Holy Spirit enabled him to exhibit sensitivity to the racial, spiritual and cultural barriers, which separated his listeners from the gospel.

---

[33] Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 56-57.

Paul's Sermons in Acts 13, 14 and 17

Paul's Synagogue Sermon in Acts 13

In the first five chapters of Acts, Luke focused his efforts on the sermons of Peter. While other sermons follow in successive chapters, for example Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin, beginning in chapter 13 Luke detailed three sermons Paul preached: two from his first missionary journey as well as his Areopagus sermon in Athens. These three sermons provide insight into Paul's ability to contextualize the gospel to his listeners.

> Each sermon as we have it is only a précis of what was said, for the longest in its present form would take no more than three minutes to deliver and the shortest can be read in thirty seconds or less. But there is enough in each account to suggest that whereas Paul preached the same gospel wherever he went, he altered the form of his message according to the circumstances he encountered.[34]

The first of these was a sermon (Acts 13:16-41) preached in the synagogue at Antioch Pisidia, an important city and center of commerce situated on the main route between Ephesus and Cilicia.[35] "Although Antioch was no large and famous city like Rome, Ephesus or Corinth, it was one of the largest and most strategic towns of the interior highlands of Asia Minor."[36] Scholars debate the reason Paul chose to travel to Antioch Pisidia. Some speculate the marshy climates nearer the sea had proven unhealthy to Paul and he chose to brave the treacherous passes through the Taurus mountains in order to benefit from the cooler, more salubrious climate of Antioch's 3,600-foot elevation. Witherington posits that perhaps Paul was commended, possibly even by letters of introduction, to influential families in that region who were related to Sergius

---

[34] Longenecker, *Acts*, 220.

[35] Reese, *Acts*, 468.

[36] Keener, *Acts, Vol. 2*, 2032.

Paulus,[37] the proconsul whom they met in Paphos and who, Luke records, "believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord" (Acts 13:6).

When they arrived in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas made their way to the synagogue for the Sabbath observance. Though not a metropolis like Corinth or Ephesus, Antioch contained a "rich amalgam of Greek, Roman, Oriental, and Phrygian traditions."[38] There was also a significant and "well-established population of Jews, originally brought to the region during the Seleucid period,"[39] so it was natural that Paul and Barnabas would seek out the synagogue.

Keener suggests several reasons why Paul might have been invited to speak in the synagogue on the Sabbath. As newly arrived Jews their arrival would not have escaped noticed in Antioch's Jewish community. If the Jewish remnant there learned of Paul's training in Jerusalem it "would have made him an exceptional candidate for a guest speaker in this relatively out-of-the-way Jewish community." It might also have been the case that Paul and Barnabas had a manner of dressing which identified them as rabbis, or for Paul as a Pharisee. It is possible Paul and Barnabas arrived in Antioch prior to the Sabbath and had already established lodging with members of the Jewish community who learned their background and put them forward as candidates to teach on the Sabbath day. Or Paul and Barnabas might simply have volunteered beforehand, for "Luke is not, after all, providing a blow-by-blow account."[40]

---

[37] Witherington, *The Acts*, 403.

[38] Longenecker, *Acts*, 219.

[39] Witherington, *The Acts*, 405.

[40] Keener, *Acts, Vol. 2*, 2045.

On the Sabbath, when invited to speak, Paul stood and faced a congregation of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. He recounted the history of their people and revealed Christ as the fulfillment of that history. His audience is mostly Jewish, and although

> some Gentile God-fearers are present, it is essentially an address to a Jewish audience. … The whole atmosphere is Jewish. The day is the Sabbath, the venue is the synagogue, the lessons are from the Law and the Prophets, the listeners are "men of Israel," and the theme is how "the God of the people of Israel … has brought to Israel the Saviour Jesus, as he promised."[41]

Despite the highly Jewish context, as Paul began his address he demonstrated an awareness of the Hellenization of the diaspora Jews. It was normal for Jews in Palestine to remain seated when addressing the audience. For instance, when Jesus preached at his hometown synagogue, he stood to read from the prophet Isaiah, and then sat down to expound on the reading. Such was not the case in synagogues in Gentile communities. Paul demonstrated an awareness of, and sensitivity to that custom. "Even though in a Jewish synagogue, Paul uses the Roman method as he stands to address the worshippers."[42]

If his manner demonstrated an awareness of his Hellenized context, Paul's message was crafted to communicate with his Jewish siblings. The normal pattern for Jewish synagogue worship, not just in Palestine but in synagogues the world over, was to begin with the Shema followed by a reading from the Pentateuch, and then one from the prophets. Then a "competent Jew" was invited to address the assembly. Often the speech related to the texts that had just been read from the Law and the Prophets.[43] The readings

---

[41] Stott, *Acts*, 222.

[42] Reese, *Acts*, 470.

[43] Longenecker, *Acts*, 219.

that preceded Paul's message that day are not known but it is likely he began his sermon consistent with that practice. Paul knew the Jews loved to hear the history of their people. He wanted them to be receptive to his message and thus "he likely starts with the scripture lesson for the day, and goes over that history, especially emphasizing God's plan to bring a Savior into the world."[44]

Luke recounted Paul's sermon as structured in three parts,[45] separated by the use of three salutary expressions: "fellow Israelites" (v. 16), "fellow children of Abraham" (v. 26), and "my friends" (v. 38). In the first section Paul recounted Israel's history. He started with Israel's Egyptian captivity before acknowledging their wilderness wanderings and the conquest of Canaan. He described the time of the judges, recognized Samuel as the prophet who oversaw Israel's transition to a monarchy, and alluded to the nation's first two kings, Saul and David. David figured prominently in Paul's sermon and occasioned the first quotation of Scripture Luke recorded, a quotation that combined the words of Psalm 89:20 and 1 Samuel 13:14, "I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do" (Acts 13:22).

Paul then turned his attention to Jesus, claiming "from this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised" (Acts 13:23). It must have been at this point that some in the synagogue began to shift uncomfortably in their seats. Keener affirms Michael Gouldner's structural analysis of Paul's speech in Acts 13, noting it is similar to Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2:14-39.

---

[44] Reese, *Acts*, 470.

[45] Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 488.

Table 2.2 Gouldner's Comparison of Acts 2 and Acts 13 Sermons[46]

Subject	Peter's Sermon (Acts 2)	Paul's Sermon (Acts 13)
You killed Jesus	2:22-23	13:27-28
God raised him up	2:24	13:30
David says in Psalm 16	2:25-28	13:35
David remains dead	2:29	13:36
God raised up Christ from David's seed	2:30	(13:23)
Jesus did not see corruption	2:31	13:37

As Peter did in Acts 2, Paul demonstrated in Psalm 16 that David could not have been referring to himself. He had died; his body decayed. The Psalm must have referred to someone else and it was Paul's assertion that it was Jesus, by virtue of Davidic lineage and by his resurrection.

Having just heard a reading from the prophets, Paul declared to the congregation that another prophet, John the baptizer, declared Jesus as Lord: "As John was completing his work, he said: 'Who do you suppose I am? I am not the one you are looking for. But there is one coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie'" (Acts 13:25).

Beginning in verse 26, Paul turned his attention to the events leading up to and including Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection. In verse 27 Paul alluded to an act in which those in attendance at the synagogue had just participated: "The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath" (Acts 13:27). Paul was preparing his listeners to confront the same question others had to answer: Are the prophets fulfilled in the person and actions of Jesus? This question had been answered for Paul; there were eyewitnesses, and though he did not say so to his Antioch audience, he too was an

[46] Keener, *Acts, Vol. 2*, 2052.

eyewitness. Paul preached, "We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus" (Acts 13:32-33a).

Paul returned to the Psalms, this time quoting Psalm 2. "The psalm citation is about the coronation of the king, on which occasion he is designated or recognized to be God's son. Here this event is connected with Jesus' resurrection."[47] The resurrection of Jesus was what differentiated the Son of David from his ancestor King David. Like Peter in his Pentecost sermon, Paul quoted Psalm 16 and explained, "Now when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his ancestors and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay" (Acts 13:36-37).

Verse 38 "begins the 'word of exhortation' or *peroration* [italics in original] proper, to which all that has come before is but a necessary prologue."[48] Paul the theologian, Paul the historian, became Paul the evangelist and told his listeners that "through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39). This was a message which must have been unexpected by Paul's listeners. Reese's suggestion that the change of tone in Paul's sermon "is best explained by saying that Paul observed, at this point in his message, a disapproving expression in the faces and actions of many of his Jewish hearers" would explain the reason Paul did not, as Peter had, "urge his hearers to repent and be baptized, that they

---

[47] Witherington, *The Acts*, 412.

[48] Witherington, *The Acts*, 413.

might be in Christ and enjoy the remission of their sins."[49] Instead, Paul cautioned his listeners from the prophet Habakkuk, "warning the congregation that Habakkuk's words apply to all who reject God's working in Jesus' ministry and who refuse Jesus as the divinely appointed Messiah."[50]

Luke wrote that Paul's message was well received, at least by a portion of the synagogue: "When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God" (Acts 13:43). Though the next time Paul would not be so well received when he preached on the Sabbath in Antioch Pisidia, his first sermon there demonstrated he was aware of his audience's context and culture.

Paul's sermon was "carefully crafted to be persuasive to a Diaspora Jewish audience."[51] Beginning with Paul's choice to stand rather than sit as he delivered his sermon, Paul contextualized his message to the culture in which he delivered it. His use of language was reminiscent of the texts of the Old Testament with which his listeners were familiar.[52] Paul's sermon differed in tone from Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin:

> When Stephen addressed the Sanhedrin, his point was how rebellious the fathers had always been in matters of fulfilling God's will. Paul's purpose differed from Stephen's and so Paul's approach built a foundation for demonstrating that Christ was the ultimate fulfillment of God's gracious care over Israel.[53]

---

[49] Reese, *Acts*, 483.

[50] Longenecker, *Acts*, 223.

[51] Witherington, *The Acts*, 408.

[52] Bruce, *Acts,* 245.

[53] Gaertner, *Acts*, 211.

"As good rhetoric demanded, this speech suits local color (especially the synagogue setting)."[54] From Paul's use of phrases which were "standard LXX language"[55] to his referencing the Septuagint in his scripture quotations,[56] Paul demonstrated his awareness that "synagogue homilies could prove quite Hellenized, reflecting the culture of those who offered them" and that "the LXX was well known in Asia Minor."[57] As Paul concluded his peroration with a warning, he chose both a text, Habakkuk 1:5, and a translation, the Septuagint, to reflect the sense of urgency with which he was warning the congregation. The prophet Isaiah warned the Jews of the coming of Nebuchadnezzar with his Assyrian army, and Paul took up the warning "in the Septuagint version, which makes the application more pointed and applies them to the new situation in which God is offering deliverance through the greatest of all his mighty works."[58]

Paul's ability to tailor a thoroughly Jewish message with a messianic fulfillment to a Hellenized diaspora synagogue audience demonstrated he knew the importance of contextualizing the gospel to his listeners.

Paul's Sermon in Acts 14

As often happened to the Apostle Paul, his efforts in Antioch Pisidia resulted in his expulsion from the region and his determination to expand the gospel message to the

---

[54] Keener, *Acts, Vol. 2*, 2051.

[55] Keener, *Acts, Vol. 2*, 2057.

[56] Reese, *Acts*, 481.

[57] Keener, *Acts, Vol. 2*, 2051.

[58] Bruce, *Acts,* 263.

Gentiles. He and Barnabas traveled ninety miles southeast[59] to Iconium by way of the well-traveled *Via Sebaste*,[60] the road the Romans constructed to serve as an important commercial connector between the cities of the province of Galatia. As was their pattern, Paul and Barnabas went to the local synagogue to teach. "There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed" (Acts 14:1b). Luke does not tell us what Paul and Barnabas said, only that their evangelistic efforts resulted in threats to their safety and of their subsequent flight from Iconium to the town of Lystra some "twenty to twenty-five miles … south-southwest of Iconium."[61]

Lystra was declared a Roman colony by Augustus in 25 BCE. Keener notes that Paul focused his efforts on Roman colonies because as a "Roman citizen Paul recognizes already the strategic importance of reaching Rome itself."[62] For the Roman colony of Lystra, one of its principle purposes was to serve as a garrison from which the Romans could control the "marauders from the Taurus mountains who threatened the Roman peace."[63]

Some time after they arrived in Lystra, Paul and Barnabas encountered a crippled man who sat begging near the Temple of Zeus. Luke's narrative of Paul's healing is strikingly similar to Peter's Acts 3 healing of the lame man near the Beautiful Gate at the Temple in Jerusalem. The individuals who were healed were each introduced similarly,

---

[59] Gaertner, *Acts*, 219.

[60] Bock, *Acts*, 468.

[61] Keener, *Acts, Vol. 2*, 2128.

[62] Keener, *Acts, Vol. 2*, 2129.

[63] Bruce, *Acts*, 272.

with Luke noting each had been born unable to walk. Each man was sitting near the entrance to a temple; each man was begging for alms. Luke notes that Peter and Paul each looked intently at the man in question. Witherington observes that two verbs used in these narratives (περιπατε and αλλομαι) "are found at Acts 3:8 and 14:10 and nowhere else in Acts."[64] Luke wanted his readers to recognize the parallel between the healing of the two crippled men.[65]

The miracle set off a tumultuous chain of events. Upon seeing the man instantly healed and walking around, the crowd mistook Paul and Barnabas for the incarnated forms of Zeus and Hermes, two gods from the Greco-Roman pantheon.

In his *Metamorphoses*, which had been written fifty years prior to the apostles' arrival in Lystra, the poet Ovid told a tale of two elderly peasants, Philemon and Baucis, who provided hospitality to the gods Zeus and Hermes when they visited the hill country of Phrygia disguised as mortals. They traveled throughout the province seeking shelter but were rebuffed in their attempts until coming upon a tiny dwelling made of thatch and sticks with the husband and wife, Philemon and Baucis, who dwelled therein. Because the two hosted the deities in spite of their poverty, Zeus and Hermes saved them from the destruction they visited upon the unfriendly inhabitants of the region. "It is reasonable to suppose both that the Lystran people knew this story … and that, if the gods were to revisit their district, they were anxious not to suffer the same fate as the inhospitable Phrygians."[66]

---

[64] Witherington, *The Acts*, 423.

[65] Longenecker, *Acts*, 231.

[66] Stott, *Acts*, 230-231.

In their exuberance to avoid a similar fate, the Lystrans determined to honor Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes, gods incarnate. When Paul and Barnabas realized what was happening, they tore their clothing to demonstrate their grief at the blasphemous demonstration.

Luke summarized the speech Paul shouted to the crowd as he and Barnabas succeeded in stopping the Lystrans from sacrificing bulls in their honor. His summation is significant, despite the brevity, because it is the only time Paul addressed an illiterate pagan audience, and because it is one of only two sermons from Paul's first missionary journey that Luke recounted.[67] It is also important because his chaotic address in the open-air of Lystra contrasts sharply with his orderly sermon at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch.

The Lystrans lacked the Jewish context Paul was able to assume in each of his synagogue audiences. They were pantheists who had no context for understanding the God of the Old Testament, let alone God's redemptive work through his Son, Jesus Christ. Consequently, Paul varied his approach to the Lystrans abandoning his textual references to Mosaic law and the Prophets with which he demonstrated that Jesus was the fulfillment of God's promises to his people. Instead, Paul made his appeal from natural law,[68] telling the crowd

> We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness

[67] Stott, *Acts*, 231-232.

[68] Reese, *Acts*, 510.

> by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:15b-17).

The timeline of events immediately following Paul's sermon is unclear. Luke recorded that "some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead" (Acts 14:19). Whether the stoning was immediately subsequent to Paul and Barnabas successfully stopping the sacrifice or whether the Jews' arrival was some hours, or even days later is uncertain.

The identity of the perpetrators who assaulted Paul is also ambiguous, as is the means by which Paul recovered from the attack. Gareth Reese suggests the stoning of Paul was the work of the Jews who had arrived from Iconium and Antioch Pisidia and that Paul, having been left for dead outside the city gates, experienced a miraculous and full recovery immediately after their departure.[69] Longenecker contends that the Lystrans were culpable for the stoning, believing that if the apostles were not gods then they were impersonating the gods. Paul, "with the aid of those who had accepted the gospel … revived; and with great courage, that evening he returned to the city where he had almost been killed."[70]

A case can be made for either view. Since Lystra was not a Jewish city, neither the Jews indigenous to the city nor the instigators from Iconium and Antioch Pisidia would not have violated Jewish law by stoning a man within the city precincts.[71] The

---

[69] Reese, *Acts*, 513-515.

[70] Longenecker, *Acts*, 232.

[71] Reese, *Acts*, 514.

brutish Lystrans could just as easily have initiated the barbarism. The act of sacrificing the two bulls, having been interrupted, deprived the Lystrans of feasting and revelry, which must have angered them.

Had Paul experienced a resurrection or something very nearly like it, it would seem that Luke would have noted it. That he does not, leads one to believe Paul recovered more normally, but it is difficult to imagine how he might have been able to make the sixty-mile journey to Derbe the following day.

Despite the murky timeline of events and the uncertain identity of the perpetrators of the attack, Paul demonstrated incredible courage throughout his ordeal in Lystra. He also demonstrated good rhetorical ability in adapting his speech to his audience. Paul omitted Scripture quotations and contextualized his message "specifically for an audience in this region."[72]

Paul's Sermon in Acts 17

Paul's mastery of bridging cultural distance is evident in his sermon in Acts 17. While Paul's first missionary journey saw him preaching in synagogues to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, in his second journey he visited churches he had planted, expanded his ministry to Gentiles, and delivered the elders' decision from the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1-29). Though he did with Paul's previous trip, Luke did not record Paul's synagogue sermons from his second journey. Aside from mentioning a sermon Paul preached in the home of the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:32), the only sermon Luke

[72] Keener, *Acts, Vol. 2*, 2158.

recorded from Paul's second journey was his address at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:22-31).

There Paul addressed a group of pantheistic "Epicurean and Stoic philosophers … [who] spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:18, 21). Paul's sermon reveals important principles related to bridging the racial, cultural and spiritual distance between two different peoples.

Paul's diversion to Athens was out of necessity rather than design. As was the case in many of the locations where he preached, Paul had been run out of town in Thessalonica and the mob who forced his flight sent agitators to Berea to stir up trouble. While his traveling companions Silas and Timothy were able remain in Berea, Paul diverted to Athens and left instructions for his coworkers to follow as soon as possible.

Paul arrived in an Athens that was surviving on a reputation which had long since faded.[73] It was once one of the great city-states of ancient Greece, but was overwhelmed by the Romans and incorporated into the Roman Empire in 146 BCE. The Romans loved all things Greek "and under their rule Athens continued as the cultural and intellectual center of the world. Rome also left the city politically free to operate as a free city within the empire."[74]

Ancient travelers arriving in Athens would have been awestruck as they made their way toward the city. At the city's center stood an enormous statue of the goddess Athena. Made of ivory and covered in gold, the glistening point of her spear was visible

---

[73] Stott, *Acts*, 276.

[74] Longenecker, *Acts*, 269.

from forty miles away.[75] From the harbor to the city gates the landscape was a forest of idols and shrines. "There were from 2000 to 3000 notable idols in the city, some have calculated."[76] Apollo, Zeus, Aphrodite, Hermes, Poseidon, Artemis: all the gods of Olympus were enshrined within the city. "They were made not only of stone and brass, but of gold, silver, ivory and marble, and they had been elegantly fashioned by the finest Greek sculptors."[77]

But if Paul was impressed by the artisans and architecture of Athens, what Luke chose to record was his distress at Athens' idolatry. What he

> saw was neither the beauty nor the brilliance of the city, but its idolatry. The adjective Luke uses (*kateidōlos*) occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, and has not been found in any other Greek literature. Although most English versions render it 'full of idols,' the idea conveyed seems to be that the city was 'under' them. We might say that it was 'smothered with idols' or 'swamped' by them.[78]

As Paul awaited the arrival of Silas and Timothy "he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17). Paul's conversations in the agora led him to an encounter with a group of philosophers from the schools of Epicurus and Zeno. Epicurus (342-270 BCE) founded a philosophical faction in Athens that embraced pleasure as their chief pursuit. Epicurus taught that pleasure ought to be the pursuit of that which was "generous, kind and patriotic" but Epicureans, as his adherents were known, often indulged in the pleasures of the flesh. They denied the existence of a creator-deity,

---

[75] Stott, *Acts*, 277.

[76] Reese, *Acts*, 627.

[77] Stott, *Acts*, 277.

[78] Stott, *Acts*, 277.

rejected the concepts of judgment and resurrection, and believed the gods were indifferent and uninvolved in human affairs.[79]

Zeno was the founder of the Stoics, so named because of the painted porch (*stoa*) near the marketplace where they taught. Unlike the Epicureans, Stoics believed the world was created by Zeus, the chief of the gods, and that the affairs of humans were governed not by the gods, but by the Fates. "To oversimplify, it was characteristic of Epicureans to emphasize chance, escape and the enjoyment of pleasure, and of the Stoics to emphasize fatalism, submission and the endurance of pain."[80] Stoics and Epicureans denied bodily resurrection having been taught, as all Athenians were, a quote which the playwright Aeschylus attributed to Apollo when he founded the Areopagus: "When the dust has soaked up a person's blood, once he is dead, there is no resurrection."[81]

Encountering Paul in the agora, "a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babbler trying to say?' Others remarked, 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods.'" (Acts 17:18). The Greek word translated *babbler* means, literally, "seed picker" and had multiple applications. It referred to people who followed the harvesters picking up the overlooked grain dropped by the reapers and also a small bird that flitted about picking up seeds. By the time Paul arrived in Athens, the word was used pejoratively to denote a person who had no ideas of his own but instead pieced together the ideas of others into a syncretistic philosophy which he then portrayed as his own. "Perhaps it was the Stoics who leveled this

---

[79] Reese, *Acts*, 622.

[80] Stott, *Acts*, 280-281.

[81] Witherington, *The Acts*, 532.

contemptuous criticism at Paul, for the word had been used by Zeno … of one of his disciples."[82]

The introduction of "foreign deities" was a capital offense in Athens and one the guardians of Athens' philosophical and spiritual heritage took seriously. Luke records that when the Epicureans and Stoics heard Paul they "took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus" (Acts 17:19a). Their charge was that Paul seemed "to be advocating foreign gods. They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 18b). Since Paul was a monotheist, some scholars suspect the Athenians misunderstood Paul's message of Jesus and the resurrection. They postulate the Athenians "thought Paul was advocating foreign gods, probably mistaking *Anastasis* ('resurrection') for the goddess consort of a god named Jesus."[83]

There is considerable disagreement about the meaning of the phrase "they took him" as it applies to Paul's conveyance to the Areopagus. Speculation includes that Paul was taken by force or that he was officially, yet politely, escorted. The phrase could apply to a location, or the council that met at that location. Dennis Gaertner makes the case for the latter, noting the similarities between Paul and Socrates who, 500 years previous to Paul, stood at the Areopagus accused of introducing foreign deities. He also notes that

> Luke's tendency in Acts is to show how Paul had to stand trial before city councils of various types in many of the major cities he visited. This observation also argues for a council rather than a place. The NIV takes this position when it says that they took him "to a meeting of the Areopagus."[84]

---

[82] Reese, *Acts*, 623.

[83] Longenecker, *Acts*, 270.

[84] Gaertner, *Acts,* 274.

Despite noting that the verb translated by the NIV as "they took him" can also be translated as "they took hold of him," Stott disagrees. He observes that

> there seem to have been no legal charge, no prosecutor, no presiding judge, no verdict and no sentence. At the same time, although Paul was not subjected to any formal interrogation, he was asked to give an account of his teaching. One may therefore regard the situation as 'an informal inquiry by the education commission', who regarded him with 'slightly contemptuous indulgence', so that 'he might either receive the freedom of the city to preach or be censored and silenced.'[85]

Joshua Lipp makes the case that Luke (and by implication, the Athenians) viewed Paul as "Socrates redivivus, the great Athenian philosopher." In doing so, Luke presented Paul as the hero and the Athenian philosophers as antagonists. Referring to Athenian history, Lipp contends Paul's speech was much more than a polite discourse at the Areopagus; rather, it was an emotionally charged, potentially deadly encounter among the Athenians, who were known to have passed death sentences on those who introduced foreign gods to their city.[86]

> Luke depicts Paul as Socrates, however, not for the purpose of narrating a philosophical conversation between Hellenistic philosophical schools, but rather in order to depict the event as a kind of mock trial between early Christianity and the epicenter of pagan philosophy and culture.[87]

Whether or not Paul was on trial remains unclear; what is certain is that Paul judged the Athenians and found them guilty of idolatry. When he arrived at the Areopagus his discourse to the Council of Athena demonstrated his ability to master the

---

[85] Stott, *Acts*, 283-284.

[86] Joshua W. Lipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16-34 as *Both* Critique *and* Propaganda," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 3 (2012): 570.

[87] Lipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," 571.

delicate task of balancing two objectives that are often in tension with each other: contextualizing the gospel and confronting the culture.

Wright makes an intriguing statement about how Paul accomplished those two objectives:

> Despite what people have sometimes concluded from a superficial reading of the Areopagus address in Acts 17, Paul wasn't simply finding 'points of contact' with his pagan audience; one of the main points of that speech is that idols and temples are a waste of time, and saying that in Athens is rather like arriving in Dublin and declaring that God doesn't like Guinness.[88]

Paul and Contextualization in Acts 17

Addressing a culture so steeped in pantheistic history and philosophy was no easy task. Paul could not rely on the same approach he used in the synagogues. "He knew it would be futile to refer to a history no one knew or argue from fulfillments of prophecy no one was interested in or quote from a book no one read or accepted as authoritative."[89]

Nor could he dialogue with the council as he had done in the agora. The learned men of the Areopagus expected high caliber rhetoric and Paul did not disappoint. Luke's précis of the speech demonstrated that Paul was a skilled rhetorician. Bock regards Paul's remarks at the beginning of his address as a *captatio benevolentiae*, though perhaps not an entirely pure effort to win the goodwill of his Athenian audience:[90] "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an

---

[88] Wright, *Pauline Perspectives*, 320.

[89] Longenecker, *Acts*, 271.

[90] Bock, *Acts*, 564.

unknown god" (Acts 17:22b-23a). Paul's reliance on classical rhetoric enabled him to contextualize his message to the erudite Athenian Council.

It would be overstating the case to suggest Paul's tone was conciliatory and yet "Paul was perfectly respectful in his language, even though his heart had been deeply affected by their idolatry."[91] Paul's choice of words in his preface, "very religious," must have caused the Athenians to lean in. The phrase can also be translated as "superstitious" or "overly scrupulous" and could have been taken by the Council as either a compliment or a criticism. We do not know Paul's tone, so it is difficult for us to determine his exact intentions. And perhaps that was his intention: to cause the Athenians to wonder whether this rabbi with strange ideas was praising or disparaging them.[92]

Paul's use of Greek language was thoroughly Hellenized in this sermon. Lipp notes that Luke/Paul's choice of Greek word for "world" (κοσμος instead of γη) in Acts 17:24 demonstrates Paul had an awareness of his audience's vocabulary and contextualized his terminology to fit theirs.[93]

Paul's mastery of contextualization is most readily observed in his use of the Athenians own poetry in the furtherance of his message. F.F. Bruce observes,

> If the address at Pisidian Antioch in 13:16-41 is intended to serve as a sample of Paul's preaching to a synagogue congregation, the present speech is equally well designed as a sample of his preaching to pagans … Here he does not quote Hebrew scriptures which would have been quite unknown to his hearers; the direct quotations are from Greek poets.[94]

---

[91] Reese, *Acts*, 626.

[92] Gaertner, *Acts*, 276.

[93] Lipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," 579.

[94] Bruce, *Acts*, 334-335.

Paul quoted two Greek poets in verse 28: "For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'" Paul was able to increase his credibility with the Council by demonstrating his sophistication, something the Council expected from orators. Anything less would have caused them to esteem Paul less.[95]

Paul chose the sixth century BCE Cretan poet Epimenides of Knossos and the third century BCE Stoic author Aratus to make his point. Paul would have been familiar with Aratus (whose words may have echoed Cleanthes, the earlier Stoic philosopher) who, like Paul, was a native of Cilicia.[96] Quoting pagan poetry was a decision calculated to build a bridge from the pantheistic Council to the monotheistic theology of Christianity. It was necessary to do so because, as Witherington observed,

> It would have done Paul no good to simply quote the Scriptures, a book the audience did not know and one that had no authority in the minds of these hearers. Arguments are only persuasive if they work within the plausibility structure existing in the minds of the hearers.[97]

Paul chose to work with ideas familiar to his Greek audience, offering more oblique allusions to the Scriptures than was typical of his sermons. He did so in order to contextualize his message, presenting it in a fresh light, which enabled him to then critique the deficiencies of the Athenian pantheistic system. "He takes a Greek idea of the 'spark of the divine being' in us as tied to Zeus and speaks of being made as God's children by the Creator, alluding to our being made in God's image."[98]

---

[95] Keener, *Acts, Vol. 3*, 2664.

[96] Stott, *Acts*, 286.

[97] Witherington, *The Acts*, 530.

[98] Bock, *Acts*, 568.

Paul understood his audience's cultural barriers to his radically different message. Consequently, Paul deliberately contextualized his message using rhetoric, language and concepts that would resonate with the Council even if they disagreed. This was critical to Paul's message because he not only practiced contextualization in his Athenian address, but also confrontation.

Paul and Confrontation in Acts 17

Paul was able to level some substantive criticisms against the Athenians because of his ability to contextualize his message. Paul not only acknowledged the Athenians' religiosity at the outset of his speech but offered a critique so sharp as to border on insulting. Paul pointed to their "Idol to an Unknown God" as an example of their devotion, yet told the learned Athenians "you are ignorant of the very thing you worship" (Acts 17:23b).

In attacking major ideas dear to both the Epicureans and Stoics, Paul used language that was familiar with the two schools of philosophy while still challenging their pagan beliefs. "When [Paul] speaks of 'God' as being creator, he would be opposing both Epicurean and Stoic thinking for they either thought of matter as eternal, or that Zeus was the creator."[99] The idea that God "gives everyone life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:25) would have been equally foreign to the Epicureans and the Stoics. The Stoics believed Zeus was the source of life. "Since the word for life (ζωη) was popularly associated with 'Zeus' … it is possible that Paul was saying 'Not Zeus but

[99] Reese, *Acts*, 628.

Yahweh is the source of life.'"[100] With respect to God's involvement in human events, the Epicureans believed the gods were disinterested in human affairs, and the Stoics held that the Fates determined the course of both human events and the humans who lived them.[101]

Paul raised another objectionable idea to the Athenians: "From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands" (Acts 17:26).

> Contrary to the Athenians' boast that they had originated from the soil of their Attic homeland and therefore were not like other men, Paul affirms the oneness of mankind in their creation by one God and their descent from a common ancestor. And contrary to the 'deism' that permeated the philosophies of the day, he proclaimed that this God has determined specific times … for men and 'the exact places where they should live'… so that men would seek him and find him.[102]

God did this, Paul told the Athenians, so we can seek him out and find him, for he is near us, a concept completely foreign to the Athenians' deist sensibilities. Paul quoted the Athenians' own poets to bolster a claim with which his audience universally disagreed. "In his search for a measure of common ground with his hearers, he is, so to speak, disinfecting and rebaptizing the poets' words for his own purpose."[103]

The Athenians also found Paul's assertion of a coming judgment ludicrous. Paul told the Athenians that the time during which God has overlooked the ignorance of all people everywhere was coming to an end. God "has set a day when he will judge the

---

[100] Witherington, *The Acts*, 525.

[101] Witherington, *The Acts*, 622.

[102] Longenecker, *Acts*, 272.

[103] Longenecker, *Acts*, 272.

world with justice by the man he has appointed" (Acts 17:31). The Epicureans' belief that there would be no judgment enabled them to pursue pleasure even to the point of licentiousness. The Stoics' embrace of fatalism made them incapable of considering the idea they might be judged for that over which they had no control.[104]

The Athenians' chief objection to Paul's message – the resurrection – was Paul's reason for addressing them. "Paul is turning to his major point, but once he mentions the resurrection, the speech is interrupted by the Athenians' reaction."[105] Luke recorded that upon hearing Paul speak of the resurrection "some of them sneered" (Acts 17:32). It is more likely the hecklers were of the Epicurean school. While the Stoics believed the soul endured beyond the grave, albeit not in bodily form, the Epicureans did not believe in any form of immortality. Neither party accepted the idea of a bodily resurrection.[106] "To the Greeks, the body was a prison house for the soul, and they looked forward to getting rid of the body. A resurrection, where men got bodies back, just didn't fit their thinking at all."[107]

Paul demonstrated an ability to master the tension between contextualization and confrontation in his speech at the Areopagus. His use of language, rhetoric and even the inclusion of the Greek's own poets are evidence of his ability to contextualize his message in a way that enabled him to confront the idolatrous beliefs of his audience. Lipp notes,

---

[104] Stott, *Acts*, 280-281.

[105] Bock, *Acts*, 570.

[106] Gaertner, *Acts*, 280.

[107] Reese, *Acts*, 635.

> Paul engages in critique of his audience with respect to superstition and idolatry by using Hellenistic philosophical tools and by Hellenizing biblical traditions. In so doing, he demonstrates that his movement's beliefs about God not only demonstrate it to be legitimate but even prove it to be a superior form of religion. The Christian movement embodies the philosophically elite's ideals better *and more consistently* than do the Athenians[108] (italics in original).

Bruce notes, "Probably no ten verses in Acts have formed the text for such an abundance of commentary as has gathered around Paul's Areopagus speech."[109] As a masterful demonstration of contextualization and confrontation it is easy to understand why that is the case.

Paul's Preaching in Acts 13, 14, and 17 Compared

Conrad Gempf once pointed out to John Stott something ironic concerning Paul's two speeches to pagan audiences. In Acts 14 Paul addressed an illiterate mob and in Acts 17 he spoke to the cultured elite. Gempf told Stott, "Both Paul's speeches to the pagans in the Acts seem to have been occasioned by a misunderstanding. 'The Athenians imagine two new gods, while the Lystrans think they are seeing two old ones.'"[110]

The setting for Paul's sermons in Acts 13, 14 and 17 reveal the challenges one faces in contextualizing the gospel. When Paul preached in the synagogue at Antioch Pisidia he had considerably less cultural distance to traverse than in his subsequent addresses in Acts 14 and 17. His listeners were Jews; he was recognized as an authority and thus afforded credibility before even speaking. The congregation was steeped in Jewish history. Paul even used the fact he was speaking to a diaspora synagogue to his

---

[108] Lipp, "Paul's Areopagus Speech," 576.

[109] Bruce, *Acts*, 333.

[110] Stott, *Acts*, 282.

advantage in quoting Amos, the prophet who prophesied the coming of the Babylonians that resulted in the diaspora.

He had no such advantages in Lystra. There he spoke to unlearned pagans. Though he was afforded a measure of credibility by virtue of healing a lame man, even that was misunderstood by the Lystrans. He could not appeal to a shared Jewish heritage because they had none. He was unable to reference their poets because they were illiterate. Paul appealed to what they knew: nature. Paul told them about the God who gave them rain from heaven and crops in their seasons. He spoke of the God who provided them with physical and spiritual sustenance.

In Antioch Pisidia Paul spoke unabashedly about Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophets. In Lystra and Athens he did not even mention the name of Jesus. Once invited to address the crowd at the Areopagus, Paul did not try to Judaize his audience. The pantheists in Athens lacked the necessary foundation for Paul to begin preaching as he had in Acts 13. Though they lacked a knowledge of Judaism they were an erudite audience to whom he quoted a familiar philosopher and one of their poets.

Eckhard Schnabel notes, "Paul's sermons before Jewish audiences are very different in terms of the argumentative flow and in terms of his appeal to authoritative sources … compared to his speeches given before Gentile audiences."[111] In contextualizing his message to three distinctive audiences Paul was able to confront the culture of each and begin to close the gap separating them from salvation.

---

[111] Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 377.

Conclusion: Comparing and Contrasting Peter's and Paul's Preaching

Both Peter and Paul were masters at contextualizing the gospel to their audience. Peter's three sermons in Acts 2, 3, and 4 show he understood the shrinking cultural distance in the three congregations to whom he preached. Paul's sermons in Acts 13, 14 and 17 demonstrate he understood his listeners' growing cultural distance. While Peter's audiences in Acts 2, 3 and 4 "lived" increasingly closer to the center of Judaism, Paul's audiences were farther and farther away as his ministry shifted from Jewish members of local synagogues (Acts 13) to an enraged Lystran mob (Acts 14) to pantheistic pagans meeting on a marble hilltop in Athens (Acts 17).

Peter had an intrinsic advantage because of his listeners' Jewish roots. He was able to affirm that which they already knew, creating personal connections with them through their shared belief. He was also able to choose which details of Jesus' backstory he wanted to share, because he could assume his hearers had a base of knowledge from Messianic scriptures and traditions.

Once Paul's ministry shifted toward Gentile audiences he could not make those assumptions. He was no longer preaching to the "home team." This lack of a home field advantage caused Paul to reorient the way he engaged with people who were far from God and resulted in him radically altering the way he preached. While he still proclaimed God's sovereignty in Athens, his Areopagus sermon made no mention of Jesus. The sermon resulted in some of Paul's listeners telling him, "We want to hear you again on this subject" (Acts 17:32). That Luke recorded the names of Dionysus and Damaris as two who were interested in Paul's claims is evidence Paul engaged in dialogue with some who heard him preach.

The sermons Peter and Paul preached in Acts demonstrate that an understanding of cultural distance is a critical component for the preacher who wants to foster spiritual growth in his or her listeners and is of particular importance for preachers who want their sermons to be catalysts for Millennials' spiritual growth.

CHAPTER THREE: UNDERSTANDING GOSPEL CONTEXTUALIZATION AS IT RELATES TO THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

Introduction

In his book on generational differences, Haydn Shaw explores a challenge the Church is facing unlike that of any previous generation:

> For the first time in history, we have five generations in our families, churches, and communities. *Five*. That's a huge change, and it causes quite a shake-up because every generation is pushing to be heard and understood, to find their own way, to recover what they feel the previous generation fumbled away, and to work out their parents' unfinished business. … The reason we struggle with other generations is that we don't understand them.[1]

Most preachers are intuitively attuned to one specific generation: their own. Connecting with a generation other than his or her own requires intentionality and the willingness to study that generation in order to learn its ways. The late author, preacher, and professor, Fred Craddock, taught his homiletics students that before they exegete the text, they must first exegete the audience. The preacher must clearly understand to whom he is preaching. A thorough and careful "Millennial exegesis" is required in order to understand the generation this project seeks to impact.

An exegesis of the Millennial generation will require an understanding of four areas: the unique characteristics of Millennials, Millennials' spiritual lives, how

---

[1] Haydn Shaw, *Generational IQ: Christianity Isn't Dying, Millennials Aren't the Problem, and the Future is Bright*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishing, 2015), 13.

Millennials learn, and how one contextualizes the Gospel to a culture that has little to no Christian frame of reference.

The Making of Millennials

Arriving at a consensus definition of Millennials is a challenge. The birth dates of this cohort and what to call them are disputed. Neil Howe and William Strauss were among the first to designate the generational cohort born 1982 and after as Millennials.[1] Jean Twenge refers to the generation born between 1982-1999 as "Generation Me," though she originally used that designation for those born between 1970-1999.[2] Donald Tapscott calls them "The Net Generation" in deference to their familiarity with, and reliance on, the Internet. His birth years for the cohort are 1978-1999.[3] While Haydn Shaw conforms to "Millennial" as this cohort's label, he defines them as having been born 1981-2001.[4] Southern Baptist researchers Thom and Jess Rainer call them Millennials, but recognize a different set of birth years: 1980-2000.[5] One thing is agreed on: regardless of the birth years one recognizes, this is the largest generational cohort in American history with somewhere between 78-86 million 18-35 year olds.

---

[1] Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Go to College*, (Lifecourse Associates: 2007), 19.

[2] Jean Twenge, *Generation Me – Revised and Updated: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable Than Ever Before*, (New York: Simon and Schuster), 6.

[3] Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*, (New York, McGraw Hill, 2009), 9.

[4] Haydn Shaw, *Sticking Points: How to Get 4 Generations Working Together in the 12 Places They Come Apart*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2013), 92.

[5] Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2011), 2.

This section will review literature related to Millennials including: (1) data claiming (and disclaiming) Millennials are the most selfish generation in US history, (2) the delay many Millennials have in achieving the recognized milestones of adulthood, and (3) how lofty expectations (and corresponding disappointments) affect Millennials at work, increasing their cynicism and distrust for institutions and authority.

Millennials: Selfish or Self-assured?

The study of Millennials has polarized researchers in the past decade. Some tout them as one of the most altruistic, engaged generations in US History. Others view them as selfish slackers. Many who view Millennials as a particularly selfish cohort do so based on research by Jean Twenge. She and her team applied cross-temporal meta-analysis to the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI), an instrument that does not screen for clinical narcissism but measures narcissistic personality among the normal population. Twenge and her team compared the answers of 49,818 US college students who took the NPI between 1982 and 2009. "The average college student in 2009 scored higher in narcissism than 65% of students in 1982."[6] Her research led Twenge to declare,

> If narcissism has increased, how would young people behave? In short, they would be less giving (For example, to charity), have inflated expectations, display less empathy, have higher materialism, make more unique choices (such as for baby names), cheat more often, have less committed relationships, undergo more plastic surgery, and display more anger and aggression. … Almost all of these have occurred.[7]

Some researchers disagree with both Twenge's method of data analysis and her interpretation of the study data. Kali Trzesniewski and her team of researchers argue that

---

[6] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 93.

[7] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 98.

"Generation Me" is no more narcissistic than previous generational cohorts were when they were the same age. Their chief objection derives from Twenge's data sample, which was limited to college students from conventional four-year institutions. That sample reflects only 20 percent of the US population ages 18-24, leading Trzesniewski's team to conclude that such convenience sampling puts the entire study on unstable ground.[8]

They also expressed concerns about the effects of an increase in the number of women taking the NPI. More women are represented in the later years of the NPI data because more women attend college than previously. Trzesniewski concludes the changes in NPI data could be driven by the increased agency and empowerment among women who took the inventory, as a consequence of improvements in women's physical and mental health. Twenge's claim "might simply indicate that today's generation of young adult women are more confident and assertive than previous generations of women."[9] Trzesniewski and her colleagues "have tentatively concluded that concerns over the characteristics of 'Generation Me' may not be well founded."[10]

Jeffery Jensen Arnett, who coined the term *emerging adult* to refer to 18-29 year olds who are post-adolescent but not quite adults,[11] also has a more charitable view of Millennials. Arnett claims that Millennials' twentysomething years are not as gloomy as

---

[8] Kali H. Trzesniewski, M. Brent Donnellan, and Richard W. Robins, "Is 'Generation Me' Really More Narcissistic Than Previous Generations?," *The Journal of Personality* 76:4, (August 2008): 904, accessed December 9, 2016, *EBSCO MegaFILE*, EBSCO*host.*

[9] Trzesniewski, Donnellan, and Robins, "More Narcissistic?" 913-914.

[10] Kali Trzesniewski, and M. Brent Donnellan, "Rethinking 'Generation Me': A Study of Cohort Effects From 1976-2006," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no.1 (2010): 72, accessed December 9, 2016, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/stable/41613310.

[11] Jeffery Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adults: The Winding Road from Late Teens Through the Twenties*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

portrayed in popular and academic literature. Arnett describes Millennials as self-focused rather than narcissistic. They are aware of the freedom their twenty-something years afford them and take advantage of those years to gain experiences which they know will no longer be available once they reach adulthood. Where Twenge points out the lack of civic engagement in Millennials, Arnett has a different take. He reports that Millennials are more likely to engage in volunteer work than previous generations. The number of college freshman who engaged in volunteer work increased from 66 percent in 1989 to 82 percent in 2001.[12]

Newspapers sell when columnists write about the "Dumbest Generation," their disinterest in politics and their poor voter rates. "But conventional wisdom is wrong, and grows more wrong with each election. They do care about their communities."[13] Despite Millennials' poor voting rates when compared to their parents and grandparents, "Harvard's Institute of Public Policy … shows that the youth are volunteering, raising money, and working with other people to fight poverty, pollution, disease, and the big issues confronting the world today."[14]

Delays in Achieving Adulthood

In *Generational IQ*, Haydn Shaw titled the chapter on delayed adulthood "When Will My Twentysomething Move out of the Basement?"[15] Sociologists recognize five

---

[12] Jeffery Jensen Arnett, "Suffering, Selfish, Slackers? Myths and Reality About Emerging Adults," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence,* 36, no. 1 (2007): 26, accessed July 12, 2017, doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/10.1007/s10964-006-9157-z.

[13] Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, 245.

[14] Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, 277.

[15] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 121.

adult milestones that mark the transition from child to adult: leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married and having children.

> The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy reports that, in 1960, more than two-thirds of young adults had attained all five of these markers by the age of 30; by the year 2000, this was true of less than half of females and less than a third of males.[16]

By nearly every measure, Millennials are taking longer than their parents and grandparents to reach adulthood. One of the reasons is that Millennials recognize they will live into their nineties and are in no hurry to be tied down by marriage, children and a job they are not passionate about.[17]

The degree to which Millennials are financially dependent on their parents is surprising. "Including school expenses, the average American receives $38,000 a year from her or his parents between the ages of 18 and 34."[18] Forty percent of young adults will move back home with their parents at least once during their twenties.[19] One of the reasons is because they are taking longer to finish school. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "Only 59% of students who enter a four-year college or university have graduated six years later."[20] Millennials' parents contribute to their emerging adults' dependence when they take an overactive role in their careers. Ten percent of employers have said a helicopter parent (a term referring to parents who hover

---

[16] David P. Setran, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 2.

[17] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 123.

[18] Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, 31.

[19] Kara Powell, Jake Mulder and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 98.

[20] Arnett, *Emerging Adults*, 147.

near their children) has contacted them to help negotiate their Millennial's salary and benefits. Fifteen percent of employers have had a parent complain to them for not hiring their Millennial son or daughter.[21]

The area where Millennials' delayed entry into adulthood most affects the church is their delay in marrying and having children. "According to anthropologists, cultures all over the world have a shared common belief that marriage marks not only the joining together of two persons in a lifelong partnership but also the attainment of full adult status."[22] Millennials are taking much longer to marry than their parents and grandparents. The average age of marriage is now 26.1 years for women and 28 for men. Compared to their GenXer and Boomer parents, Millennials are delaying marriage. According to Shaw, it is not so much that Millennials are marrying later, but that their parents married sooner. Millennials marry at an age similar to Traditionalists. Couples began marrying earlier at the end of World War II when military men came home eager to get on with their lives. Delaying marriage might also be one of the reasons why Millennials have a lower divorce rate than their parents and grandparents.[23]

The delay presents a challenge to churches, who do well fostering marriages and families, but are less certain how to disciple single adults. Since the age of adulthood has historically been 18 years old, students age out of their churches' youth ministries upon high school graduation. Few churches know what to do with emerging adults who can find themselves spiritually adrift between high school and when they get married.

---

[21] Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, 228.

[22] Arnett, *Emerging Adults*, 312.

[23] Shaw, *Generational IQ,* 159-160.

Millennials are delaying marriage; they are not delaying sex. As of 2010 nearly eight out of ten unmarried couples live together before marriage, with cohabitation lasting an average of two years (a 26 percent increase since 1995).[24] "Between 2006 and 2010, 48 percent of women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four moved in with a man they're not married to, according to the Centers for Disease Control."[25] Unmarried Millennials who do not cohabitate are still sexually active. Eighty-eight percent of teenagers who pledge themselves to sexual abstinence have sex before marriage.[26] Evangelicals are "most likely to say that premarital sex is always wrong (about 42 percent), yet *69 percent* of unmarried evangelicals ages twenty-one to forty-five, and 78 percent of mainline Protestants had sex with at least one partner during the last year."[27]

Millennials are black and white thinkers, except when it comes to sex. Previous generations stigmatized sex before marriage. Today "college students are shamed as cowards and prudes for retaining their virginity on campuses across the country. Before, you kept your sexual activity quiet for fear of shame; today, you keep your sexual inactivity quiet for the same reason."[28]

Delaying marriage and approaching sex as recreation has contributed to Millennials delaying procreation.[29]

---

[24] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 225.

[25] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 162-163.

[26] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 210.

[27] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 157.

[28] Chris Martin, "Sex, God, and a Generation That Can't Tell the Difference," *Millennial Evangelical*, last updated April 10, 2015, accessed April 6, 2017, http://www.millennialevangelical.com/sex-god-and-a-generation-that-cant-tell-the-difference/.

[29] Arnett, *Emerging Adults*, 2.

> Although few nonparents view having a child as a significant marker of adulthood, and few parents would say that parenthood is a *requirement* for adulthood, for themselves, personally, those in their twenties who are parents usually regard it as the most important event in their passage to adulthood.[30]

Shaw wrote, "I can't overstate how much these two trends – fewer and later marriages and fewer and later children – have rocked and will continue to rock the church."[31]

Millennials' Expectations

Millennials also have high, and in many instances unreasonable expectations in nearly every area of their lives. In 1967, only 27 percent of recent high school graduates expected they would earn masters or doctorate degrees. Today, more than half of recent college graduates indicate they expect to earn graduate or professional degrees, despite the fact that less than one in ten high school graduates ages 25-34 have done so. "During the same period, the percentage of high school students who predicted that they would be working in a professional job by age 30 also increased, from 41 percent to 63 percent." But the reality is that only 18 percent of high school graduates ages 25-34 work in professional fields.[32] Millennials are more optimistic about their chances of being good spouses and parents than their parents were at the same age. The number of high school graduates who indicated they would be a "very good" spouse or parent increased from one-third of those surveyed in 1975 to half of the Millennials who responded to the same survey in 2006. While in high school, two-thirds of Millennials predicted "that they

---

[30] Arnett, *Emerging Adults*, 319.

[31] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 190.

[32] J.M. Twenge, and S. M. Campbell, "Generational Differences in Psychological Traits and Their Impact on the Workplace." *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 23, no. 8 (2008): 866, accessed December 9, 2016, doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/10.1108/02683940810904367.

would perform in the top 20% of the population in their adult jobs."[33] Despite their high expectations, Millennials are doing less than ever before to achieve them. Twenge notes that fewer high school students do homework today than did homework in 1976.

Millennials expect a lot from their employers and bosses. "Millennials live in an era of radical transparency, powered by social and digital tools. Any leader or organization who wants to engage Millennials must learn this."[34] Millennials expect rapid promotion even when they are relatively new on the job. They desire frequent positive feedback and expect flexibility and freedom from their work environment.[35] Their expectations are not necessarily being met. Sean Lyons, co-editor of *Managing the New Workforce: International Perspectives on the Millennial Generation*, notes that Millennials have "the highest likelihood of having unmet expectations with respect to their careers and the lowest levels of satisfaction with their careers at the stage that they're at."[36]

Millennials' high expectations have been so frequently disappointed that it is fueling their cynicism toward institutions and authority. Millennials are generally

---

[33] Jean Twenge, "Generational Changes and their Impact in the Classroom: Teaching Generation Me." *Medical Education* 43, no. 5 (2009): 401.

[34] "How Technology is Changing Millennial Faith," Barna Group, last updated October 15, 2013, accessed October 9, 2017, https://www.barna.com/research/how-technology-is-changing-millennial-faith/.

[35] Lucy Cennamo, and Dianne Gardner, "Generational Differences in Work Values, Outcomes and Person-Organization Values Fit," *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 23, no. 8 (2008): 891. doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/10.1108/02683940810904385.

[36] Joel Stein, "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation," *Time*, May 9, 2013, accessed December 9, 2016. http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/.

distrustful of others and have detached from traditional institutions.[37] They are the first generation in the modern era to be drowning under a sea of college debt while, at the same time, having to deal with poverty, unemployment and the realization they will earn less than their parents and grandparents did in their lifetimes.[38] "High expectations can be the stuff of inspiration, but more often they set GenMe up for bitter disappointment."[39]

The Spiritual Lives of Millennials

Jean Twenge, psychologist and professor at San Diego State University, has published extensively on Millennials, whom she has dubbed "Generation Me." Her book by that same name declared Millennials to be the most narcissistic generation in history[40] and launched Twenge into the national spotlight. While her work has not focused as much on Millennials' religious lives as it has other areas, an article in which she explored Millennials' religious orientation noted, "Clearly, this is a time of dramatic change in the religious landscape of the United States."[41] Other researchers confirm Twenge's statement.

Millennials share similarities with the spiritual lives of previous generational cohorts, but they also exhibit some significant differences from their Boomer and GenXer

---

[37] *Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends*, Pew Research Center (March 2014): 7, accessed June 1, 2017, http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2014/03/2014-03-07_generations-report-version-for-web.pdf.

[38] *Millennials in Adulthood*, 8.

[39] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 172.

[40] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 96.

[41] J. M. Twenge, J. J. Exline, J. B. Grubbs, Ramya Sastry, and Keith Campbell, "Generational and Time Differences in American Adolescents: Religious Orientation, 1966-2014," *PLOS One* 10, no. 5 (2015): 14, accessed December 9, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0121454.

parents. This section will (1) look at four studies which explored Millennials' religious lives, (2) compare and contrast the spiritual beliefs and practices of Millennials with their parents' generational cohorts, and (3) examine how Millennials' spiritual lives are being coopted by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), a heretical distortion of Christianity.

The Studies

The *National Study on Youth and Religion* (NSYR) was conducted from July 2002 to March 2003. Sociologist Christian Smith and his team contacted 3,290 random US households that contained at least one teen, age 13-17, spoke with a parent for 30 minutes, and a randomly selected household teen for 50 minutes.[42] The following spring and summer the team conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 267 of those teens in 45 states. Two years later Smith's team followed up with 122 of those same respondents and then again in 2007 and 2008. Their goal was to see how the teens' life conditions shaped their lives as emerging adults in the years between the two interviews.[43] Smith's research has been cited among researchers as influential in understanding the spiritual lives of Millennials.

Religion Among the Millennials is a research project conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2010. Pew used data from the *General Social Surveys* and *Gallup Surveys* which "are used primarily for cohort analyses, which compare young adults

---

[42] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*," (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

[43] Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-4.

today with previous generations when they were in their 20s and early 30s."[44] The study notes there is some overlap between generational cohorts since the data is broken down according to age: 18-29 year olds and over-30 year olds. As a result, there are some younger GenXers in the 18-29-year-old group.

Two studies, *Monitoring the Future* and the *American Freshman Survey*, form the basis for the findings of a team led by Jean Twenge that looked at the differences in religious orientation of Millennials from previous generational cohorts. *Monitoring the Future* is an annual survey of US twelfth graders, tenth graders and eighth graders. Twenge's team examined survey data for twelfth graders from 1976-2013 and for eighth and tenth graders from 1991-2013. The *American Freshman Survey* is an annual survey of incoming college students. Data for this study included respondents from 1966-2013.[45] As with previous studies, Twenge used a method of evaluation she popularized called cross-temporal meta-analysis to compare large groups of people from different time periods. The objective of cross-temporal meta-analysis is to compare cohorts when each was the same age. It relies on large data sets from well-known surveys that are highly valid.[46]

---

[44] Allison Pond, Gregory Smith, and Scott Clement, "Religion Among the Millennials," *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, (April 15, 2010): 2, accessed December 9, 2016, http://www.pewforum.org/files/2010/02/millennials-report.pdf.

[45] Twenge, et al, "Generational and Time Differences," 1.

[46] Jean M. Twenge, Sara Konrath, Joshua D. Foster, W. Keith Campbell, and Brad J. Bushman, "Egos Inflating Over Time: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory," *Journal of Personality* 76, no. 4 (2008): 875.

Millennials' Beliefs and Practices

With a couple of exceptions, Millennials' religious beliefs largely reflect the religious beliefs of their parents. The NSYR determined that "the majority of US teenagers tend to be quite like their parents when it comes to religion." The majority of teens, like their parents, believe in God and divine judgment.[47] Earlier (2003) data from the NSYR showed that contrary to popular stereotypes, parents play an important role in their teens' spiritual lives: "The single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents."[48] When Smith's team conducted their 2005 and 2007 follow-up interviews with the initial NSYR teens, whom Smith refers to as emerging adults, they reported,

> Emerging adults today appear no less religious than those of previous decades on at least some measures. Today's emerging adults are hardly different at all from those of prior decades when it comes to daily prayer, Bible beliefs, and strong religious affiliation. Not much appears to have changed.[49]

Data from the Pew study confirms Smith's findings: "Millennials' level of belief in God resembles that seen among GenXers when they were roughly the same age."[50] They are just as likely as their elders to believe in life after death, heaven, hell and miracles. Among mainline Protestants and in historically black Protestant churches Millennials "exhibit somewhat higher levels of belief than their elders."[51] While the Pew data shows that Millennials hold some orthodox views including some that are even more

---

[47] Smith and Lundquist, *Soul Searching*, 68.

[48] Smith and Lundquist, *Soul Searching*, 261.

[49] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 95.

[50] Pond, Smith, and Clement, "Religion Among the Millennials," 16.

[51] Pond, Smith, and Clement, "Religion Among the Millennials," 16.

traditional than their parents, they hold those views more loosely and interpret them differently. Evangelical Millennials are just as likely, for example, to see the Bible as the Word of God but less likely than older evangelicals to interpret the Bible literally. They are more likely than older Americans to say their faith is the single path to salvation but are more open to multiple ways of interpreting their religion.[52]

Millennials' beliefs are not the same as previous cohorts in every area. Thirty-five percent of Millennials claim to be "Nones," that is, they have no religious preference. This was the highest percentage of Nones in a cohort that Pew has ever polled. While that study has been widely publicized and has become the source for much hand wringing, a closer examination reveals the news might not be as bad as it initially appears. Some of this increase could be explained because previous unchurched respondents chose "Christian" on the survey in an effort to avoid the social stigma that was previously directed at Nones. Additionally, 3.5 million Nones who are weekly church attenders chose that category because they do not want to be labeled and 68 percent of Nones believe in the existence of God.[53] More research needs to be done to fully understand the increase in Millennial Nones.

Millennials differ from Traditionalists by being more accepting of evolution and more accepting of abortion. Where Millennials differ most from older cohorts is with respect to an area where politics, social policy, and religion intersect: LGBT issues. Seventy percent of Millennials favor allowing gay and lesbian parents to adopt children, twelve percentage points more than Generation X, the cohort with the next highest level

---

[52] Pond, Smith, and Clement, "Religion Among the Millennials," 14-17.

[53] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 185-186.

of support (52 percent of Boomers and 42 percent of Traditionalists support allowing gays and lesbians to adopt).[54] Seventy percent of Millennials believe religious groups are alienating people because they are too judgmental of gays and lesbians, and about a quarter of Millennials who have disaffiliated from their church say their church's negative teaching on LGBT issues was a factor.[55]

One of Smith's major findings from the NSYR explains why there is so little rancor between Millennials and older cohorts where they disagree: Millennials don't hold their religious beliefs as tightly as previous generations. For Millennials, religion is not worth getting worked up over; it is for most, no big deal. Smith noted,

> To rightly understand the religious and spiritual lives of the vast majority of US teenagers, we need to see that religion is … generally viewed by most teenagers, religious and nonreligious alike, as something that simply is, that it is just not the kind of thing worth getting worked up about one way or the other.[56]

Millennials' attitudes seem to be, as Smith has titled one of the chapters in *Soul Searching*, "God, Religion, Whatever."[57] Twenge's research confirms that Millennials' "whatever attitude" is not confined to areas of religion. She writes that they are "not just Generation Me; they're Generation Whatever."[58]

The emerging adults Smith interviewed in his follow-up to the NSYR followed the same trajectory he observed when they were teens. Their approach to religion is that it

---

[54] Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivers and Robert P. Jones, "A Shifting Landscape: A Decade of Change in American Attitudes about Same-sex Marriage and LGBT Issues," (February 24, 2014), 3, Public Religion Research Institute, accessed October 28, 2017, https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014.LGBT_REPORT-1.pdf.

[55] Cox, Navarro-Rivers and Jones, "A Shifting Landscape," 19-20.

[56] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 124.

[57] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 118.

[58] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 181.

is a fine thing, but for most of them it simply does not matter that much. The Millennials Smith interviewed saw religion as useful for teaching good behavior, something they connected with an earlier life phase when parents were trying to inculcate morality into their lives. Religion was just another area for which they depended on their parents while they were growing up. But as Smith noted "Independent persons do not keep doing all the things that belong to their earlier dependence." Though they do not consciously think in terms of graduating from their faith, Millennials unconsciously distance themselves from their parents' faith as they spread their wings.[59]

Biblically Illiterate

In his 2010 address to The Association of Theological Schools, Executive Director Daniel Aleshire told the assembly that the church "is in as much need of educated lay persons as it is educated ministers."[60] Pastors are aging, and fewer college students are considering ministry as a vocation. More and more churches may find themselves relying on lay persons and tent-making pastors for leadership in their churches, yet the Millennials who may be called on to provide that leadership are biblically illiterate.

There seems to be a disconnect between Millennials' attitudes about the Bible and their actions with respect to the Bible. Parents gave children's Bibles to their Millennials when they were young, but the evidence seems to show that they expected their kids to

---

[59] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 150.

[60] Daniel Aleshire, "The Future Has Arrived: Changing Theological Education in a Changed World," *Theological Education* 46, no. 2 (2011): 77.

read them for themselves. Consequently, Millennials "who report that the Bible is very important to their faith are often those who also report that they have seldom read it."[61]

This problem has become so pervasive in some college religious studies classrooms that professors are developing strategies to address it. Caryn Riswold is a professor of religion and women's studies at Illinois College. She has experienced more and more students who have no frame of reference for understanding terms that are familiar to most Christians as the number of student Nones in her class has grown. She refers to this as "lacking Christian privilege," and notes she has adjusted her teaching to be sensitive to students who do not have this privilege.[62]

When Thom Rainer and Jess Rainer surveyed 1,200 Millennials they determined how many of them could be categorized as Evangelicals. They asked respondents about seven statements consistent with historical Evangelicalism. In order for respondents in their study to be considered Evangelicals, individuals had to be born again Christians who also strongly:

- Agree that the Bible is the accurate, written Word of God.
- Agree that they personally have the responsibility to tell others about their religious beliefs.
- Agree that their religious faith is important in their lives.
- Agree that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and rules the universe today.
- Agree that salvation is available through grace alone.
- Disagree that Jesus committed sins while on earth.
- Disagree that Satan is not a living being but just a symbol of evil.

---

[61] Jo-Ann A. Brant, "The Power of the Spoken Word: Performance-Based Pedagogy," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 28, no.2 (2010): 5.

[62] Caryn D. Riswold, "Teaching the College 'Nones': Christian Privilege and the Religion Professor," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 18, no. 2 (2015): 133-134.

"Only 6 percent of Millennials could affirm the statements above."[63] Rainer estimates that only 15 percent of Millennials are what he calls "true Christians." It is possible that many Millennials are aware of the above statements and simply disagree with them. But the reason many self-professing born-again Millennials cannot enunciate basic tenants of the Christian faith might be because they do not read their Bibles. Rainer's research indicated that two-thirds of Millennials "rarely or never" read their Bibles. Eight out of ten Millennials "rarely or never" meet with others to study the Bible (or any other sacred writing).[64] One can hardly expect Millennials to articulate orthodox theology, Christology, soteriology, or any other historical doctrines of the Christian faith. They are biblically illiterate.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

One of the more discouraging findings of the *National Study on Youth and Religion* was that "the de facto dominant religion among contemporary US teenagers is what we might well call 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.' Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) distorts Christianity in five ways that are summarized by the following statements:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die."[65]

---

[63] Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, 232.

[64] Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, 239.

[65] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163.

MTD is about approaching life with a moralistic framework and providing therapeutic benefits for its participants. In MTD the chief goal of all major world religions is to help one be good, and the chief benefit God provides is to feel good about one's self.

Rejecting the idea that sin requires redemption, MTD teaches that the way to get to heaven is to simply be good. Gabe Lyons labels adherents of MTD "cultural Christians" noting that they don't obsess about the afterlife. They believe most people will go to heaven by virtue of having been good. Only really bad people, "murderers, pedophiles, and men who don't pay child support,"[66] are excluded from MTD's heaven. This explains why many Millennials end up leaving Christianity. Since most US teens think religion is about being good, once they recognize that one does not have to be religious to be good they conclude religion is unnecessary. "In other words, the thing religion specializes in does not actually require religion to achieve."[67]

When one of the chief goals of religious involvement is being good and the chief benefit of religion is to feel good, religious involvement becomes consumer driven. The church is no longer the body of Christ but a vendor of religious goods and services. Adherents of MTD ask the wrong questions, each of which is self-focused:

> "Do I like this church? Am I getting something out of this church? Do I feel good after going to this church?" While we're asking those questions, Jesus asks, "Is this church faithful to my message? Does it follow my example? Does it follow my great commission to go everywhere and preach the gospel?" He has a different agenda."[68]

---

[66] Gabe Lyons, *The Next Christians: Seven Ways You Can Live the Gospel and Restore the World*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishing, 2010), 43.

[67] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 155.

[68] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 220.

The consumer-driven nature of the MTD infected church is evident in the way Shaw summarizes the five tenants of MTD as "Be Good, Feel Good, Live Your Life (God Is Watching)." Not only is the goal of MTD to be good and the chief benefit to feel good, Shaw observes that the god of MTD more closely resembles the deist god of the Enlightenment than the God of orthodox Christianity. In MTD God is distant, unobtrusive and disengaged and only steps in when one has a problem that she cannot handle herself.[69]

> This God is not demanding. He actually can't be, because his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. In short, God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves and does not become too personally involved in the process.[70]

According to Shaw "moralistic therapeutic deism is the single biggest problem we have in the church, and in reaching Millennials."[71]

MTD is not unique to Millennials. As has been noted previously, Millennials' faith mirrors the faith of their parents. While popular thought has suggested Millennials differ significantly from their parents, Smith and Denton's research showed "Few teenagers today are rejecting or reacting against the adult religion into which they are being socialized. Rather, most are living out their religious lives in very conventional and accommodating ways." Millennials adopted MTD not because they rejected the religion of their parents but because they embraced it.[72]

---

[69] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 110.

[70] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 107.

[71] Haydn Shaw, interviewed by the author, February 17, 2017.

[72] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 170.

MTD is fueled by Millennials' adoption of expressive individualism, which one denominational executive has called a "debacle" and the most serious problem of our age.[73] Millennials learned individualism from their parents. Boomers came of age during the church growth era and experienced churches that were eager to grow and therefore catered to their "felt needs." They evaluated their church experience from an individualistic, consumer-driven point of view. "Am *I* happy? Are the minister's sermons relevant to *my* life?"[74] (italics in original) Church became another commodity that could be tailored to meet Boomers' and GenXers' personal expectations. Then they raised Millennial children who, by and large, adopted their parents' version of MTD. They became "spiritual consumers uniquely authorized as autonomous individuals to pick and choose in the religious market whatever products they [found] satisfying or fulfilling at the moment."[75]

In an article in which he discussed the work of mid-1960s sociologist Philip Rieff, Chad Lakies asserts that preachers may have contributed to Millennials' adoption of MTD. Rieff suggested that the Church, in order to maintain its relevance to society, should move toward a therapeutic model and that pastors and priests should become the therapists.

> The year after Rieff's bombshell was published, the classic work by the eminent sociologist Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy,* was released. Berger further cemented the perception that religion had become therapeutic, saying that in order

---

[73] Harold L. Senkbeil, "Engaging our Culture Faithfully," *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 4 (2014): 295.

[74] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 53.

[75] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 176.

> for religion to be considered 'relevant' to individual lives (as a matter of religion's maintaining a plausible structure), it must be acknowledged as useful.[76]

The result was the relegation of religion into pragmatic and utilitarian spheres. What were previously viewed as secondary benefits of religion, things like happiness and personal well-being, came to be viewed as the primary goals of faith.[77] The church's emphasis in the 1980s and 1990s on meeting the felt needs of seekers added momentum to the shift toward a more utilitarian approach to religion. The most important question MTD adherents ask now is "what can religion do for me?" This has resulted in therapeutic preaching, which both reflects and perpetuates therapeutic church culture. Lakies' rather depressing conclusion is that "The church really does not have a problem making disciples at all. … The church has been making disciples of moralistic therapeutic deism."[78]

Along with their adoption of expressive individualism and the resulting utilitarian approach to religion, Millennials have embraced a form of tolerance that accepts everything except open disagreement with another individual's choices. This includes one's choice of religion. Millennials view religion as a personal, private choice which is left up to each individual. In this new climate of tolerance "nobody can tell anyone else what's right for him or her."[79] Millennials' approbation of tolerance has had some positive results. Their generation is more accepting of people who are marginalized,

---

[76] Chad Lakies, "Candy Machine God, or, Going to Church without Going to Church: Millennials and the Future of the Christian Faith," *Missio Apostolica: Journal of Lutheran Society for Missiology* 21, no. 1 (May 2013): 18.

[77] Lakies, "Candy Machine God," 18.

[78] Lakies, "Candy Machine God," 24.

[79] Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 162.

people against whom previous generational cohorts may even have discriminated. But as Millennials have become more militant in their tolerance they have distorted the meaning of the word. Where tolerance once meant that individuals could agree to disagree, that they could hold divergent views and still get along, this new deviant form of tolerance does not allow for disagreement. Many Millennials have come to view any criticism of their unchristian behavior as a violation of one of their prime directives: do not judge. In the resulting moral chaos each Millennial becomes his or her own source and standard of moral knowledge and authority "and individual self-fulfillment [becomes] the preoccupying purpose of life."[80]

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism cannot survive on its own. It needs a host religion to infect and it is not fussy. It is accurate, therefore, to refer to MTD in terms like Moralistic Therapeutic Christianity, Moralistic Therapeutic Judaism and Moralistic Therapeutic Buddhism. Smith and Denton stress:

> We are also not saying than anyone has founded an official religion by the name of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, nor that most U.S. teenagers have abandoned their religious denominations and congregations to practice it elsewhere or under another name. Rather, it seems that the latter is simply colonizing many established religious traditions and congregations in the United States, that it is becoming the new spirit living in the old body.[81]

People are shaped by the images and ideas that impact them during their formative years. The images and ideas that have shaped Millennials are best understood through the lens of popular culture.[82] The movies they grew up with and the songs they

---

[80] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 173.

[81] Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 165.

[82] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 14.

sang shaped Millennials. The widespread adoption of MTD is easier to understand when one recognizes that Millennials are the generation who grew up watching a parade of Disney characters eschew parental and societal expectations and norms, choosing instead to pursue hyper-individuality. Rebellious 16-year-old Ariel does not want to live under the sea; she wants more. The most familiar song in *The Little Mermaid* is an anthem to individuality. The film grossed $109 million at the US box-office, another $40 million in video rentals, and Disney sold 30 million VHS tapes, DVDs and laser discs that found their way into the homes in which Millennials grew up.[83] These films were the proxy babysitters for an entire generation that viewed Ariel's story (and Belle's and Aladdin's and Mulan's) over and over until they could repeat the song lyrics and even the lines of dialogue from memory. It was easier for their parents than taking time to read to them from their children's Bibles.

Millennials and Learning

One of the most significant challenges teachers of Millennials face in confronting MTD is the realization that the strategies by which Baby Boomers and GenXers learned are inadequate for teaching Millennials. With the median age of college faculty at 50-53 years, the "connection between college teachers and college students may be even more difficult to create – and maintain."[84] The same might be said of the connection between

[83] "*The Little Mermaid*," Internet Movie Database, accessed October 29, 2017, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097757/.

[84] Courtney Bracy, Sandra Bevill and Terry D. Roach, "The Millennial Generation: Recommendations for Overcoming Teaching Challenges," *Proceedings of the Academy of Educational Leadership* 15, no. 2 (2010): 21.

pastors and Millennial parishioners since the average age of pastors in America is 55 years.[85] Millennials

> have grown up digital and they're living in the twenty-first century, but the education system in many places is lagging at least 100 years behind. The model of education that still prevails today was designed for the Industrial age. It revolves around the teacher who delivers a one-size-fits-all, one-way lecture. The student, working alone, is expected to absorb the content delivered by the teacher. This might have been good for the mass production economy, but it doesn't deliver for the challenges of the digital economy, or for [Millennials.][86]

The optimum learning environment for Millennials is one in which (1) informality has replaced the highly-structured environments of the past, (2) collaborative learning has replaced the top-down approach of the lecture model, (3) a reliance on technology affords Millennials more opportunity for independent and inductive learning, and (4) the context for learning is as important as the lessons being learned.

The Informal Classroom

Millennials prefer unstructured learning to the rigidly structured classroom environments of the past. Millennials are informal learners and although they desire collaboration among classmates, they learn well on their own and at their own pace. The classroom/lecture model that was the staple of previous generations is ineffective with Millennials. "Formal learning is like riding a bus: the driver decides where the bus is going; the passengers are along for the ride. Informal learning is like riding a bike: the rider chooses the destination, the speed, and the route."[87] Previous generational cohorts

---

[85] "The Aging of America's Pastors," The Barna Group, last modified March 1, 2017, accessed October 26, 2017, https://www.barna.com/research/aging-americas-pastors/.

[86] Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, 122.

[87] Akanksha Sharma, "Designing Learning for Millennials," *Training and Development* 70, no. 6 (2016): 65.

relied on their teachers and professors not just as "bus drivers" but as tour guides who guided the classroom discussion toward each day's learning objective. They were the experts to whom the students looked for answers. Today's students are less likely to be impressed by the credentials of their professors. Being designated an expert may even suppress learning. "Students … believe in equality and bristle at authoritarian and hierarchical structures."[88] The more a professor portrays herself as an expert the less likely the classroom discussion that is so valued by Millennials will take place. Where previous generations learned from the "traditional talking-head 'sage on the stage'" Millennials are more comfortable and more open to learning from "the group facilitator, orchestrator of collaborative knowledge creation … 'guide on the side.'"[89] Millennials learn best when teachers "engage in dialogue, not lecture."[90]

Their desire for informal learning may be a result of Millennials' decreased attention spans. Twenge observed that "Generation Me students have high IQs, but little desire to read long texts."[91] Millennials prefer to learn through videos and interactive content.

---

[88] Roehling, Patricia Vincent, Thomas Lee Vander Kooi, Stephanie Dykema, Brooke Quisenberry, and Chelsea Vandlen, "Engaging the Millennial Generation in Class Discussions," *College Teaching* 59, no. 1 (2011): 5, accessed October 24, 2016, http://www.informaworld.com/openurl?genre=article&id=doi:10.1080/87567555.2010.484035.

[89] Ronald A. Berk, "Teaching Strategies for the Net Generation," *Teaching and Learning Journal* 3 no. 2: 17, accessed December 9, 2016, http://www.ronberk.com/articles/2009_strategies.pdf.

[90] Roehling, et al., "Engaging the Millennial Generation," 2.

[91] Jean Twenge, "Generational Changes and Their Impact in the Classroom: Teaching Generation Me," *Medical Education* 43 no. 5: 398.

Collaborative Learning

Millennials' affinity for more informal learning is expressed in their preference for collaborative learning. Students enjoy working in groups as is demonstrated by *Reacting*, an educational model pioneered by Mark Carnes. *Reacting* uses role-playing games to teach history. Adam Porter adopted the strategy for teaching New Testament and Acts. He assigns students to groups based on first-century factions: Pharisees, Zealots, Christians and Sadducees. Students research their group's beliefs and present their findings to the class. Porter then has the students work through an account like the trial of Jesus before Pilate, or the trial of Paul before Agrippa. Porter's students embrace the approach because they like collaboration and enjoy the competition of courtroom drama. Porter noted an increase in class attendance and engagement as a result of implementing *Reacting*.[92]

Jo-Ann Brant takes a similar approach in her religious-studies classroom by having students learn Bible narratives before retelling them as stories to small groups. Learning these narratives requires them to engage in the same research they might use in writing a paper. When students know they will be performing in front of classmates they take the assignment seriously.[93] In addition to learning Bible stories which might be unfamiliar to them, Brant's students discover the orality of Scripture:

> Understanding that the Bible was written for oral transmission and then listening to it can invigorate my students' reception. Read silently, the repetitive material in the prophets or the Gospel of John strikes them as superfluous and tedious. But

[92] Adam L. Porter, "Role-Playing and Religion: Using Games to Educate Millennials," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 11 no. 4 (2008): 230-235.

[93] Brant, "Performance-Based Pedagogy," 7.

> when scripture becomes a performance text, the repetition becomes a refrain that the audience can anticipate and speak.[94]

Some instructors have observed higher test scores in classrooms where students "participated in frequent peer discussion."[95]

Technology and Its Effect on Millennials' Learning

One of the ways teachers can promote collaboration between their Millennial students is to leverage technology to create "online collaborative learning."[96] When forty percent of newborns have a social media profile created for them by their parents[97] it is safe to say that Millennials are digital natives. Having grown up in a world where computers are ubiquitous, Millennials "instinctively turn first to the internet to communicate, understand, learn, find, and do many things."[98] Ronald Berk characterizes Millennials as having been "born with a chip." Ninety-seven percent of Millennials own a computer; 94 percent own a cell phone; 99 percent conduct research and do homework using the Internet.[99] "If you look back over the last 20 years, clearly the most significant change affecting youth is the rise of the computer, the Internet, and other digital technologies."[100]

---

[94] Brant, "Performance-Based Pedagogy," 9.

[95] Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, 132.

[96] Sharma, "Learning for Millennials," 62.

[97] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 86.

[98] Whitney Bauman, Joseph Marchal, Karline McLain, Maureen O'Connell and Sara Patterson, "Teaching the Millennial Generation in the Religious and Theological Studies Classroom," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 17 no. 4, (October 2014): 303.

[99] Berk, "Teaching Strategies," 9.

[100] Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, 17.

The fluency with which Millennials engage the Internet enables them to conduct research independently. More than any previous generation, Millennials learn inductively by leveraging the Internet for independent discovery. Classrooms that limit lecturing and demonstrate how to access expertise that is available to them via the Internet work best. At the same time, Tapscott cautions that Millennials are not impressed with gadgetry for the sake of gadgetry.[101] While Boomers and GenXers might stare in amazement at the latest thingamajig, Millennials prefer "moderate use of technology in the classroom" and are far more impressed by what technology enables them to do rather than the technology itself.[102] Trying to impress Millennials with technology for technology's sake is like trying to impress a fish with water. The fish is unaware of the water in which it swims; for a fish, water is merely a means to go somewhere. Millennials view technology the same way and are unimpressed by educators who approach technology without intentionality. But when Millennials perceive the benefit of technology they respond positively.

In recent years educators have expressed some concerns relating to Millennials' use of technology. First, while Millennials have developed investigative skills by conducting research on the Internet, they often lack the discernment necessary to evaluate a source for its validity. In addition, they might not understand the ramifications of their own contributions to the Internet.

> Without proper tools for critical reflection or self-awareness, they are likely to drown in issues of discernment and discretion that face them as they generate their own contributions to this vast sea of information through blogs,

---

[101] Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, 148.

[102] Bracy, Bevill and Roach, "Recommendations," 23.

> commentary, and images with a kind of permanency that few students truly grasp.[103]

Second, there is concern that technology's pervasiveness in Millennials' lives is re-wiring their minds.[104] While it has increased their ability to multitask it may be decreasing their ability to focus on a single task. "Increasingly, neuroscience is being called upon to answer questions about how Internet cultures are shaping our minds: How are reading skills, memory, sociality, attention and focus being transformed?"[105] As these questions continue to be explored, the answers will shape our understanding of how technology affects Millennials.

Context Matters

For Millennials, learning context and learning content are closely related. The context in which they learn matters as much as the content of what they are learning.[106] Two important elements contribute to their learning context: their interaction with peers and their perception of their teacher.

One of the unique characteristics Tapscott observes of Millennials is that "they are the collaboration and relationship generation."[107] The two go hand in hand. Though much of their collaboration takes place over technology, Millennials crave face-to-face interaction with their peers. "Despite the hours that they spend in [text messaging] and

---

[103] Bauman, Marchal, McLain, O'Connell and Patterson, "Millennial Generation," 309.

[104] Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, 29.

[105] Suparna Choudhury and Kelly A. McKinney, "Digital Media, the Developing Brain and the Interpretive Plasticity of Neuroplasticity," *Transcultural Psychology* 50, no.2 (2013): 196.

[106] Sharma, "Learning for Millennials," 61.

[107] Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, 35.

social media communications, they also gravitate toward activities that promote and reinforce in-person conversation, interaction, and collaboration."[108] Millennials view the classroom and workplace as opportunities for social interaction. Their sense of social belonging is tied to friendships that take place at school and, for older Millennials, at work. The genesis of their desire to work together with peers is different from previous generations. Beginning with Boomers, successive generations have become increasingly resistant to institutions. Previous generations had greater loyalty to institutions and demonstrated that loyalty through cooperative efforts that sustained the institutions to which they belonged, but Millennials identify more with social groups than they do institutions.[109]

How Millennials interact with their teachers also contributes to their learning context. They no longer learn from someone just because that person is exceptionally credentialed. They do not automatically respect the experts the way Traditionalists did. They want something more: they want to know their teachers' "why," and when they do they are more likely to engage with his or her "what" and "how." Openness and authenticity are important. The more a Millennial understands how her instructor got where she is and the choices and decisions that lead to the path she chose, the more a Millennial will feel a connection to her teacher and embrace her instruction.[110]

---

[108] Berk, "Teaching Strategies," 11.

[109] Brian E. Eck, Scott White, and David N. Entwistle, "Teaching Integration to Postmodern and Millennial Students: Implications for the Classroom," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 35 no. 2 (2016): 133.

[110] David H. Roberts, Lori R. Newman and Richard M. Schwartzstein, "Twelve Tips for Facilitating Millennials' Learning," *Medical Teacher* 34 (2012), 276.

Millennials want their teachers to promote dialogue in the classroom. They want to know their opinions have been heard and considered. A professor's attitude makes a difference in whether or not Millennial students will engage in dialogue or whether they will sit silently checking their social media feeds. When professors openly disagree with students, when they portray themselves as experts and students as neophytes, they violate the unspoken egalitarian contract that many Millennials bring to the classroom.

> To feel comfortable and safe enough in the classroom to share one's thoughts and opinions, students must perceive that their professors are open to student opinions, and that their grades and their professors' opinions of them will not be negatively affected by what they say in a discussion.[111]

Millennials crave informal learning environments, the collaboration of their peers in learning, the ability to use technology to learn independently and inductively, and an egalitarian context for learning that acknowledges teachers are learners and learners are teachers. Millennials are poised to become the most highly educated generation in American history.[112] Spiritually speaking, however, they "are often better educated in almost every other area of their lives than in their faith."[113]

Contextualizing the Gospel

Missiologists Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz articulate the importance of contextualization in their book *Urban Ministry*: "The gospel needs to be contextualized in order for the recipient to understand its significance with reference to his or her

---

[111] Roehling, et al., "Engaging Millennials," 3.

[112] Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital*, 123.

[113] Aleshire, "The Future," 77.

relationship with God."[114] Preachers in the United States can no longer assume that contextualization is unnecessary in the communities they serve. The most recent data from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) reveals what many preachers have come to intuit: Christians are no longer the home team. Only 65 percent of Americans identify with Christianity of any variety (Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox). The percentage of Americans who are unaffiliated (that is, who identify as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular") has tripled since the early 1990s to 24 percent. For Millennials, the proportion of unaffiliated is even larger. Nearly one-third of Americans under age 30 identify as Nones. The state where the researcher lives is consistent with the rest of the United States. One in four Michiganders self-identify as unaffiliated with respect to religion.[115] Every sermon is now an address given in the context of an "away game," and must be crafted to contextualize the message to those who hear it. The time has come, as Alan Hirsch writes, "to learn that all our attempts to communicate the gospel are now cross-cultural." [116]

Contextualizing the Sermon

When missiologists speak about contextualization, their broader meaning refers to incarnating the Gospel to a culture so it is communicated in a way that can be understood by a culture unfamiliar with it. Jesus is God contextualized (incarnate); He set aside

---

[114] Harvie Conn, and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 268.

[115] Daniel Cox, and Robert P. Jones, "Americans Changing Religious Identity: Findings from the 2016 American Values Atlas," last updated September 6, 2017, accessed October 30, 2017, https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

[116] Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church,* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 58.

transcendence to come to Earth. Christians who commit to contextualizing the Gospel will similarly incarnate wherever God plants them. They will put down roots, engage with neighbors, and as Eugene Peterson paraphrases John's description of Jesus' incarnation in John 1:14, "move into the neighborhood." To speak more narrowly of contextualizing the sermon means to preach so the listener is able to connect with the message despite being separated from the preacher by race, culture, language or generational differences. Baby Boomer and GenXer preachers lack the framework to naturally connect with Millennial listeners. When one hears "JFK, the average Boomer and GenXer thinks of former president John F. Kennedy. The average Millennial thinks about the airport."[117]

A cultural gap exists between Millennials and previous generations. "Until the early 1960s a broad-based Judeo-Christian culture informed our society."[118] Harold Senkbeil, a Lutheran (Missouri Synod) pastor who has lived long enough to experience the shift away from that culture wrote, "There has been a tectonic shift in the foundations of civilization in the West. … Objective truth is now viewed much like a daguerreotype in a world of flashy full-color imagery, a quaint vestige of bygone times."[119]

The Apostle Paul preached during a time of shifting worldviews. He explained how he contextualized the gospel to cultures that were similar to his, and to those with significant differences:

---

[117] David A Miller, and Ryan Leak, "Millennials in Leadership," Slingshot Group, (2015), 9, accessed July 28, 2015, http://slingshotgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2015/05/Millennial_eBook_R5.pdf?goal=0_6b0d6beef6-116669a6ed-108491781.

[118] Alan J. Roxburgh, and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What it Is, Why it Matters, How to Become One*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 79.

[119] Senkbeil, "Engaging our Culture," 294.

> To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:20-23).

Paul understood that "if we are serious about identifying with a given people group, there is going to be a cost, whether that be in adopting a culture not our own or giving up personal freedoms."[120]

Contextualization is not without challenges. Followers of Jesus who grew up in a Christian context can find it difficult to change. One of the challenges Erwin McManus and the church he leads experienced when they decided to make the gospel accessible to South Central Los Angeles was saying goodbye to the familiar way of doing church. He noted that it is difficult for many Christians to let go of the places where they met God, the context in which God became real, and the songs they sang when God's presence first overwhelmed their hearts – what he calls, "the very best of our experience with God. Yet God calls us to take the memories with us but to leave the memorabilia behind."[121] Culture constantly changes and for the gospel to be understood in shifting contexts "it has to be communicated in the language of those to whom it is addressed and has to be clothed in symbols which are meaningful to them."[122] When a church refuses to change

---

[120] Alan Hirsch, and Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 237.

[121] Erwin McManus, *An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2013), 84.

[122] Lesslie Newbigen, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co., 1989), 187.

in order to reach their culture they are in danger of mistaking the mission of the church for the church itself becoming the mission.[123]

Another challenge in contextualization is that the church might capitulate to culture in an effort to reach that culture's people. Senkbeil warns, "If you marry the culture you are destined to become an early widow."[124] An example of marrying culture is the approach to Scripture Randall Reed takes. He wrote that the increasing acceptance of evolution among secular, spiritual, and religious Millennials indicates "the notion that our students take the Bible seriously on either a historical or moral level has to be questioned."[125] He advocates a solution to this contextual barrier that is a capitulation to his students' culture. While he rightly notes that Millennials place a high value on tolerance, and while he correctly encourages Bible teachers to teach Bible texts that exhibit cultural strangeness like the Judah and Tamar account from Genesis 38, he rejects texts that violate Millennials' militant commitment to tolerance. He dismisses any Scripture that calls homosexual behavior sinful because, "The sexual system of antiquity is vastly different than that of our age. The presuppositions, expectations, and lines of argumentation do not map into our own understandings of the roots of sexual orientation or the expression of desire."[126] This is not contextualization but capitulation and "when

---

[123] Alan Hirsch, and Tim Catchim, *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 229.

[124] Senkbeil, "Engaging our Culture," 298.

[125] Randall Reed, "A Book for None? Teaching Biblical Studies to Millennial Nones," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 19, no. 2 (2016): 154.

[126] Reed, "A Book for None?," 167.

attempts at contextualization concede too much to the culture and distort the fundamental beliefs and practices that shape us, then we must challenge it."[127]

The Need for Cultural Exegesis

In order to rightly contextualize the Gospel, preachers must carefully exegete Scripture and exegete the culture by engaging in cultural investigation. Ed Stetzer observed,

> If you were a missionary to the Khosa (a South African tribe), you would study every aspect of their lives. You would learn their language, understand their worldview, and exegete their culture. Much of that, you would do in a classroom, but the most important lessons would take place by interacting with the Khosa tribe.[128]

Missiologists call this practice creating an ethnography. Hirsch echoes Lesslie Newbigin in his view that "we need to see the Western world as a mission field, and that we as God's people in this context [need] to adopt a missionary stance in relation to our culture – just as we would in India."[129]

The most effective way for preachers to exegete Millennial culture is to spend time with them. An ethnographer is not just studying the culture; he is learning from the people in that culture. Sitting in an office reading about generational characteristics is easy; establishing a relationship with Millennials is more challenging, especially if that

---

[127] Hirsch and Hirsch, *Untamed*, 138.

[128] Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley and Jason Hayes, *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches That Reach Them*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2009), 14.

[129] Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 81.

relationship is based on mutual learning which is "essential if you are to gather information that is truly accurate and helpful for ministry."[130]

Contextualizing the Gospel to Millennials

A relationship is something Millennials want from their preachers. They can find great preaching online. What they really want is a "relationship with leaders who know their name and model a life of faith."[131] Connecting with Millennials might be as simple as understanding that, while they are not always impressed with his preaching, they are interested in a relationship with their preacher. That can only happen when a preacher commits to spending time with them. Face time matters to Millennials because they want to know that the person preaching to them is authentic. They do not expect perfection from their leaders. In fact, they are suspicious of anyone who portrays herself that way.[132]

Authenticity is so important to Millennials that it can be the difference between them attending a church or leaving one. In their book on de-churched Millennials and how to reach them, Ed Stetzer and his co-authors wrote, "*Lost and Found* is about churches that are reaching young people and how they do that. And authenticity came up. Not once. Not a lot. But always."[133] Millennials describe authentic leaders as people who:

- lead from brokenness
- are not afraid to share their struggles
- are willing to tell stories that may make them appear weak or imperfect
- avoid pretenses or the use of gimmicks

---

[130] Conn, and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry, 274*.

[131] Powell, Mulder and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 64.

[132] Shaw, *Generational IQ*, 147.

[133] Stetzer, Stanley and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 197.

- admit the need for grace and for a Savior
- are hopeful about the redemption they have found in Jesus.[134]

Many preachers are focused on relevant preaching. What Millennials want are real preachers. When Kara Powell surveyed younger Millennials, she learned that only thirteen percent focused on relevance but "87 percent talked about authenticity or other qualities unrelated to relevance."[135] Millennials have "heard a lot about … what Christianity is supposed to be. They're very curious to see what it looks like lived out. Their hypocrisy meter is very high."[136] Self-awareness, vulnerability, careful honesty, time, and real excellence are all hallmarks of authenticity and when Millennials see them in a church (and in their preacher), "it produces a transparent and powerful ministry to young adults."[137]

Contextualizing the gospel to Millennials also means preaching with depth. Mary Hulst, the college chaplain at Calvin College, contends that Millennials "want preaching that opens up scripture, teaches them something, and impacts their lives." She and a group of Millennials were part of a panel at a worship conference when they were asked "What do you want preachers to know?" One of the Millennials responded, "We know the difference when you're preaching your own agenda or when you're preaching God's agenda."[138] The sermon's agenda reveals the "why" behind the message. For Millennials,

---

[134] Stetzer, Stanley and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 199.

[135] Powell, Mulder and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 61.

[136] Mary Hulst, interviewed by the author, March 30, 2017.

[137] Stezer, Stanley and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 215.

[138] Hulst Interview.

depth is more than the preacher reciting the commandments: thou shalt, and thou shalt not. It is about explaining the reason for the commandments. "Why does scripture teach that? Why do I have such a difficult time with that?"[139]

Preaching with depth puts Jesus at the center of God's master narrative. Every part of the Bible is related to God and the story of his people. The team who wrote *Growing Young* discovered that "churches that communicate the gospel of Jesus as the centerpiece of God's story are more likely to have young people with greater faith, vibrancy and maturity."[140]

Pastors who commit to exegeting culture and preaching with depth are likely to discover that contextualizing the gospel to Millennials is like trying to push water up a hill. Teenage Millennials

> enter adulthood considering themselves to be Christians and saying they have made a personal commitment to Christ. But within a decade, most of these young people will have left the church and will have placed emotional connection to Christianity on the shelf.[141]

A 2011 Barna Research Group report stated that 59 percent of Millennials have left the church either permanently or for an extended period of time. While the research indicated that "no single reason dominated the break-up between church and young adults," Barna offered the top six reasons that Millennials gave for their exits:

1. Churches seem overprotective.
2. Millennials' experience of Christianity is shallow.
3. Churches seem to be at odds with science.
4. Millennials view the Church's handling of issues related to sexuality as facile and judgmental.

---

[139] Stezer, Stanley and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 98.

[140] Powell, Mulder and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 140.

[141] David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Thinks About Christianity and Why it Matters*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 72.

5. Millennials struggle with exclusive claims of Christianity.
6. They view the church as a place that is not safe for doubters.[142]

Millennials' complaints about the church are not inaccurate. They distrust some of the methods churches have employed in recent years to try to connect with their generation. They are not looking for a Disneyland experience when they attend church. They are not won over by espresso machines and concert quality lighting. "Millennials are hyperaware and deeply suspicious of the intersection of church and consumer culture."[143] Churches that try to persuade Millennials to attend by pursuing a strategy of "cool and hip" may be disappointed. What Millennials want are real answers to their questions. "Most Millennials say they attend church to be closer to God (44%) and more than one-third say they go to learn more about God (37%). … Two-thirds … say a good description of church is 'a place to find answers to live a meaningful life.'"[144] The style of the worship service, the architecture and décor of the building, the creativity of the staff, the sophistication of the preacher, and the list of events churches offer are not "the main attraction. These elements are nice sideshows, but people don't come to church for the carnival rides. They come to meet God."[145]

---

[142] "Six Reasons Young Christians Are Leaving Church," Barna Group, last updated September 28, 2011, accessed April 10, 2015, https://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles/528-six-reasons-young-christians-leave-churchchurch.

[143] "What Millennials Want When They Visit Church," Barna Group, last updated March 3, 2015, accessed March 15, 2015, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/711-what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church#.Vbeycnh--M4.

[144] "What Millennials Want," Barna Group.

[145] George Barna, and David Kinnaman, *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2014), 175.

Conclusion

Exegesis comes from the Greek, "to lead out." In biblical exegesis, the preacher starts with the text at the center and leads out from there. Scripture determines the trajectory of the sermon; exposition, illustration and application all flow from the text. Haddon Robinson notes, "We must know the people as well as the message, but to acquire that knowledge, we must exegete both the Scripture and the congregation."[146] Exegeting the congregation was easier when the people in the pews all viewed the world from a Judeo-Christian perspective. Preachers were able to assume a certain body of knowledge and facts about Christian faith that were shared by most Americans, churched and unchurched alike.

That is no longer the case.

Now that Christianity is no longer the home team, pastors must intentionally commit themselves to careful cultural investigation that includes a detailed exegesis of Millennials. They must learn all they can about the unique characteristics of the Millennial generation, Millennials' spiritual lives, and how Millennials learn. Then, applying that knowledge to their sermons, they will be able to contextualize the Gospel to Millennials, millions of whom are on a path leading to an eternity without Christ.

---

[146] Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, *Third Ed.*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 10-11.

CHAPTER FOUR: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF PREACHERS WHOSE SERMONS FOSTER MILLENNIALS' SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Review of the Thesis Project

The purpose of this thesis project was to address the limitations of the sermon as a catalyst for spiritual growth in Millennials. To accomplish that goal the researcher studied the contextualization principles of Peter and Paul in their Acts sermons and conducted a literature review to learn characteristics that are distinctive to Millennials. The researcher also conducted a qualitative study of multiple cases whom the researcher interviewed and then analyzed using in-case and cross-case analysis. Cases were selected through a process which identified the subjects being studied as preachers whose sermons result in Millennials' spiritual growth. The three cases selected for study preach in Independent Christian Churches that have a significant portion of Millennials in their congregations.

Qualitative Study

The research consisted of qualitative study of multiple cases. The researcher chose to conduct case study because "the case study method is most likely to be appropriate for 'how' and 'why' questions."[1] Paul Leedy and Jean Ormrod note that case study is a good approach when the researcher wants to "understand one person or

[1] Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods, Fourth Ed.*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2009), 27.

situation (or perhaps a very small number) in great depth," and when the data that is collected will be used to develop an "overall portrait of the case(s)."[2]

The researcher considered but ultimately rejected conducting grounded theory study. Such a study is useful in developing a "general explanation … of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants."[3] This method was rejected for two reasons. First, to conduct grounded theory study would have significantly increased the number of cases that needed to be studied, which was beyond the scope of this project. Second, grounded theory studies rely on open coding and the researcher determined to begin the coding process with a list of *a priori* codes[4] derived from the literature review.

Description of Data and Sources

Introduction

The primary data for this study consisted of (a) responses from surveys given to Independent Christian Church leaders who were asked to nominate preachers who preach sermons resulting in Millennials' spiritual growth, (b) surveys administered to, and interviews of the preachers who were selected for case study based on the recommendation of the aforementioned leaders, and (c) surveys given to Millennials that attend the churches of the preachers selected for case study. The researcher elected to complete the literature review before designing the surveys and interview protocol used

---

[2] Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 2010), 146.

[3] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among the Five Approaches, Second Ed.*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007), 63.

[4] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 152.

in this study because "experienced investigators review previous research to develop sharper and more insightful *questions* about the topic (italics in original)."[5] Three cases were chosen for study.

Multiple Case Study

The researcher chose to conduct a multiple case study rather than one in-depth case study. While in-depth case study might have revealed principles that preachers can incorporate into their preaching that will make their sermons more palatable and profitable for Millennials' spiritual growth, the researcher deemed it important that the principles that came to light in this project be observable in multiple contexts. Multiple case study was deemed to be more useful to that end. Cases were compared through cross-case analysis so "a single set of cross-case conclusions"[6] could be drawn. According to Robert Yin,

> In each situation, an individual person is the case being studied, and the individual is the primary unit of analysis. Information about the relevant individual would be collected, and several such individuals or "cases" might be included in a multiple-case study.[7]

The primary unit of analysis for each case in this study was the lead pastor of the case study churches.

Selection of Cases Studied

The researcher sought nominations from nine Independent Christian Church leaders including the executive directors of two conferences, a magazine editor, one of

---

[5] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 14.

[6] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 20.

[7] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 29.

the most widely known preachers in our fellowship of churches, and the leader of a Restoration Movement church extension fund. Of the nine leaders approached by the researcher two responded that they were unable to participate and one did not respond to the researcher's repeated attempts to contact him. The remaining six leaders each completed an online survey (Appendix A) and nominated between three and five persons for a total of seventeen preachers.

Fifteen of the seventeen individuals nominated completed an online survey (Appendix B) to determine if they met the following qualifications for selection:

- They were willing to be interviewed by the researcher.
- They were willing to allow Millennials in their church to be surveyed by the researcher.
- They preach at their church a minimum of 35 times per year.
- They self-reported being intentional about reaching, discipling and preaching to Millennials.
- Millennials make up a minimum of 20 percent of their church.

Cases Selected

Case One. Chris VandeLinde is the 39-year-old lead pastor of Cornerstone Christian Church (CCC) in Shiloh, Illinois, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. It is an Independent Christian Church which was established in 2000 when three churches merged to form one congregation. In 2006 what was then known as Chapel Hill Christian Church changed its name to Cornerstone Christian Church and moved to a new campus. The church quickly doubled in size.

The church averages 1,300 people in attendance in four weekly gatherings at one location. The average age of the congregation is 33 years old. Most people are middle

class, white, suburban families. Millennials make up approximately 40 percent of CCC's membership. VandeLinde preaches about 40 times each year.

Case Two. Tyler McKenzie is the 31-year-old lead pastor of Northeast Christian Church (NECC) in Louisville, Kentucky. It is an Independent Christian Church founded in 1977. McKenzie reports that one-third of the church are Millennials. The church's main campus is located among Louisville's wealthiest communities, and church members are mostly upper-middle class. Since McKenzie became the lead pastor of the church the congregation has grown to more than 3,300 in four weekend services at the church's two campuses. McKenzie preaches 40 times each year. He is a Millennial.

Case Three. Scott Kenworthy is the 36-year-old lead pastor of Owensboro Christian Church (OCC) in Owensboro, Kentucky. The church is a multigenerational church of predominantly blue-collar families. Following a series of scandals in the church, attendance declined from 2,500 in 2007 to 1,300. Under the leadership of Kenworthy and his immediate predecessor, church attendance has increased to 1,850 in three weekend services. Since Kenworthy's hiring, the church has focused on developing healthy leadership and staff structures and retiring the church's debt. Kenworthy was born near the boundary between the GenXer and Millennial cohorts.

Case Study Interviews

The three preachers completed an initial online survey (Appendix C) that included questions related to the individuals' biographical information and their respective church's demographic information. These questions were designed to give the researcher greater insight into the subjects' contexts and motivations for ministry. It was also used to

help schedule the subject interviews. Following this survey, the researcher interviewed two of the subjects in face-to-face conversations and the third via online videoconference.

Leedy and Ormrod recommend limiting the number of interview questions to a small number, "perhaps five to seven of them."[8] Consequently, the researcher designed an interview protocol form consisting of six questions[9] (Appendix D). The interviews were conducted informally with the researcher seeking to build rapport with the subjects "through body language (smiling, maintaining eye contact, leaning forward) and such neutral encouragements as 'Go on' and 'What do you mean?'"[10]

Question one. What role does preaching play in helping the Millennials' faith grow? John Tyson's research[11] indicated that the sermon does not play a significant role in Millennials' faith development. The researcher sought to determine if the case study subjects agreed. The researcher hypothesized that if preachers do not believe preaching is especially important, they are less likely to work at it as they might otherwise be.

Question two. What are the biggest challenges that preachers face in preaching to Millennials? This question was intentionally worded vaguely and non-threateningly.[12] The researcher asked about "preachers" rather than directing the question directly at the case study subjects, in order to disarm the interviewees and still discover the challenges they have faced.

---

[8] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 149.

[9] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 136.

[10] Leedy and Ormrod, *Practical Research*, 151.

[11] Jon Tyson, *Sacred Roots: Why the Church Still Matters*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 23.

[12] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 107.

Question three. What characteristics of you, as a person, influence how Millennials receive your preaching? This question sought to determine if the case study subjects value transparency and authenticity, two characteristics that Millennials report are important to them. Additionally, the researcher hoped to learn if the case study subjects are cognizant of the context of their preaching as it relates to the content of the preaching.

Question four. What changes in preaching (if any) have you made to help Millennials grow spiritually? The researcher wanted to discover if the case study subjects approach preaching with the intentional purpose of communicating to Millennials.

Question five. What sort of preaching best resonates with Millennials? Rather than asking a leading question about which approach to preaching the case study subjects think best communicates to Millennials (expository, topical or narrative), question five was designed following Yin's advice:

> The specific questions must be carefully worded, so that you appear genuinely naïve about the topic and allow the interviewee to provide a fresh commentary about it; in contrast, if you ask leading questions, the corroboratory purpose of the interview will not have been served.[13]

Some authors in the literature review indicated that expository preaching resonates with Millennials more than topical preaching. This question was designed to learn if the case study subjects corroborate that view, without revealing the researcher's predisposition or the results of the literature review.

Question six. What about Millennials makes fostering spiritual growth through preaching challenging? The researcher designed this question to touch on Millennials'

---

[13] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 107.

unique characteristics that make cultural exegesis important to understanding Millennials and communicating with them.

At the beginning of each interview the researcher obtained consent from the interviewee to be recorded.[14] The six questions in the case study interview served to guide the conversation rather than as rigidly structured queries.[15] Follow-up questions were asked to clarify the interviewees' comments.

Treatment of the Data

The case study interviews were transcribed. The researcher then followed the guidance of Creswell to "read the transcripts in their entirety several times. Immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts."[16] Following the initial readings, the interviews were coded. A list of 23 preexisting codes was established (Appendix E) and the interview transcripts were coded using the initial list of *a priori* codes. Although prefigured codes were used in the initial reading, during subsequent readings the researcher was "open to additional codes emerging during the analysis."[17]

A secondary coder was employed to validate the researcher's data codification. The secondary coder was instructed in the process of coding and was given the researcher's list of *a priori* codes but coded the transcripts independently of the researcher. The secondary coder's analysis was compared to the researcher's, which

---

[14] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 134.

[15] Yin, *Case Study Research*, 106.

[16] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 150.

[17] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 152.

validated the researcher's findings and suggested other codes for the researcher to consider. The emergent codes identified by the secondary researcher were incorporated into the researcher's analysis when appropriate.

Rudimentary text analysis was also employed with each interview to look for frequently used words. The case study interview transcripts were stripped of all text with the exception of the interviewees' answers. That text was then entered into an online text analysis program[18] that quantified the number of times phrases of varying word counts were used as well as the number of times individual words were spoken by the interviewees. This analysis was consulted to validate that the list of *a priori* codes and emergent codes was complete.

As the interviews were analyzed, themes began to emerge that were "extensively discussed by the participants"[19] in each of the three cases studied. These formed the basis of a central phenomenon which became apparent as the data was reanalyzed "to provide insight into specific coding categories that relate or explain the central phenomenon."[20]

Survey of Millennials in Case Study Churches

The researcher created a qualitative survey to distribute to Millennials in the three case study churches (Appendix F). The researcher chose this method because a qualitative survey was more in keeping with the coding process with which the case study interviews were analyzed. The researcher administered the survey to a pilot group of

---

[18] https://www.online-utility.org/text/analyzer.jsp.

[19] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 160.

[20] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 161.

eighteen Millennials at South Lansing Christian Church to increase its reliability. Their feedback was incorporated into the survey to provide greater clarity to the questions.

The researcher attempted to maximize survey participation in the case study churches by offering an incentive. Upon completion of the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to sign up to win one of four prizes. In order to maintain the anonymous submission of the surveys, respondents who elected to participate in the drawing were directed to a different website where they provided their name and contact information. Their identifying data remained completely separate from their survey answers. While the researcher and the researcher's assistant coded the data from the survey, the winners of the four incentive prizes were selected from a database maintained at a separate location by an individual not connected with the survey. Respondents were made aware their identifying information would be used solely for the giveaway before being securely deleted.

Survey Questions

Question one. What year were you born? It was designed to confirm that the survey respondent was a Millennial.

Question two. What sex are you? It allowed for three choices: "male," "female," and "other or prefer not to answer." This question was designed to make the respondents more amenable to the survey. The specific data regarding sex was not correlated to any other answer. The researcher wanted to demonstrate through this third category that he grasped the complexities with which Millennials grapple. The third category was added at the suggestion of a Millennial in the pilot group.

Question three. Which best describes how long you have been a Christian? This question allowed the respondent to choose one of four selections ranging from "less than a year" to "more than five years." Respondents could also indicate they had not yet become a Christian. The purpose of this question was to better understand the case study subjects' contexts.

Question four. Which best describes how long you have attended (case study church name)? Respondents were able to select one of five choices ranging from "less than a year" to "eleven years or more." The purpose of this question was to better understand the case study subjects' contexts.

Question five. Which best describes how often you attend (case study church name)? Respondents were able to select one of four choices ranging from "once a week or more" to "a couple of times every few months." This question was designed to indicate if Millennials at the case study churches have patterns of church attendance that are consistent with Millennials in general.

Question six. How have (case study name)'s sermons helped you grow in your faith? If possible, please provide specific examples. This question was intentionally open ended. Its purpose was two-fold. First, the researcher wanted to discern if the Millennials in the case study churches affirm that their preachers' sermons foster spiritual growth. While the case study subjects were selected for being preachers whose sermons foster spiritual growth in Millennials, the researcher wanted to confirm that Millennials in the case study churches felt the same way. Second, the researcher wanted to learn how the case study subjects' sermons foster spiritual growth in their respective population of Millennials.

Question seven. What characteristics of (case study name) as a person do you think make him a good preacher? This question was designed to determine if Millennials in the case study churches believe their respective preachers possess characteristics Millennials value such as transparency, integrity and authenticity. To that end, the researcher chose an open-ended question rather than asking leading questions like: "Is (case study name) authentic?"

Question eight. What about (case study name) or his sermons would make you want to invite your friends who are not Christians to come hear him preach? As with the previous question, the researcher chose to ask an open-ended question. In this instance the question pointed toward characteristics like tolerance, acceptance and vulnerability.

Question nine. What do you wish (case study name) would preach more about? The researcher wanted to know what topics or scripture texts are important to Millennials in the case study subjects' respective contexts. This question was designed to learn two things: what Millennials value in their preachers' sermons and whether or not those sermons meet the expectations of Millennials in the case study churches.

Question ten. If you could change something about the way (case study name) preaches, what would it be? Whereas the previous question elicited what Millennials in the case study churches want to hear preached, this question elicited how they want their preacher to preach. It sought to determine what adaptations, if any, the respective preachers need to make to their preaching styles so their sermons are more useful for the spiritual growth of Millennials.

Questions one through five were administered in the same order to each respondent. Questions six through ten were administered in random order to each

respondent. The purpose in doing so was to avoid any bias that might develop as the result of asking questions in the same sequential order with each survey taker.

Participants and Treatment of the Data

A total of 196 respondents ranging in age from 18-35 years completed the survey. The surveys were coded using the same list of preexisting codes (Appendix E) with which the case study interviews were coded. The coded data from the case study interviews and the Millennial surveys were compared to determine which codes and subcategories the two data sets shared. As codes began repeating it was determined the researcher could not find any new data that added to the subcategories identified in the *a priori* codes and the codes that emerged from the data. This point, which Creswell calls "saturation,"[21] represented the conclusion of data gathering for the project.

Secondary data

In addition to the three case study interviews conducted by the researcher and the surveys administered to Millennials in their respective churches, the researcher conducted interviews with two individuals who possess extensive knowledge of Millennials. The first, the author of two books on Millennials and their interaction with other generational cohorts, consults with Fortune 500 companies, governmental agencies and not for profits on the subject of Millennial engagement. The second is a chaplain at a Christian university in Grand Rapids, Michigan. These interviews were not coded but provided anecdotal data that buttressed the findings of the case study data.

[21] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 240.

CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Case Study Observations

Case One: Chris VandeLinde

Case Study Overview

Chris VandeLinde is the 39-year-old lead pastor of Cornerstone Christian Church (CCC), an Independent Christian Church in Shiloh, Illinois, a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri. VandeLinde graduated from Johnson Bible College with a degree in youth ministry and earned a master's degree at Hope International University. Before coming to CCC in 2015 he served in youth ministries in Tennessee and Missouri, as well as a family pastor at a church in Florida.

The leadership transition at CCC was difficult as VandeLinde was beginning his tenure as the church's lead pastor. With a failed capital campaign in 2015 and significant staff turnover, VandeLinde faced immediate challenges when he arrived. The church has since worked through the difficulty and VandeLinde reports he has "been leading through health and new directions."

VandeLinde grew up in a churched family and became a Christian at church camp when he was twelve years old. About that same time, he began to feel a burden toward ministry, which he cultivated throughout middle school and high school by attending church camp and serving in his home church. Although he does not recall a specific moment of calling, VandeLinde always felt that his gifts and passions lined up well with

vocational ministry. He and his wife have been married for fifteen years. They have a ten-year-old daughter and a seven-year-old son.

Shiloh, Illinois is a middle-class community with a median household income of 1.4 times the United States household income. As a community, it is slightly older than the rest of Illinois (39.8 years versus 37.7 years for all of Illinois). VandeLinde is nearly the same age as the median age in Shiloh.[1] The community's largest employer is Scott Air Force Base with 7,917 uniformed service members and 5,085 civilian employees. There are 18,332 retired military members in the area.[2]

The church averages 1,300 people in attendance in four weekly gatherings at one location. There are 18 full-time staff persons. VandeLinde reports that the average age of the congregation is 33 years old. Most attenders are middle class, white, suburban families. The congregation has a membership that is 15 percent African American and a handful of other races. VandeLinde preaches 40 times a year to the church, which includes a Millennial population of 40 percent of Cornerstone's membership.

Interview Observations

The researcher met with VandeLinde at the International Conference on Missions in Peoria, Illinois. The interview lasted about an hour, and was interrupted twice by individuals who stopped to say hello to either the researcher or VandeLinde. The first impression of the researcher is how much VandeLinde seems to care about people and about creating environments where they can belong. He has a genuine love for others and

[1] "Shiloh, IL," DataUSA, accessed October 22, 2017, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/shiloh-il/?compare=united-states.

[2] "Scott AFB Facts," Scott Air Force Base, accessed October 22, 2017, http://www.scott.af.mil/About-Us/Questions-and-Information/.

a desire that they connect with a community. The following observations were made from coded transcripts of VandeLinde's interview:

Creating space to belong. VandeLinde's 17 years as a youth pastor have influenced his approach at CCC. When you hear him talk about CCC it is obvious he still has the heart of a youth pastor and the desire to see that every person has a place to connect and belong. He makes a concerted effort to create spaces where people can gather and connect. For Millennials, according to VandeLinde, "who they're with and [the] environment they're in matters a lot." He recognizes that Millennials are going to gather. They go to restaurants in record numbers. They gather in public places more than previous generations. An intentional strategy he employs is "empowering them to get together … whether it's around a campfire or whether it's in a living room."

His efforts are about more than providing spaces where people can gather and connect. He promotes an ethos of belonging by the way he preaches. He approaches preaching with an attitude of "Hey, I don't have this figured out. … I'm on the journey with you." Promoting the idea of next steps has aided that approach. He tells Millennials at CCC, "We all have next steps; none of us has arrived." VandeLinde described this as a conversational approach to preaching that relies on authenticity, transparency and topical preaching.

VandeLinde's approach to preaching. VandeLinde told the researcher that Millennials have "the highest crap detector of any generation that's alive." They are cynical and suspicious of authority. VandeLinde said, "The thing that I have found that reaches Millennials the most is just being real about who you are."

According to VandeLinde, given their general suspicion it is not surprising that Millennials are especially hungry for the truth. He stated, “They really are eager for truth and eager for the Word and eager for somebody to teach the Bible.” Millennials’ hunger for the truth is undiminished even when they disagree with what VandeLinde preaches. The key is acknowledging there are genuine differences and validating the person’s right to have an opinion even if it is one that conflicts with the sermon. VandeLinde noted, “I think if you … say, ‘I can see how you might come to that. Here's why I disagree with it,’ you're in. If you say, ‘No, no, no. Stop right there. Did you not read verse 12? You're missing the entire point,’ then you've lost your audience.”

Millennials are comfortable dialoguing with people with whom they disagree. Their pastor does not have to agree with them, but their pastor does have to be authentic. For VandeLinde that means living in the tension between trying to relate to Millennials and living authentically as a GenXer. He stated, “I don't try to be a Millennial. … I don't try to dress like … and look like … and think like [them] in every way. I own who I am and ride the line between, ‘Well, I'm not like you guys’ and the flipside being, ‘I'm one of you guys.’” Instead, his approach to Millennials is “to understand and love you where you are in the way you are wired.”

That means being with them as they journey through life. VandeLinde stresses to Millennials in his preaching that they are on a journey together and he is another of the travelers. He shares his weaknesses with them, and though he avoids going into too much detail he tells them, “Hey, I don’t have this figured out.”

VandeLinde prefers preaching topical sermons, even when the text lends itself to an expository approach. He stated,

> I have always and still continue to funnel everything through [a] topical approach. … We did Ephesians once and called it *Labeled* and … talked about the labels that the world gives us and … how Paul says, "You're called; you're saved; you're free; you're forgiven; you're alive in Christ." I mean it's topical, but, really, I just went through the book of Ephesians.

He admitted he is conflicted over this approach, noting that Tim Keller has grown a multisite megachurch in New York City through expository preaching. Though he preaches topically, VandeLinde said he is open to changing that approach in the future as research reveals more about other preaching strategies that foster growth in Millennials.

The environments VandeLinde creates to foster belonging have provided opportunities to reinforce the message of his sermons. The church has experimented with multiple settings, including post-sermon gatherings on campus where Millennials can discuss VandeLinde's sermons. Noting that "Millennials are a discussion-oriented bunch of people," he also uses the church's life groups and social media platforms to foster dialogue centered on his teaching.

Intentional about contextualization. VandeLinde also spoke about his intentional efforts to exegete Millennial culture. He noted that his entire adult life has focused on Millennials, first as a youth minister and now as a lead pastor in a church with a membership that includes more than 500 Millennials. VandeLinde has been successful at helping Millennials grow spiritually because he has studied their culture and learned to contextualize the gospel to it.

During the interview VandeLinde related an experience from his youth ministry days that demonstrated his ability to grow in his understanding of Millennials. When he used to take students on retreats he would require them to leave their cell phones at home to help them focus. Noting how unpopular that was VandeLinde stated, "Maybe we could

have funneled that differently by speaking their language a little bit differently [and] just understanding where they're coming from."

VandeLinde observed, "The younger side of the Millennial generation has never known an era where there … wasn't Netflix, where there wasn't the Internet. They just have no concept of that, and so we have to speak their language more." Expressing the need to speak the language of Millennials is evidence VandeLinde knows how important it is to contextualize the gospel to their generation. He equated doing so with the way a missionary would approach a cross-cultural interaction: "You've got to be able to speak the language and understand the framework of the people … you're talking to, and even [the] worldview of those people."

VandeLinde's interview revealed that cultural exegesis is especially necessary for preachers who are non-native to the generation they seek to impact. During the discussion, the researcher told VandeLinde, "You said 'I think' three or four times. … That is a language that is foreign to Millennials. They would not say 'I think;' they would say 'I feel.'"

VandeLinde responded, "That is another one of those misses for me. I kinda go, 'I don't really care what you [feel]. Your feelings don't drive you. You tell your feelings what you're gonna do." Even if he sometimes struggles to do so consistently, VandeLinde understands the importance of speaking the language of his listeners. He stated, "I think for me the struggle is honestly just looking through their lens. [That] is what I have to fight to do."

Understanding Millennials also means recognizing the way their experiences have impacted their lives. VandeLinde observed, "Some of the things you can assume about

Millennials [are that] one in six of the boys and one in four of the girls have been sexually abused or molested. … Most of them grew up in a divorced home. … One in five of the guys in the audience are either addicted to or actively looking at porn." Though VandeLinde is not a Millennial he understands who they are and the experiences that have shaped their generation.

Observations from Survey of Millennials at Cornerstone Christian Church

Forty Millennials from Cornerstone Christian Church completed surveys. Two were excluded because they did not indicate the year they were born.

- Twenty-six respondents were older Millennials (born 1982-1990); twelve were younger Millennials (born 1991-1999).
- Twenty-four were female; 13 were male. One individual selected, "Other, or prefer not to answer."
- All but one respondent indicated that they are Christians. The majority (82 percent) have been Christians for five years or more.
- Sixteen of the respondents started attended CCC in the time since VandeLinde became lead pastor. The other 22 individuals were already attending CCC when he arrived.
- Eighty-two percent of the respondents attend CCC once a week or more. Five attend two to three times per month and two attend a couple of times every few months.

As the coded data from the Millennial surveys was analyzed some themes emerged.

Millennials at CCC view VandeLinde as personable and accessible. One of the most common attributes mentioned by the respondents is how personable VandeLinde is. Thirteen people wrote about his friendliness and outgoing nature. They referenced the priority he puts on meeting them and his ability to remember their names. Respondent eight, a 29-year-old man who began attending CCC within the last two years wrote,

> He is just so genuine and his heart is enormous. He cares about people. Period. Lost people, saved people, old, young, guests, volunteers, you name it. He learns

> and remembers names and cries when talking about broken lives and the hope of the gospel.

Respondent 18, a 29-year-old woman who recently began attending the church, noted how VandeLinde "made it a point to introduce himself to my husband and me after a Sunday service. He made sure to connect with us and make us feel like he's known us for years and accepted us for all that we are." VandeLinde does not hide in his office between services but as one person noted, "He makes time for the congregation between services. He truly does want to meet with you and hear how things are going" (respondent 30).

Others noted how VandeLinde "makes everyone feel like they belong" (respondent nine) and how "friendly, easy going and relatable" (respondent 26) he is. Respondents indicated that VandeLinde's friendliness and accessibility contribute to them feeling like they belong and is a factor in inviting their friends to experience CCC. When asked question twelve, "What about Pastor Chris or his sermons would make you want to invite your friends who are not Christians to come here him preach?," one person noted that VandeLinde is "friendly, relaxed, funny, [and] relatable" (respondent 24). The most frequent responses to question twelve, however, had to do with VandeLinde's preaching.

VandeLinde's preaching focuses on action and growth. Thirteen of the 38 respondents noted something about the way VandeLinde preaches as the reason they would invite their unsaved friends to experience CCC. Respondent 31 cited as significant VandeLinde's "simple message" which he characterized as "easy to consume for a new believer." Another wrote, "He has a unique way of delivering his messages. You feel as if you have been in his living room talking about God and not in a huge church being

preached to" (respondent 26). A 22-year-old male wrote, "He talks about real world struggles and challenges faced by every day [sic] people, not just Christians" (respondent 29).

Another notable finding is how action-oriented VandeLinde's sermons are. People mentioned being challenged to action or recalled specific actions they had taken as a result of VandeLinde's preaching. Respondent nine mentioned being challenged to tithe. A 32-year-old male wrote,

> Each sermon has a "call to action" associated with it as well as "simple" handouts that are intentional in getting the flock outside the building to bring Jesus to those in our community. It has challenged me to think in a different way than before and ultimately has resulted in addressing life priorities and getting far more involved in both the education and volunteer sides of my faith (respondent 19).

Several were able to recall specific sermons and specific changes they made as a result of hearing them. Others pointed to ways they had grown from VandeLinde's preaching. An 18-year-old woman wrote, "By teaching me to be comfortable with others' stories, and by teaching me through these to be less judgmental, I have been able to grow in my faith" (respondent 14).

Millennials at CCC appreciate the relevance of his messages and the passion with which he communicates. When asked what they would like VandeLinde to preach more about (question nine) and what they would change about the way he preaches (question ten), no theme emerged. Millennials at CCC seem to appreciate his topical approach; only two of the thirty-eight respondents expressed the desire for more expository sermons. Although a handful of respondents suggested ways he could improve his sermon delivery there was not a consensus among those who offered opinions.

Interview Observations and Survey Results Compared

In his interview with the researcher, VandeLinde emphasized the priority he gives to creating environments at CCC where Millennials can belong. The survey results indicate his efforts have made a difference. Not only do CCC's Millennials feel connected to VandeLinde, they expressed that the church is a place where they can bring their unsaved friends and know they will experience acceptance and belonging. VandeLinde's cultural exegesis of the Millennial generation has earned him a right to be heard. He preaches sermons that challenge his listeners to grow spiritually and to take action, practically. That so many of the survey respondents indicated ways they have grown or taken action indicates that VandeLinde's sermons are effective in promoting spiritual growth in CCC's Millennials.

Case Two: Tyler McKenzie

Case Study Overview

Tyler McKenzie is the 31-year-old lead pastor of Northeast Christian Church (NECC) in Louisville, Kentucky. McKenzie and his wife have been married since 2011, have one son who is a toddler, and are expecting a newborn. The church is an Independent Christian Church founded in 1977.

His father was a preacher, yet when McKenzie graduated from high school becoming a pastor was the last thing he wanted. Instead, McKenzie attended Belmont Abbey College where he played baseball. After a spiritually tumultuous time in his life, McKenzie started a Sunday morning chapel service so his teammates would be able to worship when they were on the road for away games. That service grew into a ministry

which included 40 percent of the athletes at the college. It was, McKenzie explained, as if God was tapping him on the shoulder saying, “This is where your gifts are needed.”

McKenzie graduated from college with a bachelor’s degree in theology and was finishing his master of divinity degree from Cincinnati Christian University when he learned the founding pastor of NECC was retiring. Encouraged by one of his professors, he applied for the position and was chosen. Northeast Christian Church is the only church where McKenzie has been employed.

McKenzie leads a staff of 50 people and is supported by a board of elders that establishes policy, holds McKenzie and his staff accountable for key metrics and safeguards the church’s doctrinal boundaries. The church is a multisite, regional church that attracts people from all over Louisville. Church members are mostly upper-middle class. The church’s main campus is located among Louisville’s wealthiest communities, and McKenzie reports that one-third of the church members are Millennials.

In 2007 the church added a second site when it merged with Clifton Christian Church, located fifteen minutes from its main campus. At the conclusion of the merger, the new campus became NECC: Clifton Campus. Since McKenzie became the lead pastor of the church the congregation has grown to more than 3,300 attending four weekend services at the church’s two campuses. McKenzie preaches 40 weekends each year.

Interview Observations

The researcher was unable to travel to Louisville so the interview was conducted via online videoconference. What quickly became obvious was Tyler’s energy. He fidgeted a lot during the interview. He played with a rubber band. He swiveled from side

to side in his chair. Through all of that he did not seem distracted, just really alive. The following observations were made from coded transcripts of McKenzie's interview:

Age is a thing. McKenzie is a Millennial. It became clear during the interview that much of what McKenzie does is intuited by virtue of being a Millennial. McKenzie innately understands Millennials' desire for community and has made accommodation in his megachurch context to help them find it. He noted, "I'm not gonna be everybody's pastor at the hospital when they have their baby or doing their wedding. … You have to have systems in place to connect them with other people who are in the Christian community."

He instinctively understands the cynicism toward institutions and authority that is intrinsic to Millennials. He noted that, in his father's church, sermons begin with an understanding that the Bible is authoritative. One of the issues McKenzie noted with Millennials is "the general distrust for institutional authority and thus biblical authority, so one of the challenges is getting them to trust, to see the Bible as something that is reliable."

Focus on skeptical Millennials. Because he is a Millennial, McKenzie understands the skepticism with which his generation approaches the church and the church's teaching. He makes an effort to address skepticism by acknowledging the skeptics in the room, by preaching sermons that have an apologetic bent and by finding points of cultural contact. McKenzie noted that "most of my intentional practices go at the skeptical Millennial. … I [assume] that the Millennials in my audience have a healthy skepticism about Christianity and the Bible." Because he assumes they are in the room, McKenzie is careful to acknowledge Millennials' doubts and questions: "I'll answer

cynical questions that I know a Millennial will be thinking about something because … it's usually what I'm thinking."

This has meant crafting his sermons with an apologetic bent. McKenzie regularly emphasizes what makes Christianity different from other world religions by highlighting distinctives which are particularly attractive to Millennials. McKenzie reported that he points out the idea of a God of love who can be known is a Christian concept. He challenges Millennials by identifying "the cultural common ground between Christianity and what … the average Millennial might consider to be wise or good." This has required McKenzie to live in the tension between truth and unity, a concept he reported is critical to his Millennial engagement strategy.

The tension of truth and unity. McKenzie's thoughts on the relationship Millennials have with truth were insightful. He noted that they desire truth and said, "We're past the postmodern, relativistic, truth-is-dead day." Instead he suggested that Millennials elevate the value of truth. They are, he claims, passionate about truth. What is true of other generations in the United States is true of Millennials, according to McKenzie who said:

> We're divided on race issues, politics issues, gender issues, sex issues, religion issues, you name it. We're divided over everything. That is not a sign to me of a culture that is relative when it comes to truth. That's a sign to me that a culture is very passionate about truth. The problem is … nobody can agree on what's true.

What might appear to Boomers or GenXers as the rejection of absolute truth in favor of a what-is-true-for-you-might-not-be-true-for-me ethos is more likely the value that Millennials place on tolerance. Thus, McKenzie has focused much of his teaching on the tension between truth and unity. His talks often reference the catchphrase "truth in love" and urge his listeners to practice each. He stated that Millennials lean toward love

without truth, which is not love at all but enabling. Conversely, he observed that Boomers lean toward truth without love, which can appear harsh and lead to the message being rejected by Millennials because of their disdain for the messenger. “One of the lost arts of our society,” as he calls it, is the ability to speak the truth in love, which one can only earn the right to do in the context of a relationship. That is one of the reasons why McKenzie is so intentional about relational preaching.

Intentionally relational. McKenzie told the researcher, “I think the relational preaching piece is huge.” Millennials want to know their preacher is someone who is real and who has struggles like they do. That is different, McKenzie noted, from his parents’ generation and from some ethnic communities that put their pastor on a pedestal. McKenzie stated that Millennials “like somebody a little bit more relatable and real and honest.”

Relating to so many individuals in a context like McKenzie’s can be challenging. Northeast Christian Church is a congregation of more than 3,000 people with approximately 1,200 Millennials. It is impossible for him to be accessible to them all. In order to stay connected to such a large group of people McKenzie says he tries to preach in a way that feels like “a monologue over coffee rather than a sermon. … I want it to seem like it’s coming from a person who cares, not from a point of authority.”

McKenzie’s use of social media fosters connectivity more than he realizes. He observed,

> Social media can go such a long way in terms of connecting with people, so I am … very active on Facebook and Twitter. And it's as simple as just liking posts that your friends throw up on Facebook or liking a Tweet. … Maybe I'm more accessible than … I would ever imagine because I am pretty active on that, and I do that on purpose.

McKenzie seemed surprised when the researcher suggested to him that his social media presence might be one of the reasons why he is able to seem accessible to such a large group of Millennials. Social media engagement is less strategy and more intuition to him as a Millennial. At the same time, he was conversant in the algorithms Facebook uses to keep his content at the top of his followers' social media feeds. It was further evidence that as a Millennial, much of what he does is likely indigenous to Millennial preachers and a learned skill for Boomer and GenXer preachers. A lot of McKenzie's social media interactions are focused on the church's outreach efforts to the community, which are part of an effort the church has branded *Love the 'Ville*.

Love the 'Ville. McKenzie noted that "the social action piece is huge." Observing that a lot of Millennials like to make church into a social occasion with their friends, he leverages that desire in his sermons by frequently referencing opportunities for groups to serve. He uses social media to affirm members of the church who engage in *Love the 'Ville* activities and finds opportunities to connect with other Millennials through his own participation. He told the researcher, "We serve so much at our church that it's impossible not to meet other people. … We're just constantly out doing different things in the community." Since McKenzie is passionate about making his sermons translate into action, he frequently references *Love the 'Ville* in messages and suggested that the *Love the 'Ville* movement "has done more than anything else to bring young people to our church because they want to see a church that's putting their money where their mouth is."

McKenzie bemoaned the irony that Millennials are the most difficult generational cohort to get involved in giving and serving in the church. He said that Millennials "want

a church that's doing all this, but it's really hard to get their face out of the phone … and their butts out there serving." That might be evidence of the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism that Millennials have absorbed from their parents' spiritual lives. McKenzie complained that Millennials seem to be baptized with their wallets and phones out of the water: "They like the idea of a Savior or a spiritual or emotional connection [but] they're not ready to give their time and their money yet." McKenzie repeatedly challenges those issues in the topics on which he chooses to preach.

A reluctant topical preacher. McKenzie would rather preach expository sermons. He noted that it would probably be easier and more fun for him to preach that way. He said, "I don't preach the style that I would like to preach. But that's because I think that [in] my context [the] style that I preach … works better. I talk to a lot of folks who say that Millennials appreciate expository preaching more, but I've just not found that to be the case." Instead, McKenzie is intentional about preaching topics that interest Millennials. Part of the reason for that might be the pressure he feels from the access Millennials have to excellent online sermons. He said, "Millennials are a busy group, and they can sit home and watch Andy Stanley or Craig Groeschel or whoever that day. So you better … talk about something they care about."

One of the strategies McKenzie employs in his preaching is pointing out that Millennials' cultural assumptions are insufficient to the challenges they face. One sermon series addressed the topic of the disillusionment many Millennials face when they realize their dreams for the future cannot all be attained. Instead of focusing on their dreams for the future, which he pointed out can lead to disappointment for those who do not attain them and disillusionment for those who do, he challenged NECC to pursue God's

dreams. Pursuing God's dreams means investing in people, which provided McKenzie another opportunity to challenge his congregation to *Love the 'Ville.*

Intergenerational relationships. The researcher made one other observation from his interview with McKenzie. He is intentional about fostering intergenerational relationships between Millennials and older mentors. This is something he models through his relationship with his retired predecessor at NECC, a Baby Boomer in his mid-sixties. "Every Millennial book that I read says that Millennials hold a high value and premium on mentorship," McKenzie said, "I know how life giving that relationship's been for me and for other friends who have gotten into … intergenerational relationships."

Observations from Survey of Millennials at Northeast Christian Church

Fifty-four respondents were included in the survey analysis. There were additional respondents who were dropped because the researcher was unable to verify they were Millennials.

- Forty-five of the respondents were older Millennials (born 1982-1990) and nine were younger Millennials (born 1991-1994). There were no respondents who were born 1995-1999. The under-representation of the youngest Millennials is noted.
- Thirty-nine of the respondents were female; 15 were male.
- All the respondents indicated they are Christians. More than 92 percent of them indicated they have been Christians for more than five years.
- Three-fourths (76 percent) of the respondents have attended NECC for more than three years. Just under one-fourth (24 percent) began attending the church since McKenzie's arrival.
- The majority of the Millennials who took the survey (39 out of 54) attend the church once a week or more. Thirteen people indicated they attend two to three times per month. Two attend a couple of times every few months.

Some themes emerged from the coded data:

Age, passion and energy. Question seven, "What characteristics of Pastor Tyler as a person do you think make him a good preacher?" and question eight, "What about him or his sermons would make you want to invite your friends who are not Christians to come hear him preach?" resulted in responses about McKenzie's age. Respondent 22, a 31-year-old woman wrote, "He is the same age I am (and most of my friends), and we are in the same phase of life." Respondent 31, a 24-year-old woman wrote, "Honestly his age is a huge factor when I invite people to church I tell them 'my pastor is fantastic he's only 30 years old [and] he gets it!'"

Others indicated that McKenzie's passion and energy, two characteristics often associated with youth, are important to them. In some instances the mention of his passion was directly connected to remarks about his age. Age was mentioned 13 times by the respondents and passion or passionate preaching was mentioned 14 times. His energy was also mentioned 13 times in comments similar to this one: "[His] energy is great. However, his age is appealing because I can immediately relate to him" (respondent 39).

Real and relatable. His age might also have a role in the perception Millennials have of McKenzie being real and relatable. Several respondents referred to him as "down to earth" and noted their appreciation for his "real manner" and the way his sermons speak to real-life issues. A 32-year-old woman who attends NECC two to three times per month noted, "He is very down to earth and speaks truth in a thoughtful and graceful way. He is more real than most pastors I've heard preach" (respondent 47). Respondent 52, a 23-year-old woman who started regularly attending the church since McKenzie became the lead pastor, noted that his relatability has been an important factor in her unsaved mother beginning to attend the church:

> He's very practical and real. He's extremely knowledgeable with scripture and the teachings of the Bible, but he presents them in a way that is easily understood and remembered. … He makes everyone feel welcome by saying that there are no perfect people in the church and that he is not perfect either. It makes guests feel like they don't have to put on a mask or show when they enter the building. My mom has started to come to church with my husband and I, and she feels like she is not perfect, but that she fits in perfectly at Northeast.

His relatability has proven an important factor in the respondents' perception that McKenzie balances preaching the truth with creating a welcoming environment for people who disagree with him. Respondent 40 wrote, "He's honest. He doesn't sugar coat things but he has a respectable way of addressing tough issues." Her assessment was echoed by others who noted McKenzie is able to communicate with people who are not yet Christians in ways that are not off putting or offensive. McKenzie's relatability was one of the most frequently mentioned characteristics (22 times).

A focus on application, especially on Love the 'Ville. Something else that appeared frequently in the survey responses was some form of the word "challenge" (17 times). The survey respondents indicated that McKenzie's sermons challenge them to grow and put into practice the things they are learning. This often comes as a challenge to participate in the church's three-year neighborhood engagement initiative *Love the 'Ville*.

Respondent 16, a 33-year-old male who attends the church weekly wrote,

> He has challenged me to be more active in my faith. To look for more opportunities to help others and share Jesus in the process. An example would be my neighbor. I have noticed a need he has. He is an older man and is not able to do all that he used to and has had several trials recently. I feel I have been more aware of his need and have tried to help him however possible in hopes to build a relationship with him and have the opportunity to share Jesus with him.

Six other respondents mentioned *Love the 'Ville* in their surveys, indicating that it has been impactful in their lives. Respondent 15, a 33-year-old male wrote that McKenzie's "movement with *Love the 'Ville* has changed my life on serving my community."

Another spoke of how McKenzie challenges the congregation to practically live out their faith by putting "feet on our beliefs" (respondent 59). There were eleven mentions of practical application and an appreciation for the emphasis McKenzie places on putting faith into action.

Topical versus expository preaching. There was some divergence among the respondents about their preference in preaching. When asked what they would like to hear McKenzie preach more about (question nine), 31 people indicated they would like to hear more topical sermons. The most often mentioned sermon topic was marriage and family. Others topics of note included apologetics (three mentions), Islam (two mentions) and eschatology (one mention). Eight people indicated they would like McKenzie to preach more expository sermons. One member of the church, a long-term attender who has been a Christian for more than five years (respondent six), indicated she would like McKenzie to "dig into the meat of the Bible more like he used to." Others identified texts they would like to see McKenzie focus on such as the gifts of the Spirit (respondent 23) and some of the "books of the Bible we don't hear as much about" (respondent 24).

It is interesting to note that while the majority of NECC Millennials prefer topical preaching to expository, when segregated by age (older Millennials, born 1989 and before, and younger Millennials, born 1990 and after) topical preaching was preferred more by younger Millennials than by older Millennials. Older Millennials who noted a preference for one type of sermon over another preferred topical preaching to expository by a 3:1 ratio. In younger Millennials, the ratio was 8:1. While the researcher notes the sample size is inadequate to constitute a quantitative study and make any correlation between age and preference in sermon type, the observation is an interesting one.

Interview Observations and Survey Results Compared

The responses to the Millennial survey validated the observations the researcher made from the coded transcript of the case study interview. One notable congruency is with respect to McKenzie's age. He is young. He is a Millennial. That is not a strategy; that is a reality. Millennials who responded to the survey frequently noted their appreciation for his youthfulness, passion and energy.

While his age was also a factor the survey respondents cited in describing McKenzie as relatable so were his intentional efforts to relate to them. His use of social media to connect with NECC members and his willingness to preach with transparency and honesty about his own struggles has played a role in Millennials at NECC viewing him as relatable and real. McKenzie's relatability has earned for him the ability to preach hard truths to Millennials. Millennials at NECC are open to his teaching because he does not just preach "truth in love" as a catchphrase but lives it out. They appreciate his boldness and affirm he is successful in his efforts to balance grace and truth.

There was also significant agreement in McKenzie's efforts to promote *Love the 'Ville* and the popularity of the effort among survey respondents. McKenzie consistently promotes *Love the 'Ville* in his sermons, using the program as a launching point to catapult Millennials toward service. The survey results indicate his efforts are paying off. Multiple respondents referred to *Love the 'Ville* as an actionable compassion initiative in which they engage.

There was one area of slight incongruity between the surveys and McKenzie's interview. McKenzie noted his inner struggle with preaching topical sermons when he would personally prefer to preach expository sermons. Some respondents share that

preference. While a four-to-one majority of NECC Millennials indicated their penchant for topical preaching, older Millennials were less enthusiastic about topical preaching than their younger generational peers. Generally, however, the survey results indicated that McKenzie's strategies for engaging Millennials are working.

Case Three: Scott Kenworthy

Case Study Overview

At 36 years old, Scott Kenworthy was born on the boundary between Generation X and the Millennial generation. Since 2013 Kenworthy has been the lead pastor of Owensboro Christian Church (OCC), an Independent Christian Church in Owensboro, Kentucky. Kenworthy grew up in a Christian home with parents whose consistent walk with the Lord pointed him toward Christ. He became a Christian at age thirteen.

Kenworthy experienced a crisis in his faith when he was an undergraduate at Indiana University. His fellow students had vastly different worldviews and belief systems than his own and the challenge their views posed to his faith caused him to retreat into solitude. He scheduled a time to meet with the pastor of the church he was attending to get some help sorting out what he was experiencing.

During that same time he began to sense God might be calling him to become a minister. Kenworthy transferred to a Christian college and graduated with a degree in preaching and church leadership. Later he earned a master of divinity degree and a master's degree in theology with a focus on philosophy and apologetics.

Before going to OCC, Kenworthy was an intern in a small church, an associate minister at a medium-size church and a leadership resident at his home church, a church of more than 2000 people. While there he met Sarah, whom he married in 2000. As his

residency ended, Kenworthy was prayerfully looking for what was next and OCC called him in 2013 to become their lead pastor. He and his wife are expecting their first child in 2018.

Owensboro Christian Church was founded in 1953 and grew to about 750 people by 1994. That year the church purchased, moved into, and began renovating a declining mall in the center of the town. They grew steadily over the course of the next thirteen years until the facility housed a church of about 2500 people. In 2007 the first of a series of moral failures rocked the church. The pastor of 21 years was dismissed. An interim minister was appointed, but within six months of his arrival two staff persons were discovered in a moral failing and were also fired. By this time, weekly attendance dipped to 1300 people and staff had to be laid off.

When Kenworthy was hired in 2013 the church had already become much healthier at the leadership level. And though Kenworthy also had to fire a staff person for a moral failing the church has continued to recover. Kenworthy likes to say, "We are a people of faith and failure and where you find failure and faith, you find grace. … In many ways the story of OCC is the story of all of us."

Over the four-plus years of Kenworthy's tenure the church has shifted from an attractional model to a more mission-focused model. The church now focuses less on amenities for the members and more on compassion-based initiatives such as using the mall property for job training for low income families, housing a refugee ministry, and lending space to other not-for-profit organizations. With household incomes in

Owensboro decreasing 2.44 percent from 2014 to 2015,[3] these ministries have been important to the city's residents.

The church reflects the educational diversity of Owensboro with blue-collar and white-collar members whose educations range from trade school to PhDs. The church has grown to about 1,850 people in three weekend services, 20 percent of whom are Millennials. Kenworthy preaches at OCC 40 times each year.

Interview Observations

The researcher met with Kenworthy in a hotel dining room in Peoria, Illinois during the International Conference on Missions. The interview lasted just under one hour and was conducted using the protocol described in chapter four. The researcher's initial reaction to the interview and transcript review brought two things to mind: Kenworthy's intelligence and soft-spokenness. Kenworthy was measured in his responses to the researcher's questions. He paused to think before each answer and came across as erudite and articulate. The following observations were made from coded transcripts of Kenworthy's interview.

Biblically illiterate Millennials. A theme which emerged from Kenworthy's interview is his intentional strategy to connect with biblically illiterate listeners. He noted, "Whether they grew up in church or they're new … they don't understand much about God and the Bible. They don't have a good grounding." With a background in apologetics, Kenworthy is purposeful about helping Millennials develop a worldview consistent with their Christian faith. Recalling Ravi Zacharias's four questions of origin,

[3] "Owensboro, KY," DataUSA, accessed October 22, 2017, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/owensboro-ky/.

meaning, morality and destiny, Kenworthy stated that he assumes Millennials are asking those questions and that they have "almost no biblical knowledge" with which to answer them.

Connecting with biblically-illiterate Millennials is a foundational preaching strategy Kenworthy employs. He is intentional about making sure skeptics in the room feel welcome, as well as the freedom to express their doubts and uncertainties. He stated that he uses his sermons "probably every week or every other week" to answer the questions skeptics ask noting, "If you were [a] skeptic or you're a Christian, but … no one's ever answered these questions, I try to answer [them]." This means he addresses topics typically approached by apologists: science, Christianity's exclusive claims in a pluralist society and the question of evil.

Preaching to skeptics also means Kenworthy avoids facile answers. In doing so he acknowledges Millennials whose ideas are contrary to his own. His approach to seekers, doubters and those with questions is hospitable. He stated,

> I've been in contexts where [questioning] wasn't welcomed, or if it was welcomed, people didn't know what to do with it when it was expressed. And for me, normally when someone expresses doubt, that means they are seeking. They want truth.

Kenworthy noted that their church uses technology in their teaching time. He interacts with a television on stage that displays main ideas and key scriptures. Although he is intentional about leveraging technology during preaching, Kenworthy encourages his congregation to access the main passage in Bibles the church provides for the congregation.

Expository/narrative preaching. Kenworthy prefers to preach expository sermons. About 75 percent of his sermons are expository. He stated that he works through the text

verse by verse because he assumes "that people who are coming … haven't gotten the background" of the previous sermons in whatever series he is working through. His preference for expository sermons is intentional in another respect: he wants to teach his congregation how to read the Bible for themselves. Noting his belief that topical sermons tend to create a dependence on the preacher, Kenworthy sees expository sermons as a means to help congregants become self-feeders.

He also has a preference for narrative preaching. Because humans live their lives as stories instead of three homiletical points, Kenworthy suggested it is more natural to think in terms of story and to preach in ways that reflect story. People read books, they watch movies and tell stories to one another. It makes sense to Kenworthy that preaching also tells God's story. He will often tell a story verse by verse, and at the end of the sermon share two or three ways the story can be applied to his listeners' lives.

Kenworthy uses sermons to build bridges to Millennials instead walls. He stated, "If you're consistently attacking things … they're not gonna appreciate that." He is intentional about knowing the media Millennials consume without, necessarily, consuming it himself. He said, "I read every review of every movie that comes out so I know what people are watching. I do similar things with books. I read pretty widely." Kenworthy doesn't shy away from difficult topics. He addresses divorce, non-traditional families, gender identity, sexuality and pornography. His preference, though, is to find a passage of scripture which deals with such topics and preach an expository sermon.

Transparency and vulnerability. Kenworthy understands that the context in which he delivers the sermon is as important as the content of the sermon. When asked what he shares about himself in his sermons, Kenworthy noted he relates what is going on in his

personal life but with a measured approach. One Mother's Day, for example, he shared the difficulty he and his wife had with infertility. He shares personal struggles and uses self-deprecating humor in his messages but is careful to avoid sharing too much or too frequently lest his sermons appear formulaic.

Kenworthy tries to demonstrate in his teaching that he is on the journey along with everyone else. He has not yet arrived but as he puts it, "There is a story; we are in a process, on a journey." When he shares personally, Kenworthy is intentional about sharing instances in his life that are "honest struggles and not just made up." That enables him to encourage doubters and skeptics whom he welcomes to join him on the journey.

Intentionally connecting with Millennials. Perhaps the most significant observation from the interview is the commitment Kenworthy has made to directly connecting with Millennials. Not only does he carve out time to be with Millennials, he makes the congregation aware of this priority by mentioning it in his sermons. He occasionally speaks to OCC's high school students. He invests in younger staff persons by giving them opportunities to preach and coaches them through their preparation and delivery. He noted that "just spending time with them and being able to articulate that in messages … has made a big difference for our people."

This commitment includes enlisting the help of the Millennials on the OCC staff: "I'll lean in and sit with our staff who work with [Millennials] on a regular basis and sometimes even ask questions [like] 'what do we need to be covering and talking about that we are not?'" Kenworthy made a practice of hosting a group of twenty-somethings at his home every Saturday night when he first went to OCC. It is a practice he has continued with somewhat-less frequency.

Kenworthy is culturally curious. He knows what Millennials are reading, watching and talking about. He relies on his wife, who works with students at their church, on younger staff persons and on direct interactions with Millennials to help him be aware of the questions they ask and the issues they confront. He uses social media to stay connected to Millennials and push content to them, though he admits he is not as strategic as he could be in doing so.

Observations from Survey of Millennials at Owensboro Christian Church

Survey forms were completed by 104 individuals. Some individuals who accessed the survey were excluded from the data because they did not indicate their birth year and thus were unable to be confirmed as Millennials.

- Sixty-eight respondents were older Millennials (born 1982-1990); 31 were younger Millennials (born 1991-1999).
- Sixty-one were female. Thirty-eight were male. Four did not indicate their sex.
- All respondents indicated they are Christians. Ninety-three percent have been Christians longer than five years. None have been a Christian for less than a year.
- Half of the respondents have attended OCC for six years or longer. The rest have either been at OCC about the same time as Kenworthy, or came since he became the lead pastor.
- About two-thirds of respondents indicate they attend OCC once a week or more. Twenty-three percent attend two to three times per month. The remaining attend once per month or less.

As the coded data was analyzed some themes emerged.

Kenworthy is perceived as intelligent. Several of the respondents indicated their appreciation for Kenworthy's intellect and the way it contributes to the depth of his teaching. Respondent 64 noted, "Scott has a very deep knowledge of the Bible. [He] is such a student of the Bible [and] has a unique ability to draw out little known facts or

insights that are valuable." A 30-year-old woman wrote, "I am impressed by the depth of his study and ability to examine the text from new angles" (respondent 38). Millennials at OCC appreciate the bibliocentrism of Kenworthy's preaching. Comments like "so much knowledge of the Word in every sermon" (respondent 94) and "I have a deeper appreciation for God's Word" (respondent 95) were typical of the reasons why respondents said Kenworthy's sermons helped them grow in their faith.

Kenworthy's sermons are understandable. Millennials' appreciation for Kenworthy's knowledge is amplified by his ability to make the complicated understandable. While the respondents commented that they liked how Kenworthy's sermons focus on scripture and appreciate that his main text is the Bible, they also indicated their gratitude for the way his sermons make the Bible so accessible. The response of this 29-year-old male (respondent 52) was typical: "Pastor Scott's sermons are challenging for the non-Christian and Christian alike. He addresses a multitude of topics and he always completely explains the topic at hand with biblical evidence and real-life examples." Respondent 98 stated, "Scott preaches in a way that allows all to understand." Respondent 28 wrote that Kenworthy "discusses deep theological things in ways every person [can] understand." Survey takers frequently noted the relevance Kenworthy's sermons had in their lives. Respondent 11 indicated, "He has helped me in life." Respondent 27 said, "He addresses real life questions in scripture."

Millennials perceive Kenworthy as humble. His ability to make the complicated clear and relevant to his congregation may also be one of the reasons why Millennials at OCC perceive humility in Kenworthy. Some respondents noted a connection between the two, like the 31-year-old male who noted Kenworthy's "simplicity in speaking. He's

open, humble and real" (respondent 36). Humility, authenticity, and realness often appeared in word clusters. Although OCC's Millennials perceive Kenworthy's intelligence, he does not feel distant from them one as might expect from someone so scholarly.

That might be due to Kenworthy's willingness to admit his own struggles and failures. Multiple respondents indicated their appreciation for him doing so. Respondent 36 wrote, "His teachings have helped provide perspective, even using his own life in mistakes he's learned from or hard times that have pushed his faith to grow. His openness in sharing his struggles and what he has learned helps encourage me and remind me that I'm not alone." Survey takers frequently mentioned their appreciation for Kenworthy's transparency and openness. A comment from a 23-year-old woman was typical of several others. She noted, "Scott is honest, transparent, and incredibly intentional" (respondent 90). Others characterized this aspect of Kenworthy as genuine and authentic. Respondent 56 wrote,

> Scott is very open, transparent, honest, and talks and deals with things in a very real and mature way. This also makes his sermons very inviting because he is being real when he preaches and what he is saying comes from a place of truth and grace.

Kenworthy's humility may also be one of the reasons so many Millennials at OCC describe him as accessible and personable to people who have doubts and questions about their faith. Comments like these indicate the closeness many Millennials feel to Kenworthy: "Scott is relatable and seems approachable" (respondent 65). "Scott is personable [and] values each individual in his church" (respondent 24). A handful of respondents noted that Kenworthy is a "good guy." Despite the large size of Kenworthy's congregation, Millennials feel like they are connected to their lead pastor. The perception

that Kenworthy is accessible to OCC's Millennials enables him to preach some hard truths while preserving the relationships he has with them.

Kenworthy does well balancing grace and truth. "He doesn't push Jesus down people's throats" is the way one 20-year-old guy (respondent 35) characterized Kenworthy's teaching. Respondent 54 noted that "Scott is able to tackle tough issues by presenting both truth and grace within his messages." Respondents noted that Kenworthy has preached on LGBT issues in his church. He has tackled tough subjects like the intersection of faith and science, and current events in the United States which have polarized many. Respondent 91 wrote, "He is quite capable of presenting striking truth in a gracious way and helps the congregation to examine our beliefs and worldview."

The ability to balance grace and truth was noted by OCC Millennials as important to welcoming their doubting friends. One person appreciated Kenworthy's approach which makes the "church experience more welcoming and laid-back, allowing a non-believer to come in the doors of a church and feel more comfortable" (respondent 24). This allows for, as another person noted, "a safe space for people to ponder instead of immediately reacting defensively if they don't agree right away" (respondent 27). Another wrote, "Pastor Scott always addresses the non-Christians in every sermon that he preaches" (respondent 52).

Interview Observations and Survey Results Compared

There was significant congruence between Kenworthy's interview and what the Millennials in his church had to say about him. In his interview he appeared poised, thoughtful and intelligent; OCC Millennials frequently cited his intelligence and knowledge of the Bible. Kenworthy made a point of mentioning his strategy to connect

with biblically illiterate Millennials. He assumes his listeners lack a good grounding in theology and orthodox doctrines, and Millennials in his church indicated their appreciation for his ability to make spiritually complex concepts understandable.

Kenworthy's intentional practice of speaking to skeptics in the room is appreciated by OCC's Millennials. He welcomes doubters. He sees people who question their faith not as weak, but as seeking. The survey results reflect that this practice is effective. Millennials at OCC feel comfortable expressing their doubts, but perhaps more importantly they feel comfortable inviting fellow seekers to the church secure in the knowledge that it is a safe place to explore faith. It is also a place that is safe to be vulnerable with their struggles. Kenworthy's practice of being transparent with his personal struggles demonstrates that the church is a place where people are able to journey together and that failure is not a cause for rejection but an opportunity for growth. Millennials at OCC feel connected to their pastor. Although there are more than 350 Millennials at OCC, they reported they feel he is accessible and approachable.

Comparing the coded interview transcript with the coded data from the surveys taken by Millennials at OCC reveals Kenworthy's efforts are having an impact. Millennials at OCC recognize and appreciate his sensitivity to their culture. The congruence between Kenworthy's statements and those of the respondents indicates he is successfully contextualizing the gospel to OCC's Millennials. Kenworthy exhibits a cultural curiosity evidenced by his ability to not only exegete the scriptures but to exegete his audience. Kenworthy is hitting the target at which he is aiming.

Cross-Case Analysis

There are two notable differences and a number of similarities between the three cases selected for study.

Differences

Different Generational Cohorts

The most significant difference in the three cases selected for study are the respective generational cohorts to which the three individuals belong. Born in 1978, Chris VandeLinde is the oldest of the three and is well within the boundaries of Generation X. Scott Kenworthy qualifies as a "cusper" having been born in 1981 on the boundary between the GenXer and Millennial cohorts. McKenzie is a Millennial. At age 31 he is the youngest of the three cases studied and is the only one who is a Millennial by every definition of the term. Much of what McKenzie does to engage with Millennials is not strategic so much as it is intuitive. While VandeLinde and Kenworthy are intentional about their efforts to connect with Millennials, McKenzie does so intrinsically by virtue of being one. Asking him about Millennial culture is like asking a fish about the water in which it swims. The fish is not really aware of the water; it is a taken-for-granted part of the environment. Engaging in cultural investigation requires less effort for McKenzie than for VandeLinde and Kenworthy. As generational immigrants they have to approach Millennials more mindful of the cross-cultural exchange necessitated by their divergent generational cohorts.

Different Approaches to Preaching

The second difference in the three cases is their approach to preaching. All three have preached topical and expository sermons. Where McKenzie related he is a reluctant

topical preacher and would personally prefer to preach expository sermons, VandeLinde makes no apology for preaching topically. He stated his unequivocal bias that topical sermons are more effective at fostering spiritual growth in Millennials in his context. Kenworthy prefers to preach expository sermons, even going so far as to note his opinion that topical preaching can foster unhealthy dependence on the preacher. Kenworthy is also intentional about preaching stories. Noting that our lives are lived in stories, he focuses his efforts on preaching narrative sermons which expose truth in verse-by-verse treatments.

Similarities

Similarities in Background

Generational cohorts aside, there are a number of demographic similarities in the three case studies. Each is in his thirties. Each is married. Each is a father or else soon will be. Each preacher has earned a graduate degree (Kenworthy has earned two), and each has been the lead pastor at his current church for four years or less. Each has overcome challenges related to their transition to the churches where they serve. As a 25-year-old preacher fresh out of seminary, McKenzie was asked to fill the shoes of NECC's founding pastor and to lead a church of 2,500 people. Kenworthy faced the challenges of significant church debt and wounds from the moral failings of multiple staff members when he arrived at OCC. VandeLinde endured the challenges of a failed capital campaign and significant staff turnover at CCC.

While not enough pastors were studied to make a positive correlation between family of origin and the ability to pastor churches with large Millennial populations, it is worth noting that each of the three preachers came from family backgrounds of

significant faith. All three grew up in the church and lived in homes where their parents modeled following Jesus. One wonders if the endurance needed to overcome the challenges the three have faced in the early years of their tenures has its foundation in the Christian upbringings that each received.

Preaching to Skeptics

While there was variance in how the three cases approached the issue of topical versus expository preaching, all three preachers indicated they make an effort to connect with skeptical Millennials. Each expressed an understanding of, and strategy for, engaging Millennials' skepticism. Each preacher acknowledges the skeptics in the room when he preaches. Giving voice to those doubters creates a safe environment to ask questions and seek the truth.

McKenzie and Kenworthy approach preaching to skeptics with an apologetic bent to their sermons. VandeLinde's strategy involves fostering relationships and creating environments where skeptics' questions are acknowledged and dialogue can occur. All three note that skeptics, doubters and seekers place a high premium on authenticity. To varying degrees, each preacher acknowledges his struggles in his sermons, demonstrating openness, honesty and vulnerability. Recognizing that Millennials have finely tuned sensors for anything that smacks of phoniness, each lives authentically before his congregation. By doing so each of the three case study preachers is perceived by Millennials in their respective congregations as relatable and genuine, which enables them to deliver sermons that sometime contain hard truths.

Each of the three preachers emphasized that Millennials, skeptics included, are hungry for truth. Kenworthy noted that when he encounters a Millennial seeker he sees

someone who is searching for truth. VandeLinde began his interview by stating that preaching is more important than ever because Millennials are hungry for the truth of God's Word. McKenzie – the Millennial of the three – made the most full-throated argument that Millennials want truth when he stated that the cultural upheaval our nation is currently experiencing is a sign Millennials are not ambivalent about truth but passionate about it. A challenge each of the three preachers has been able to master is the ability to preach truth so Millennials will hear it even when they disagree with it.

Preaching Sermons That Motivate Action

The three also focus their sermons toward action. They preach messages that are applicable in real-life situations, and the Millennials in their churches express appreciation for their sermons' relevance. Kenworthy's narrative approach to preaching means the bulk of his sermon is spent exposing the text, but each sermon concludes with specific application points which are reinforced in sermon-based small groups. While VandeLinde did not speak about sermon application in his interview, CCC's Millennial surveys indicated that his sermons drive toward action and spiritual growth. McKenzie's push to apply the sermon is consistently overt as he frequently urges Millennials at his church to engage in *Love the 'Ville.*

A Commitment to Cultural Exegesis

Each of the three preachers is a cultural investigator who has worked to better understand Millennials and contextualize the gospel to their generation. Through the selection process, the researcher was able to ascertain that each of the three has read books and articles to gain greater insight into Millennials and their worldview. Each also

indicated he is intentional about preaching sermons that address issues important to Millennials.

Perhaps most importantly, though, each of the three spends time with Millennials. That is easiest for McKenzie because he is a Millennial. Kenworthy began his ministry at OCC with a commitment to spend every Saturday with a group of Millennials in his home. He engages with students in the church's student ministry and regularly interacts with Millennials on his staff to elicit their thoughts on how the church can better disciple Millennials. He makes it a practice to know what Millennials are reading, viewing, and the applications they use on their mobile devices. VandeLinde expressed that cultural investigation is as necessary for the GenXer pastor who wants to reach Millennials as it is for a missionary who contextualizes the gospel in a foreign setting.

The cultural investigation in which VandeLinde, McKenzie and Kenworthy engage is done in order to contextualize the gospel to the Millennials in their churches. The researcher believes they are succeeding in that effort.

CHAPTER SIX: FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR PREACHING SERMONS THAT FOSTER SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN MILLENNIALS

The Case for Contextualization

There is an extent to which every preacher in every culture has contextualized the gospel to his listeners. Each time she speaks, the preacher leads her congregation on a journey from where they are to where she wants them to go. That her listeners are not yet "there" implies missional distance which the sermon attempts to bridge. That means every sermon is a cross-cultural sermon just as every conversation is a cross-cultural conversation and every interaction is a cross-cultural exchange. Even when there is very little missional distance between two people, each is still a unique individual who must seek to understand before trying to be understood. What sets communicating to Millennials apart from preachers' past efforts at contextualizing the gospel to their listeners is how radically different Millennials are from the generational cohorts that immediately precede them.

Scripture provides examples of preachers whose sermons were contextualized to the culture to which they were delivered. Missionaries have demonstrated the importance of the missiological investigation necessary for contextualizing the gospel. Preachers can no longer take for granted that Millennials share the beliefs, attitudes and actions that were once assumed to be part of the experience of every person who grew up in a Judeo-Christian context. Neither can preachers assume Millennials share a body of cultural, scriptural and spiritual knowledge with the older generational cohorts to which most of

their pastors belong. This lack of a home field advantage means today's preachers must assume that every Sunday morning in America is now an away game.

The Case from Scripture

God has always used people to communicate his message. He used Abraham to communicate his desire to bless the world (Gen. 12:1-3). He used Moses to communicate how he wanted his people to live in holiness and interact with a God who is completely other (Exod. 19:3-6). God ordained priests to act as intermediaries who bridged the gulf between a perfect God and his imperfect people (Num. 3:5-7). The prophets communicated God's decrees. Some were messages of judgment and condemnation. Others were messages of hope and reconciliation. Since Adam and Eve's expulsion, God has revealed himself through people because a veil of holiness prevented God from revealing himself directly to humankind (Exod. 33:20).

Jesus Christ changed that. His incarnation is the ultimate expression of God's revelation. Jesus told Philip, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). God "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14) to show us who God is and to demonstrate how God wants his children to behave. Jesus is God contextualized to the human experience. He was subject to parents to show us how to obey (Luke 2:51). He was tempted (Heb. 4:15) to show us how God overcomes sin (Matt. 4:10). He wept (John 11:35) to show us how God grieves. He walked among us to show us how to live (2 Cor. 6:16) and he died to show us the depth of his love (John 15:13). Every human condition which the enfleshed God (1 Tim. 3:16) experienced contextualized the Creator to his creation.

God still reveals himself through people as his Spirit-filled church bears witness to the nations (Acts 1:8). His apostles testified to the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 4:33). Peter proclaimed the risen Christ to the Jews and Paul preached him to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:8). Successive generations of disciples have entrusted the things they have seen and heard in the presence of many witnesses to reliable men and women who have taught them to others (2 Tim. 2:2). God continues to use people to reveal who he is, as his children give a reason for the hope they have in Jesus to everyone who asks (1 Pet. 3:15).

Among the people whom God uses are the preachers he has called. The world needs preachers (Rom. 10:14) who will contextualize the good news of a first-century Messiah to twenty-first century Millennials. The world needs preachers like Peter and Paul who have the discernment to exegete the scriptures and their congregations, preachers who have the Spirit-inspired creativity to cross the cultural barriers that separate lost people from Jesus.

An Example of Cross-Cultural Mission Practices

When the researcher's sister and brother-in-law became Bible translators in Africa, their first step was to move there. They chose a village, built a house and settled into village life. They learned their neighbors' language. They studied cultural practices so they could avoid unintentional faux pas. They planted a garden, discovered new foods as well as new ways of cooking them, and soon their diets were similar to the other villagers. They raised two daughters. The fears every parent in the village had for their children – poisonous snakes, disease outbreaks and political upheaval – became their fears also. When a villager died, they mourned; when a baby was born, they rejoiced.

These actions, though uncomfortable, were undertaken intentionally because they were necessary to bridging the cultural, language and spiritual divides which separated them from their new neighbors. Before being able to share Jesus, they first had to share life (1 Thess. 2:8). Before they ever spoke the name of Jesus, they became Christ incarnate to their village. While there was much they could learn from travelogues, tourists and West African expatriates, there was no substitute for being there. Studying anthropology and linguistics gave them the skills to perform ethnographic research, but eventually they had to cross the ocean in order to cross the cultural divide that separated them from a third-world tribe.

When Paul received his Macedonian call in a dream he heard someone saying, "*Come* over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 6:9, emphasis added), not "send someone" or "write an epistle." In order to engage cultures different from their own, missionaries like Paul, as well as the researcher's sister and brother-in-law, have been crossing divides, metaphorical and literal, for centuries.

Most preachers are culturally distant from Millennials in their pews each Sunday, but one does not have to board a plane to cross that divide. Preachers who contextualize their sermons to Millennials recognize the cultural divide and preach cross-cultural sermons because they understand that preaching to Millennials is a cross-cultural experience.

Millennials are a Different Culture

Each generation is shaped by the images and ideas of its youth. Traditionalists learned loyalty from posters of Uncle Sam urging them to do their part to win World War II. Baby Boomers were inspired to dream by President Kennedy's Camelot and Neil

Armstrong walking on the moon. Movies like *Back to the Future* fueled Generation X's sense that they missed out on America's best years. Millennials were also shaped by the images and ideas of their childhood.

Disney movies, with their heroic children and daft, insensitive adults, taught Millennials to reject authority and believe they could be anything they wanted to become. When they discovered their expectations were unachievable, they became cynical. For older Millennials, the hanging chads of the United States 2000 Presidential election and the sex-abuse scandals of religious leaders were among the disappointments that fueled their suspicion and mistrust of public institutions. Younger Millennials, who have never known a world without on-demand television, smartphones and the Internet, have become increasingly impatient to achieve their unrealistic expectations. For younger Millennials, whose childhood years were presided over by an elegant and graceful African American President, the 2016 election was jarring. Because the cartoons they watched at home and the curricula they studied in school indoctrinated them with a new prime directive, tolerance, the political vitriol scrolling across their social media feed is particularly disillusioning.

For many Millennials, faith in Jesus and engagement in his church is either a quaint but largely irrelevant accessory from a bygone era, a perpetuator (or perpetrator, depending on one's perspective) of morals that are bigoted, out-of-date and intolerant, or something in between. All is not lost. One-third of America's Millennials attend church on a given Sunday. And they need preachers who can contextualize the sermon to their culture.

Five Principles for Contextualizing the Gospel to Millennials

Before the five principles for contextualizing the gospel to Millennials can be considered, there is one preliminary – yet absolutely essential – first step. The first step in preaching more effectively to Millennials is purposing to do so. It is an act of the will more difficult for established preachers than they might be comfortable admitting. Change often is.

Boomer and GenXer preachers ascended to leadership in an evangelical church culture that promoted the attractional church model: find a good location, build a modern facility with state-of-the-art amenities for the members, hire a competent, charismatic staff, develop a safe and fun student ministry program, pull off inspiring worship services each week and the church will grow. This way of doing church included a preaching model predicated on addressing church members' perceived needs, but it spawned the hyper-individualistic, consumer-driven Christianity that grew into Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, the default religion of the Millennial cohort.

It is also a preaching model that is wholly inadequate for discipling Millennials.

In order to contextualize the gospel to a cohort so different from preceding generations, the researcher and his fellow generational immigrant preachers must be willing to learn, to grow, to change. The apostle Paul demonstrated how:

> Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some (1 Cor. 9:19-22).

Too much is at stake for preachers to wait in smug expectation for Millennials "to come to their senses." Emerging generations almost never move toward the culture of their immediate predecessors. Millennials cannot afford for preachers to remain stiff-necked and intransigent on this point. The discipling of a generation requires indigenous Millennial leaders, as well as Baby Boomer and GenXer immigrants, who will preach with the humility of Paul, becoming like Millennials so that by all means possible they might save some.

The results of this project's biblical-theological study, literature review and case studies reveal important characteristics of what preachers must be and do if they want to preach sermons which help Millennials grow in faith. They also revealed two characteristics that do not impact a preacher's ability to engage with Millennials.

One does not have to be a Millennial to preach to Millennials; though it probably helps. Preachers born after 1982 already "speak Millennial." They intuit much of what their older counterparts must learn. Nevertheless, older preachers who commit to learning all they can about Millennials can leverage that generation's desire for mentoring and intergenerational relationships to more effectively communicate the gospel to their younger siblings.

One does not have to commit exclusively to a specific sermon method, either. The three case study preachers presented in this project have preached topical, expository and narrative sermons. One preaches expository and narrative sermons almost exclusively. The other two preach mostly topical sermons. Yet each leads a church that has grown during their tenure. Each preaches to a significant number of Millennials who indicated by their surveys that their preacher's sermons challenge them to grow in their faith.

Keeping that in mind, the researcher synthesized the findings of this thesis project to identify five principles preachers can implement which will enable them to preach sermons that are more palatable and profitable for the Millennials who hear them. The majority of these principles are about *doing*, but perhaps the most important of the five is about *being*. Therein lies an irony: while this thesis was conceived to articulate principles aimed at preaching, the principles that follow ended up being mostly about the preacher.

Principle One: Engage in Cultural Exegesis

With the average age of pastors in America at 55 years, the vast majority of preachers confront Millennials as generational immigrants, as missionaries to a culture they will only understand with a resolute commitment to cultural investigation. If twentieth-century century preachers hope to connect with Millennials they must commit to engaging in cultural exegesis.

For as long as there have been preachers, they have been exegeting their listeners. Peter discerned the differences in the three audiences to whom he preached in Acts 2, 3 and 4. Doing so enabled him to adjust how much he shared with his audiences about the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. When Paul preached in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13-43), he started with the story of Israel's ancestors and progressively revealed to them, from their own history and scriptures, that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah for whom the Jews had prayed. Knowing the Lystran mob had no such background (Acts 14:8-18), Paul preached using examples from nature. When he preached in Athens (Acts 17:22-31), Paul used images and stories with which the Epicureans and Stoics were familiar. Millennials need preachers like Peter and Paul who have the discernment to exegete their congregation before they exegete the scriptures.

The cultural shifts of the last thirty years have created a divide that is considerably larger than the few feet between pulpit and pew which separate preacher and parishioner each Sunday. Everything has changed. Baby Boomer and GenXer preachers preach in analog, but the Millennials to whom they preach are digital natives. Preachers often assume that the sexual ethics about which they preach are shared by Millennials. They are not. Preachers hold their Bibles aloft and intone authoritatively, "The Bible says." Millennials reply, "So what?" Considered experts in systematic theology, church history and ecclesiology by the Traditionalists in their congregations, preachers are surprised when Millennials not only don't care what the preacher thinks about such topics, but don't even know what those topics are.

The responsibility for traversing the cultural gap between the preacher and Millennial parishioners begins with the preacher and her commitment to developing cultural curiosity. Preachers must foster the art of listening. They must learn to ask more questions and make fewer statements. When Millennials ask their pastor a question, his default first response must be, "Why do you ask?"

Fostering cultural curiosity begins by assuming the best in Millennials. Preachers need to resist the urge to accept Millennial stereotypes that compare them with previous generational cohorts. If Millennials' approach to sexuality seems shameless, perhaps it is because they grew up in a culture awash with sexual images where one in six boys and one in four girls was sexually abused. If Millennials' approach to work seems lazy and they are perpetually moving in and out of their parents' basements, maybe it is because the promise that a college education would guarantee a good job left them, instead, with a mountain of school debt and a degree with little practical application. If Millennials'

extreme version of tolerance, their demands for safe spaces and trigger warnings makes them seem delicate to preceding generations, maybe older generational cohorts need to reexamine their own proclivity to discriminate against people who are different.

Preachers who commit to cultural exegesis will choose to lean into the differences they encounter in Millennials instead of being repulsed by them. Millennials' cultural assumptions cannot be challenged until preachers know what they are, how they were arrived at, and why they are so tightly held.

Of considerable importance in exegeting Millennial culture is understanding Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) and its effects on religion in America. The god whom Millennials inherited from their Baby Boomer and GenXer parents is not just a poor facsimile of the God of Christianity. He is much worse. The god of MTD is a toothless god, a cosmic butler who stands quietly in the corner until he is summoned and stoops obsequiously to lower the silver tray upon which rests whatever morsel for which the bell was rung. The god of MTD is fake beauty and no duty. He is the loving uncle who never castigates but soothes the stricken consciences of those whose sin has aroused the righteous conviction of the Holy Spirit. If the false god of Millennial veneration is to be confronted, preachers must understand MTD and be able to demonstrate the sheer superiority of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who is revealed in Jesus Christ. That can only happen when preachers become students of Millennial culture instead of merely critics of Millennial culture. There is no better way to engage in the required cultural investigation than to spend time with Millennials.

Principle Two: Intentionally Connect with Millennials

There is no substitute for spending time with Millennials. For Millennials, the context of the sermon matters more than the content of the sermon. The context includes the one doing the preaching. For Millennials, the preacher is the most important component of the sermon. The only way they will relate with their pastor is if their pastor relates to them. The key to doing that is for the preacher to intentionally connect with Millennials.

The previous generations' cliché was, "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Acceptance of your content depends on the context. The Millennial version of that saying is, "They don't care how much you know, until they know you." Without context, there is no transfer of content. For preachers who have been trained to preach really well, the paradigmatic shift to being known really well can be challenging.

Again, change is difficult. Baby Boomer and GenXer preachers recall with respect and admiration the preachers of their youth. They were men who wore suits and ties and held office hours and sat on community boards. In mainline churches they were called "Reverend;" in evangelical churches they were called "Pastor." In churches such as the researcher's, which eschewed titles, the preacher's peers called him "brother" and the preacher's parishioners called him "Mister." (When older church members speak about the pastor emeritus at the researcher's church they invariably call him Mr. Palmer.) These titles were more than honorifics. The clergymen who wore them wordlessly promoted them by the way they held the church at a distance, slightly awestruck by preachers who seemed more Christian than the rest of the congregation. The idea of being

known, of lowering the scrim which separates clergy and layperson, is as difficult for many older preachers as it is for them to hear nineteen-year-olds address them as "Bob."

Intentionally connecting with Millennials means preachers will choose to let themselves be known. They will be the ones to walk across the room to where Millennials cluster waiting to see who will make the first move.

With respect to this principle, preachers in smaller contexts have an advantage over their megachurch counterparts. They have the ability for face-to-face interaction with every person in their congregation. They can choose to carve out time for Millennials. Hungry for inter-generational relationships, Millennials are likely to respond favorably to their efforts. For preachers in smaller contexts, the way they relate to Millennials sets up their ability to preach effectively to Millennials. Conversely, for preachers in larger contexts, the way they preach sets up their ability to relate. When a preacher in a larger context does something as simple as liking an Instagram photo of a Millennial from his church serving, it helps the Millennial who posted it, and every Millennial in that person's circle of friends, feel more connected to their pastor.

One of the most effective ways preachers in large and small contexts can relate better to Millennials is to share their story. A person's story is their most unique possession. When a preacher shares his story with a Millennial he is giving her something of value because he is the only person on the planet who can offer that gift. Sharing one's story provides context for everything else a preacher has to say. Sharing one's story reveals the "why" behind the message, and the "why" is where the power of the message is located. A preacher's sermon on hope takes on new meaning for the Millennial who realizes following Jesus enabled the preacher to be the first person in three generations of

his family to experience freedom from addiction. A preacher who teaches to forgive has enormous credibility when her listeners learn she forgave the perpetrator of her own childhood abuse. A sermon on resisting temptation is more meaningful when the preacher admits he sometimes fails at resisting.

Intentionally connecting with Millennials also means going where Millennials are, literally and virtually. Preachers in smaller contexts should invest the time to mentor Millennials in their churches; preachers in larger contexts need to be intentional about connecting with Millennials in their church through social media and by making themselves available when the church gathers. There is no place for a green room in a church that is intentional about connecting with Millennials. Not every Millennial will want to connect with their pastor, but his visible presence in the lobby between services speaks volumes about his accessibility and increases the perception that he is relatable.

Relatability is critical to being able to preach the hard truths of scripture. Millennials are more accepting of difficult truths, even those with which they disagree, when they feel connected to the person doing the preaching. Both from the pulpit and in individual conversations, preachers need to be courageous enough to share their struggles and failures with Millennials. As counterintuitive as it feels to older preachers, when they are transparent and vulnerable about their own mistakes it increases their ability to preach sermons which help the Millennials in their churches grow.

Principle Three: Live Humbly; Be Transparent

That kind of sharing can only take place if the preacher is humble enough to acknowledge his own faults and transparent enough to allow others to see them.

Preachers who want to lead Millennials on a path to greater spiritual growth need to communicate that they are fellow travelers with the Millennials they seek to influence.

Millennials have been so often let down. Their parents often couldn't hold their marriages together and Millennials became collateral damage. Their sports heroes were exposed for using performance-enhancing drugs and stripped of their titles. The Hollywood celebrities they admired turned out to be lecherous old men who used their power to prey on women. The musicians they listened to overdosed. Their government officials got caught. And the pastor got arrested. Millennials assume their preacher does not have it all together. When the preacher's lone portrayal of himself is as someone who is always confident and always competent, the only person he's fooling is himself.

That is why three of the most important words a preacher can ever say to a Millennial are, "I don't know." Millennials do not expect their pastor to have life's road map memorized. If he is willing to admit that he does not, though, Millennials are more likely to want to share the journey. Admitting one does not have all the answers creates space for Millennials to engage in the collaborative learning they prefer. Many preachers' insecurities can cause them to fear admitting their ignorance will make the church wonder why they keep someone so incompetent on staff. What's the point of paying a pastor, after all, if he cannot explain why bad things happen to good people? The reality is, admitting one's inadequacies endears the preacher to his Millennial parishioners.

The two most important words a preacher will every say to Millennials are, "Me too." You struggle with sin? Me too. You sometimes wonder if God is real? Me too. You get angry, depressed, sad, overwhelmed? Me too. Admittedly, there are plenty of circumstances in which preachers cannot say those words. Most preachers will never

know the way student loan debt crushes Millennials' hopes for the future. But most know the feeling of hopelessness. Few Baby Boomer and GenXer pastors have known the humiliation of moving back into their parents' basements, but they can relate to feeling helpless. "Me too" are two potent words that, when spoken with humility and transparency, can powerfully bond a preacher to the Millennials in her church.

The single most important word a Millennial can hear their preacher speak is "yes." There are times when the answer must be "no" but Millennials have heard that word so often they have come to expect it. When Millennials hear powerful words like, "Yes, I have time to meet with you" or "Yes, God loves you anyway" the impact of positive affirmation in the context of repeated negative responses is incalculable.

Another idea from the world of missiology is germane to principle three: fostering reciprocity with Millennials. Cross-cultural missionaries know the importance of developing reciprocal relationships with their neighbors. They understand that a one-sided relationship in which the missionary always gives and never receives creates an unhealthy paternalism. An important breakthrough often results when a missionary asks an indigenous person for help. That assistance can come in the form of helping navigate a government bureaucracy that is foreign to the missionary. Maybe it is the result of helping clear up a conflict centered on a cultural misunderstanding. It can even be as simple as loaning a tool or personal item to the missionary.

Preachers would be wise to develop reciprocal relationships with Millennials. It takes humility for a GenXer to admit he does not know how to program the elliptical at the gym. It takes transparency for a Baby Boomer to hand his laptop to a Millennial and tell her, "I can't figure out how to store documents in the cloud." Requests like these

signal to Millennials that they are viewed as peers, not projects. They level the playing field and give preachers an entryway into Millennials' lives which can lead to spiritual conversations. They can also provide a doorway to influencing Millennial skeptics and doubters.

Principle Four: Create Room for Skeptics and Doubters

When previous generational cohorts doubted their faith, more often than not they kept their doubts to themselves. Not so with Millennials. Their inherent mistrust of ecclesial and biblical authority fuels their cynicism. Millennials have doubts. They are going to talk about them with someone. The only question is whether or not they will approach their pastors with their skepticism. They are much more likely to do so if preachers are intentional about creating room for skeptics and doubters to voice their suspicions and uncertainties.

The Millennial generation contains the largest percentage of Nones of any of the four adult cohorts currently living. Just over one-third of all Millennials report they have no faith affiliation of any kind. The approaches which worked with previous generational cohorts in addressing skepticism and doubts are insufficient for Millennials. When Baby Boomers and GenXers shared their doubts with their pastors (if they were courageous enough to do so) they were handed a copy of Josh McDowell's *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*. The book was the apologetic textbook to the masses for a generation. It employed reason and logic to argue the truth of Christianity.

Millennials are not up for the argument. They are the "whatever generation" and view religion as something not worth fighting over. Preachers who want to connect with

Millennial skeptics and doubters will become twenty-first century apologists who focus less on building a case and more on building relationships.

Affirmation and exploration are important steps in addressing Millennials who are bold enough to bring their doubts to their preachers. When a skeptic shares his misgivings, it is something to be celebrated. Most Millennials view the church as a place that is hostile to doubters and skeptics, so it takes courage to confront a preacher with views one can assume are opposed to her own. Consequently, preachers should affirm at every opportunity that the church is a safe place to explore faith. They must remind Millennials that Jesus' disciples harbored doubts of their own at times. That Jesus told his followers "blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed" (John 20:29) is evidence there were doubters among the first Christians. That Paul reassured the Corinthians that Christ had risen (1 Cor. 15:5-8) suggests there were those who doubted the resurrection. Affirming doubters and skeptics creates a safe environment and the opportunity for dialogue.

It also opens the door for exploration. When a Millennial shares a doubt with her pastor, it is important for him to understand the question behind the question. Again, asking questions before making statements is a good practice. Some of the best questions to ask skeptics are the "why" questions. Why is this so important to you? Why do you think you are wrestling with this now? Why do you think God has you thinking about this? Maybe the reason a Millennial is struggling with his faith is because he is learning about the injustices perpetrated in the name of religion in his medieval history class. Maybe a Millennial has been taught an either-or approach to science and the Bible, and has consequently determined that, having to choose, she chooses science. Maybe a family

tragedy has caused long unspoken doubts about the goodness of God to surface. When pastors understand the issues underlying the questions Millennials bring them, they are in a better position to respond to those questions.

That means preachers must not neglect the discipline of apologetics. Preachers still need to "hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so [they] can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). However, twenty-first century apologists may benefit by beginning the conversation in a more pragmatic place. Since Millennials are naturally mistrustful of authority, their approach to knowledge is egalitarian. The ability to Google means nobody is an expert because everybody can be an expert. Nearly 40 percent of Christian Millennials have fact-checked their preachers' sermons in real time. That means Millennials are not just going to take their pastors' word as gospel. Well-crafted, airtight, coherent arguments are not nearly as effective for Millennials as saying, "It sounds like this is really challenging your faith right now. Let's try and find an answer to your questions together."

This means preachers will focus more on a Millennial's trajectory and less on his destination. In the past, more attention was paid to one's destination: is he or she saved or not? Because Millennials are the collaborative learning generation that thrives on dialogue, preachers need to become more comfortable with the idea of encouraging Millennials to take "next steps." The goal of this paradigm is not just crossing the line from unsaved to saved; it is setting a course which leads one closer to Jesus. The very act of asking a pastor about one's doubts is a signal that a Millennial's trajectory is bending in the direction of Jesus. Rather than focusing solely on how one can answer all their doubts and fears, preachers need to invest their time helping Millennials move in the

direction of Jesus. Much of that can be accomplished by changing the way preachers approach preaching to Millennials.

Principle Five: Adjust the Way You Preach

Not only is Sunday morning no longer a "home game," there are fewer "season ticket holders" in the seats. While most Millennials do not attend a church on Sunday, those who do attend, do so less frequently. That narrows the opportunities to engage Millennials via the sermon. Preachers who are serious about preaching sermons which foster spiritual growth in Millennials will adjust the way they preach. They will make the most of every opportunity by implementing the following adjustments.

Assume Biblical Illiteracy

Millennials are infamous for their biblical illiteracy. So much so that some public schools have recognized the Bible's deep influence on the worlds of art, literature, music and cinema, and have implemented *The Bible as Literature* classes to deal with Millennials' biblical ignorance. Anecdotes about Millennials who think Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife and Billy Graham preached the Sermon on the Mount frequent social media feeds. Preachers who want their sermons to promote spiritual growth in Millennials have to confront the reality that Millennials are biblically illiterate. According to a Barna Group study, less than one-third of Millennials know the New Testament was originally written in Greek. Only four out of ten recognize that the words "the truth shall set you free" come from the Bible.[1]

---

[1] Sarah Ekhoff Zylstra, "What the Latest Bible Research Reveals About Millennials," *Christianity Today*, May 16, 2016, accessed January 12, 2018, http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/may/what-latest-bible-research-reveals-about-millennials.html.

This means preachers need to become intentional about explaining the context of what they are preaching. They cannot take for granted their listeners understand the Old Testament roots of New Testament stories. Titles which preachers assume their hearers comprehend like "Son of Man" and "Lamb of God," have to be explained to Millennials in order for them to know to whom the text refers, let alone appreciate the depth of scripture. What was once considered elementary – that some scripture is history, some poetry and some prophecy, for example – now has to be articulated with frequency. Preachers cannot assume once is enough because many Millennials are infrequent church attenders. Pushing against the tide of biblical illiteracy must be a weekly pulpit discipline.

One interesting note: Millennials are only slightly less literate than their parents and grandparents, so changing the way one preaches to accommodate biblical illiteracy is likely to help all generations in the church, not just Millennials. Infrequent church attendance also means preachers must teach Millennials how to feed themselves.

Teaching Millennials to Feed Themselves

One of the challenges which keeps preachers up at night is deciding what to preach to church members who are likely to attend, in the best of cases, three out of every four Sundays. Developing a scope and sequence seems pointless. If one preaches a sermon series on *The Four Spiritual Laws*, for example, which sermon can a parishioner afford to miss? The one that teaches God is love? The one that explains that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23)? Certainly not the sermon that invites the listeners to receive Christ as Savior!

Preachers can address this dilemma by using the sermon to teach Millennials how to obtain their own biblical nourishment. This means creatively explaining their

hermeneutical approach to the text during the sermon. As preachers explain background and context they need to introduce who wrote the scripture being exegeted. They should provide their listeners with the broader understanding of why a text was written, when it was written and to whom it was written. They can explain the implications of where the author was when he wrote it and the cultural context of the recipients. These do not need to be full-blown lessons in hermeneutics; they can be short interjections in each sermon, which explain how to study scripture and allow the preacher the opportunity to demonstrate how that is accomplished.

In this respect, expository preaching has an advantage over topical preaching. When a pastor preaches a topical sermon he instructs Millennials in what the Bible says about a given issue. But the preacher who exposes the text can demonstrate how to rightly interpret scripture and, in so doing, teach Millennials how to discern for themselves what scripture teaches. Empowered with a basic understanding of the hermeneutical approach to scripture, any Millennial can Google a topic, find the scripture in her Bible and conduct her own study.

Another important strategy to address sporadic attendance is to create systems that will extend the life of the sermon.

Extending the Life of the Sermon

Advances in technology have made it possible for a sermon to have broader distribution than ever before, and Millennials are taking advantage of those opportunities. Making sermon recordings available on a church's website is becoming the norm. Doing so can help Millennials who attend irregularly stay connected with the preacher's teachings.

Most preachers in larger churches already rebroadcast videos of their services and even stream them live. The researcher recently spoke to one preacher whose church introduced live online streaming of their services. A handful of "online campuses" where six to twelve people gather around a video screen to experience the service were begun and the church is actively engaged in planting more. Many churches do not have the resources to invest in the equipment and training for such ventures but most can curate their sermons on their church's website. For Baby Boomer and GenXer pastors who do not know how the technology works, doing so provides an opportunity to develop a reciprocal relationship with a Millennial who knows (or can learn) how to create a podcast or upload a sermon to iTunes or another file sharing service.

Preachers can also create additional content like discussion guides for small groups or blog posts which summarize and amplify the sermon content from the previous Sunday. Social media offers preachers the ability to push content to Millennials. The sermon's main point, a link to an online audio or video file, scriptures that tie into the teaching, and thought-provoking questions to get Millennials talking with each other and with their preacher can be distributed via social media throughout the week. Each of these can extend the life of the sermon and enable preachers to promote ways to apply their weekend messages.

Emphasizing Application

While some researchers claim Millennials are the most selfish generation in history, others suggest they might be one of the most altruistic generational cohorts ever. The latter is true of the researcher's experience. The researcher leads a medium-sized church of 320 people in average attendance. The church partners with missionaries on

each of the six inhabited continents. Half of those missionary partners are Millennials; two of them grew up at the researcher's church. Naysayers claim Millennials are entitled and lazy but the Millennials the researcher knows are selfless, philanthropic individuals who look for opportunities to serve and make a difference. They do not just want to learn something; they want to do something.

That is why it is so important that preachers who want to help Millennials grow, include a call to action of some kind in every sermon. In many instances the application needs to be explicit. Previous generations might have been able to connect the dots from the scripture lesson to their own lives. Millennials may have difficulty doing so, given their biblical illiteracy and frenzied daily pace. Application has always been included in sermons, to a greater or lesser extent, by most preachers. For some it was merely an afterthought tagged onto the end of the sermon, a facile "go and do likewise." It was what many preachers learned in homiletics class.

The preaching model most evangelical pastors learned in seminary was simple: exposition, illustration and application. The preacher went through the scripture text he had chosen verse by verse. Cultural curiosities were sometimes explained but often he assumed the congregation already understood the necessary background. As the preacher exegeted the text he would offer illustrations to amplify his sermon theme. The message ended with an application. At times the application was a practical one aimed at Monday morning, but more often than not it was a Sunday challenge: be a better Christian, attend church more regularly, commit to tithing or volunteer to serve in a church ministry. It was a model that was effective for generations.

Rather than reject that model, preachers who want Millennials' faith to grow can become more effective with a relatively small adjustment: more application. Table 6.1 compares the two models:

Table 6.1 Application in Preaching Models Compared

Preaching to Older Generational Cohorts	Millennial Preaching Model
Exposition ➔ Illustration ➔ Application	Tension building application ➔ Exposition ➔ Illustrate the application

The Millennial preaching model begins with application. It communicates up front the difference applying the sermon will make. It compares the way things are (uninspiring and incomplete) with how they could be if listeners will commit to embracing what is about to be taught. This is referred to as "tension building application" in the homiletics classes the researcher teaches. Front loading application into the sermon puts the congregation on notice that what is about to be taught is no mere intellectual exercise; it will make a difference if applied. It also prepares the congregation to look for application throughout the exposition section of the sermon.

The preacher exposes the text before returning, to application, this time by illustrating specific ways listeners can apply what they have just heard. In a sermon on anger, for example, the Millennial preaching model might look like what follows. The preacher might begin by telling the congregation what they are about to learn will radically transform the way they interact with others if they apply it. It will change the way they interact with people at work, at school and in their neighborhoods. It can even change the way they interact with people who are difficult to love. After the tension building application comes the exposition of the text. In this instance the preacher might exegete Jesus' words on anger from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21-26) and end by

communicating a memorable principle like, “When we allow our anger to boil over at people it is often because we have failed to see the Creator in those whom he has created. Start looking for the Creator.” Then the preacher can illustrate the application: “When the driver beside you cuts you off, remember that he was created by God. When the professor hits you with a pop quiz, remember that she was created by God.” Illustrating different ways to apply what the preacher has just taught gives Millennials, and all generational cohorts, specific ways they can put faith into action. Focusing on application in sermons aimed at Millennials helps them grow.

Preaching what is Relevant to Millennials

Preaching relevant sermons also helps them grow. The challenges Millennials face as a result of their delayed entry into adulthood, their disappointment with unmet expectations and their adoption of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism give preachers entry into their lives.

Churches generally do a good job of ministering to families. Single adults are another matter. The church has often struggled with how to connect with divorced adults and those who have chosen to live as single men and women. Millennials are challenging the church to minister to a new category of parishioners: emerging adults. Preachers can better minister to those who are no longer youth, but not quite yet adults, by preaching sermons explaining “how-to” instead of just preaching “ought-to.” Considering the average age of marriage for Millennials is 28 years for men and 26 years for women, preachers need to do more than tell their congregations, “Do not sleep around.” Preachers need to communicate how Millennials can live holy lives before God. With so many Millennials buried under a mountain of student debt, preachers need to do more than just

teach, "You ought to tithe." We need to communicate how handling money God's way can make a difference in Millennials' lives. Preachers can be a source of encouragement for Millennials who feel let down by people and disappointed by life.

Preach Grace and Truth

Finally, preachers who want to preach sermons that will help Millennials grow, will learn to navigate the tension which exists in preaching grace and truth. Jesus was full of grace and full of truth (John 1:14). In every circumstance he was able to be a graceful and truthful preacher. It is a struggle for the rest of us.

Grace and truth are two lenses of the "eyeglasses" called love. One has to look through both lenses in order to see someone clearly. Many in the Evangelical Church have worn only the monocle of truth. The result is a Millennial generation that believes the church is judgmental and hypocritical. The church spoke the truth but it lacked grace. Many mainline denominations look only through the monocle of grace. They speak of mistakes and errors in judgment but never sin. The result is a Millennial generation that believes the church's primary function is to make people feel good.

Truth without grace is caustic and leads to legalism. Grace without truth is careless and leads to hedonism. Legalism repels Millennials; hedonism deceives them. Millennials need grace *and* truth. Preachers need to rely on the Holy Spirit to help them discern when to communicate each and in what measure. Preachers who have a predisposition to viewing people through the lens of truth (preachers like the researcher who affiliate with more conservative churches) need to employ the grace lens first when preaching to Millennials. Preachers whose default response is to view Millennials

through the lens of grace need to be more conscious of preaching the hard truths even when doing so risks upsetting younger parishioners.

The Millennial of the three case study preachers, Tyler McKenzie, reported that he often tells his congregation that he endeavors to "preach truth in love." It is good advice for every preacher. More challenging, but perhaps even more useful for preaching to Millennials is for preachers to find the love in truth, that is, to point out where the love of God is contained in his commands.

Conclusion

In the end, each of the aforementioned principles is less about preaching and more about the preacher. They begin with a decision to engage Millennials. The choice to change is rooted in the preacher's humility and vulnerability. The desire to relate to Millennials, to be transparent and accessible is founded in the preacher's love for the Millennials with whom God has graced his life.

Paul told the church in Thessalonica, "Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well" (1 Thess. 2:8). His statement is a good summary of how preachers can approach Millennials in their churches. Share the gospel. Do so in a way that is contextualized to Millennials so they can hear it, understand it and embrace it. Do so in an environment of love that welcomes Millennials to do life together with their preacher. And do so not begrudgingly but with delight. The five principles offered here are not new. Preachers who read this thesis are more likely to nod "amen" than they are to exclaim "aha." Still, the reminders are needed because preaching to Millennials is a weighty responsibility.

The good news is, doing so is not particularly complicated and nothing is impossible with God's help (Matt. 19:26). And that is very good news indeed, especially for Millennials.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Thesis

Strengths

One of the strengths of this research project was its validity. The surveys administered to the Millennial populations of the three case study churches provided a comparison to the three case study interviews. They confirmed where the three preachers' intentional efforts were bearing fruit. The Millennial survey was pilot tested with a group of Millennials at the researcher's church to ensure the questions were clear and more likely to provide the data the researcher sought to acquire. A second coder was employed to validate the researcher's analysis of the case study interview manuscripts, and basic text analysis was employed to look for emergent codes the researcher and secondary coder might have missed.

Another strength was the case study selection process. The Independent Christian Churches, with which the researcher identifies, is a group of more than 6,000 churches which voluntarily associate with one another. Without a denominational structure or central headquarters, it was necessary to seek the input of multiple parachurch leaders to identify potential cases for study. The leaders with whom the researcher engaged are deeply networked and their nominations resulted in the selection of cases which met the selection criteria. That all three cases were unknown to the researcher prior to being selected for study is further evidence of the strength of the selection process.

It was also a strength that the criteria for case study selection reflects the realities with which most preachers grapple. The majority of Independent Christian Churches are

small to medium-sized congregations which are led by either by a solo pastor or a small church staff. The preachers in these churches do not have a research staff; they prepare their own sermons and rarely have a Sunday off. In order to make this research project as applicable as possible to as many as possible, the case study criteria specified each selected preacher be the primary communicator at his church, preach a minimum of 40 times per year and write his own sermons.

One final strength of the project is its novelty. While reams have been written about Millennials, relatively little research has been conducted at the nexus of Millennials and the sermon. The researcher was able to find a doctoral thesis that had a tangential relationship to the researcher's work and another that was more closely related. The first was a project to assist mainline denominational churches in crafting sermons that engage four generations of listeners with equal effectiveness. The second was a thesis which sought to promote a desire in pastors to engage Millennials but offered little in the way of specific methods for doing so. While the researcher's thesis project was narrowly conceived as one aimed at preachers of Independent Christian Churches, it is hoped it will be more broadly useful to all who want to preach sermons that are more palatable and profitable for Millennials.

Weaknesses

The most significant weakness in the project is its lack of diversity. The Independent Christian Church is not a particularly diverse group of churches. There are relatively few congregations that are predominantly people of color. There are almost no women in lead pastor positions. Notwithstanding the forgoing, each of the three cases selected for study are from the Midwest. The project would have benefitted from

selecting cases from different regions of the country and, if it were possible, a more racially diverse group of preachers.

Another weakness is its generality. As narrow as the researcher attempted to make the project, the enormity of the Millennial cohort means that it is a broad group with multiple subsets. The experiences of a 34-year-old mother of four are significantly different from those of a 19-year-old undergraduate student with a part-time job at Starbucks. It is challenging to have a conversation about Millennials and avoid painting with too broad a brush.

Suggested Modifications to the Project

While measures were taken to increase the thesis project's validity, it would also have benefitted from the researcher viewing online videos of the case study preachers' sermons. Had he done so, the researcher could have identified code words that corroborated the case study interviews and Millennial transcripts. The researcher could also have spent time in each context to validate the information received, though it is difficult to conceive how he might have done so on Sundays given the demands of his own ministry.

The project might have benefitted from additional cases. A fourth case study was identified and the case study interview was conducted and transcribed. Only seven individuals from the church completed the Millennial survey, however, and the researcher deemed that data set insufficient and disqualified the case study for inclusion. A cursory review of the interview transcript revealed themes that were similar to the three cases included in this report. Though additional cases might have affected the findings,

the researcher suspects doing so would have served only to confirm that a saturation point had been reached.

CHAPTER SEVEN: REFLECTIONS

Personal Growth

The Doctor of Ministry journey has been a humbling experience for the researcher from beginning to end; even from before the beginning, really. When the researcher approached the elders of his church with the idea of entering the program, their answer was "no." The researcher was just emerging from a difficult period of church conflict and the elders of the church wisely discerned that his focus at the time should be on healing. They recognized what he could not: the hard work of healing could be derailed by pursuing education, and he would be better served to first do the hard work of recovering. After a time of healing, the church elders affirmed his desire to move forward.

The first day the Missional Effectiveness cohort assembled was intimidating for the researcher. He was certain that he was the least gifted, least intelligent person in the room. The other leaders in the cohort had accomplished much. They were networked with nationally prominent pastors whom they referred to by first name. That was when he made a decision that may have been his saving grace: he decided to approach the program one step at a time and trust the process. He determined to focus on one class at a time. He read one book at a time, not always completely comprehending what he was reading but trusting God would help him retain what he needed to learn. He approached one project at a time, sometimes having to ask for extensions or clarification, unsure if he was headed in the right direction.

As the midway point of the program approached, the researcher had grown in confidence. He learned from the members of the cohort and began to feel like he was making a contribution to them. Other challenges emerged, though. The researcher's father suffered a stroke just before the second module and was diagnosed with cancer just before the third. It was a difficult summer during which the researcher's parents decided to move to be near their son. Together with his brother-in-law, the researcher remodeled a house his parents purchased so they could live next door to the researcher. There is no other explanation for the researcher being able to juggle ministry, school and caring for family than to credit the grace of God, the love of his family (especially his wife) and the prayers of his church.

From time to time, he was asked how the program was progressing and the researcher joked, "They don't tell you how hard this will be at the beginning and by the time you figure out just how hard it is, you're in too deep to quit." The truth is, the cohort probably was told how difficult it would be but hearing it and experiencing it are two different realities. If the first part of that statement is a bit tongue in cheek, the rest of it rings true. The researcher has not often been the brightest person in the room. He has not always been as disciplined as he needed to be. His ability to start has always been better than his ability to finish.

That is why finishing this project has given the researcher a great deal of satisfaction. More than the degree, just knowing he was able to finish this academic marathon is rewarding. The researcher's father entered into hospice care as the last chapters of this thesis were being written. There have been many times when the researcher has questioned whether or not he should continue or withdraw from the

program to spend more time with his father. In the end, it was the encouragement of his father which urged him on. The researcher's father is also a pastor. He has lived all his adult life in service to God, first as a layman then as a nontraditional underclassman sitting next to his upperclassman son in a church history class. He has served as a pastor of small churches which could not afford a full-time preacher. The researcher and his father share more than a vocation. They share an unwavering faith that the incredible memories they have made over a lifetime, the ministry victories and defeats they have shared with each other, as well as the painful parting they are now experiencing "are a mist that appears for a little while and the vanishes" (James 4:14) when compared to the eternity they will share with one another in the presence of Christ.

While the researcher is grateful for the generation that preceded him, he is hopeful for the next generation, the Millennials on whom this research project focused. Millennials are the Church's emerging leaders. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, they will pilot the church into the second half of the twenty-first century. Though different than the challenges faced by previous generational cohorts, the challenges Millennials face are equally daunting. Yet Millennials have the energy and creativity to face them. Many of the problems they will face are inconceivable to the minds of previous generations. Undoubtedly Baby Boomers and GenXers have caused some of the problems Millennials will face.

But Millennials are a plucky lot. They will not be defined by their generations' tests; they will be refined by them. When they overcome the mountains of college debt, the disappointment in institutions and the people who lead them, and the challenges of

delaying adulthood, Millennials will emerge stronger and more innovative to create ministries not yet imagined.

So it is accurate to say the researcher has grown in his optimism. The researcher's daughter recently took a leave of absence from the work she does with refugee children to return home and help care for her grandfather. Earlier tonight the researcher's eldest son stopped to pray with his grandpa before leaving to spend time with friends. The researcher's youngest son will be teaching three and four-year-old children in Sunday school this weekend. They are Millennials. They are not the sort who show up in the latest Millennials-gone-wrong viral video. Bloggers hungry for clicks will never feature them on their Twitter feeds. They are three of the millions of Millennials who brighten the future and remind the researcher that, despite past regrets and today's fears, the future is in good hands.

Topics for Further Study

Generation Z

There is, it turns out, another generation on the Millennials' heels. Fifty years ago it was challenging to preach to three different generations at once. Today preachers are expected to captivate five generations simultaneously. Haydn Shaw told the researcher that preachers must decide which generation they are going to focus on because trying to focus on more than one is a recipe for ineffectiveness. That point is disputable but, Shaw's advice notwithstanding, additional research needs to be conducted to determine the best way to preach sermons that will help Generation Z grow in their faith.

Youth Pastors Becoming Lead Pastors

An interesting hypothesis began to take shape during the course of this project. The researcher observed that some of the most effective lead pastors are individuals who are former youth ministers of the predominant generation in the churches they end up leading. It is as though they grew up alongside their youth group students and naturally moved into the lead pastor role.

Billy Graham began preaching at Youth for Christ rallies in the 1940s. His preaching has resonated with Traditionalists ever since. Bill Hybels experimented with a new model for youth ministry in a program called Son City. Many of the same Baby Boomers who grew up in Son City are among the thousands at Willow Creek Community Church. Hybels has influenced an entire generation of Boomers through his books and leadership conferences. Andy Stanley was a youth minister to Generation X. They now flock to North Point Community Church and the Catalyst conferences the church sponsors. One of the lead pastors in this study, Chris VandeLinde, worked with Millennials for 15 years, first as a youth minister and later as a family minister, before becoming the lead pastor of a church with more than 1,300 people and a Millennial population of 40 percent.

A fascinating study could emerge from exploring the connection between being a youth minister to a generational cohort and the subsequent effectiveness of those who become lead pastors in churches which engage the same cohort. Is there causation, or does youth ministry merely represent a more immersive form of cultural exegesis?

Intergenerational Partnerships that Lead to Missional Innovation

The researcher nearly chose as his thesis project the development of a model for fostering intergenerational partnerships between Millennials and Baby Boomers. America is in the middle of the largest intergenerational transfer of wealth in the history of the world. It is estimated that $11 trillion will change hands from Traditionalists to Baby Boomers by the time that transfer is complete.

Baby Boomers and Millennials have a love-hate relationship. The complaints each cohort makes about the other are well known. At the same time, there is affection between the two cohorts not unlike that which exists between a grandparent and his grandchildren.

The researcher is captivated by the concept that each cohort could bring their strengths together to create potent synergistic partnerships which would transform the world. Baby Boomers are waning in energy; Millennials have it in abundance. Baby Boomers have wisdom and experience; Millennials crave mentoring and, unlike previous generations, prefer to learn from others' mistakes rather than making their own. Boomers are coming into money; Millennials have aspirations and ideas, but so much student loan debt that it has all but killed their dreams.

Creating a model that could bring the two generations together could be more than just an interesting thesis. It could be transformative for the Kingdom of God.

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A: NOMINATIONS FOR PREACHERS WHOSE SERMONS ARE SUCCESSFUL IN FOSTERING SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN MILLENNIALS

Q1 Please give us the following information about yourself.

Q2 What is your name?

Q3 In case we need to contact you, what is your preferred means of communicating with the researcher?

- Telephone
- Email
- Written correspondence

Q4 Please provide the information for your preferred contact above.

This research project seeks to identify principles that preachers can adopt in their preaching that will make their sermons more palatable and more profitable as a tool for spiritual growth in Millennials.

For the purposes of this study, spiritual growth is defined as: growth in an individual which results in that individual becoming more like Jesus in his or her actions and attitudes. Growth is evidenced by a person thinking more like Jesus, acting more like Jesus, and loving more like Jesus.

You are being asked to nominate up to five individuals who meet the above description. In order to be nominated, these individuals must be a preacher at an Independent Christian Church/Church of Christ.

Please fill out the survey below before August 15. Thank you for your participation.

Q9 What is the name of your first nominee?

Q10 What church does your first nominee preach at?

Q11 What is the best contact information for your first nominee?

Q12 How well do you know (on a scale of one to ten):

This person?
This person's church?
This person's preaching?

Q13 In your opinion, what makes this person especially effective at preaching sermons that foster spiritual growth in Millennials?

Q14 Would you like to nominate another individual?

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B: SURVEY FOR PREACHERS NOMINATED IN MILLENNIAL PREACHING STUDY

You are receiving this survey because you have been identified as a preacher whose sermons are effective in fostering spiritual growth in Millennials. (For the purposes of this survey, Millennials are defined as those who are currently ages 18-35.) This research is being conducted as part of a doctoral thesis for a student pursuing his Doctor of Ministry degree. Preachers who complete this survey may be selected for interview by the researcher.

Please answer the following questions.

Your answers will be strictly confidential. The researcher will know your name and contact information in order to be able to contact you if you are selected to be interviewed for additional insight into the topic. Your name and identifying information will remain confidential, and will be redacted from the published doctoral thesis if you prefer to remain anonymous.

Thank you for your assistance with this important research project.

General Information

What is your name? What is your mailing address? (Street, City, State, Zip Code)

What is the best phone number by which to contact you?

What is your email address?

What is your preferred means of me contacting you?
- US Postal Service Mail
- Email
- Telephone

How old are you?
- 18-35
- 36-52
- 53-71
- 72 or older

Are you willing to be interviewed by the researcher? (Yes/No)

Are you willing to allow the researcher to survey Millennials in your church to gain their perspective? I am seeking provisional approval. You will be able to review the survey before it is distributed. (Yes/No)

Information About Your Church and Preaching

What is the name of your church?

What is the address of your church? (Street, City, State, Zip Code)

What year was the church where you serve founded?

Approximately how many years have you served as your church's primary preacher?

How many Sundays do you preach each year? (Or weekends, if your church has Saturday services.)

What percentage of your congregation are Millennials (ages 18-35)? Leave blank if you do not know.

Interacting With Millennials

How intentional is your church about reaching and discipling Millennials?

- Extremely intentional
- Moderately intentional
- Slightly intentional
- Neither intentional nor unintentional
- Slightly unintentional
- Moderately unintentional
- Extremely unintentional

How intentional are you at preparing and delivering sermons that specifically address issues that are important to Millennials?

- Extremely intentional
- Moderately intentional
- Slightly intentional
- Neither intentional nor unintentional
- Slightly unintentional
- Moderately unintentional
- Extremely unintentional

When planning what you will preach, how often do you consult with Millennials about the issues that are important to them?

- Always
- Most of the time
- About half the time
- Sometimes
- Never

What are some other ways that you interact with the Millennials that are part of your church?

Rank the following resources from most helpful to least helpful in terms of how you have grown in your understanding Millennials.

- Articles in journals or magazines
- Books
- Seminars and/or conferences
- Spending time with/speaking with Millennials
- Websites/information from the internet

Which, if any, of the following books have you read? (Check each)

- *You Lost Me* by Aly Hawkins and David Kinnaman
- *unChristian* by David Kinnaman
- *The Next Christians* by Gabe Lyons
- *Onward* by Russell Moore
- *The Millennials* by Rainer and Rainer
- *Generational IQ* by Haydn Shaw
- *Souls in Transition* by Christian Smith
- *Generation Me* by Jean Twenge

Is there a book or resource that you recommend others consult in understanding Millennials?

List and briefly describe some of the sermons or sermon series that you have preached in the last year, that were specifically geared toward Millennials.

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX C: PREACHING TO MILLENNIALS: YOU AND YOUR CHURCH

Thanks again for participating in my research project. As I have communicated already, I believe that the research you are assisting me with will help equip preachers throughout America to preach sermons that will better connect with Millennials and aid in their spiritual growth.

As one of three individuals that I will be learning from, your contributions to this project are incredibly important and will help formulate a set of transferable principles that will assist other preachers in their efforts to shape Millennials who think like, act like and love like Jesus.

In order to say, "yes," to this project you had to say, "no," to something else. I want you to know that I appreciate your investment of time and ask for it believing that, together, we will make a difference!

Please complete this survey by Friday, October 14. You can save your progress on this survey and return to it if need be.

Part One: About You

This section is about you. I want to hear your story. If you have a biography that you have previously created, feel free to send it to frank@frankweller.com and skip the questions below that are answered in the file you send me. Please keep in mind that more information is better than less.

What is your name?

How old are you?

Tell me the story of how you became a follower of Jesus.

Starting with college, what is your educational background?

Tell us about your previous paid ministry experiences, including places where you served and the years in which you served at them.

Tell me about your call to ministry.

Tell me about your immediate family. How long have you been married? Do you have children and, if so, what ages?

Tell me the story of how you became the pastor of the church where you are currently serving.

Please tell me your title and give me a brief job description.

Will you be attending the International Conference on Mission (ICOM) in Peoria, Illinois in November 2017? (Yes/No)

[If answer to the above is YES] The researcher will be attending ICOM, too, and would like to meet with you face-to-face, rather than conducting our interview over the phone. Are you willing to connect with Frank at ICOM in Peoria? (Yes/No)

Part Two: About Your Church

This section is about your church. I want to understand your church's history. If there is someone else in your church who can provide this information you are welcome to delegate this portion of the survey to them. If you have a previously created document that answers these questions, feel free to email it to frank@frankweller.com and skip the questions below that are answered in whatever you send me. Again, more information is better than less.

Tell me your church's story.

What are the demographics of your church? (Age, sex, socioeconomic status, race, educational levels, etc.)

What is your church's average weekly attendance? In how many services/locations?

Tell me about your paid staff.

How is your church governed? Staff led? Elder led? Other?

What are the core values, vision and mission of your church?

Tell me about the community in which your church is located.

What are some of the challenges your church has recently faced or are currently facing?

This concludes the in-depth survey portion of the project. The next step will be an in-depth interview with you that will focus on your efforts to intentionally engage with Millennials and, more specifically, to engage them through your preaching. Thank you again for your investment of time and thought!

APPENDIX D

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR CASE STUDY INTERVIEWS

Date:
Time of Interview:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:
(Briefly describe the project and obtain permission to record interview)

Questions:

1. What role does preaching play in helping the Millennials' faith grow?

2. What are the biggest challenges that preachers face in preaching to Millennials?

3. What characteristics of you, as a person, influence how Millennials receive your preaching?

4. What changes in preaching (if any) have you made to help Millennials grow spiritually?

5. What sort of preaching best resonates with Millennials?

6. What about Millennials makes fostering spiritual growth through preaching challenging?

APPENDIX E

APPENDIX E: A PRIORI CODES FOR CASE STUDY INTERVIEWS AND MILLENNIAL SURVEYS

Millennials' internal characteristics

- Authenticity and integrity highly valued
- Suspicious of/cynical toward authority
- High expectations of, and disappointment in, others
- Tolerance highly valued
- Community highly valued

Millennials' external characteristics

- Delayed adulthood
- Technologically savvy
- Highly individualistic
- Highly sexualized
- Multi-generational relationships desired by Millennials

Millennials' external influences

- Shaped by ideas and images
- Culture's influence on Millennials
- Shifting worldviews

Millennials and faith

- Biblical illiteracy
- "Nones" (no religious affiliation)
- Parents biggest spiritual influence
- "Whatever" approach to religion
- Infrequent church attendance

Preaching strategies

- Apologetics
- Narrative/Expository/Topical
- Contextualized to Millennials
- Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD)
- Cultural exegesis necessary to understand Millennials

APPENDIX F

APPENDIX F: SURVEY ADMINISTERED TO MILLENNIALS AT CASE STUDY CHURCHES

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. This survey about <CASE STUDY NAME> is being conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation project by a seminary student. Please fill the survey out completely and honestly (once only). Your answers will be completely anonymous. This survey should be completed only by individuals who attend <CASE STUDY CHURCH NAME>, and who have heard <CASE STUDY NAME> preach. In appreciation for answering all 10 questions, you will have a chance to win one of four $50 iTunes gift cards.

What year were you born?

What sex are you?
- Male
- Female
- Other or prefer not to answer

Which best describes how long you have been a Christian?
- I have been a Christian for less than a year.
- I have been a Christian for one to five years.
- I have been a Christian for more than five years.
- I have not yet made a decision to become a Christian.

Which best describes how long you have attended <CASE STUDY CHURCH NAME>?
- Less than a year
- One to two years
- Three to five years
- Six to ten years
- Eleven years or more

Which best describes how often you attend <CASE STUDY CHURCH NAME>?
- Once a week or more
- Two to three times per month
- Once per month
- A couple of times every few months

How have <CASE STUDY NAME>'s sermons helped you grow in your faith. If possible, please provide specific examples.

What characteristics of <CASE STUDY NAME> as a person do you think make him a good preacher?

What about <CASE STUDY NAME> or his sermons would make you want to invite your friends who are not Christians to come hear him preach?

What do you wish <CASE STUDY NAME> would preach more about?

If you could change something about the way <CASE STUDY NAME> preaches, what would it be?

Thank you for completing the survey! If you would like to be entered into a drawing to win one of four $50 Apple iTune cards, click here.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aleshire, Daniel O. "The Future Has Arrived: Changing Theological Education in a Changed World." *Theological Education* 46, no. 2 (2011): 69-80.

Arnett, Jeffery Jensen. *Emerging Adults: The Winding Road from Late Teens Through the Twenties*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

_____. "Suffering, Selfish, Slackers? Myths and Reality About Emerging Adults." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence,* 36, no. 1 (2007): 23-29. Accessed July 12, 2017. doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/10.1007/s10964-006-9157-z.

Astin, Alexander W., and Helen S. Astin. 2006. "The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose." *Spirituality in Higher Education*. Accessed December 9, 2016. http://spirituality.ucla.edu/docs/reports/Spiritual_Life_College_Students_Full_Report.pdf

Barna, George. "The Aging of America's Pastors." Barna Group. Last modified March 1, 2017. Accessed October 26, 2017. https://www.barna.com/research/aging-americas-pastors/.

_____, and David Kinnaman. *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers. 2014.

Bauman, Whitney, Joseph A. Marchal, Karline McLain, Maureen O'Connell, and Sara M. Patterson. "Teaching the Millennial Generation in the Religious and Theological Studies Classroom." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 17, no. 4 (2014): 301-322.

Berk, Ronald A. "Teaching Strategies for the Net Generation." *Teaching and Learning Journal* 3, no. 2 (2009). Accessed December 9, 2016. http://www.ronberk.com/articles/2009_strategies.pdf.

Bock, Darrell L. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 2007.

Brant, Jo-Ann A. "The Power of the Spoken Word: Performance-based Pedagogy." *The Conrad Grebel Review* 28, no. 2 (2010).

Bruce, Frederick Fyvie. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1998.

Cennamo, Lucy, and Dianne Gardner. "Generational Differences in Work Values, Outcomes and Person-Organization Values Fit." *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 23, no. 8 (2008): 891-906. doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/10.1108/02683940810904385.

Choudhury, Suparna, and Kelly A. McKinney. "Digital media, the developing brain and the interpretive plasticity of neuroplasticity." *Transcultural Psychology* 50, no.2 (2013): 192-215.

Conn, Harvie, and Manuel Ortiz. *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. 2010.

Cox, Daniel, Juhem Navarro-Rivers and Robert P. Jones. "A Shifting Landscape: A Decade of Change in American Attitudes about Same-sex Marriage and LGBT Issues." (February 24, 2014): 1-60. Public Religion Research Institute. Accessed October 28, 2017. https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014.LGBT_REPORT-1.pdf.

_____, and Robert P. Jones. "Americans Changing Religious Identity: Findings from the 2016 American Values Atlas." Last updated September 6, 2017. Accessed October 30, 2017. https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PRRI-Religion-Report.pdf.

Craddock, Fred. *Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon. 1985.

Creach, Jerome F. D. "Between text and sermon: Acts 4:1-31." *Interpretation* 66, no. 3 (July 2012): 306-308. Accessed October 17, 2017. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCO*host*.

Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among the Five Approaches, Second Ed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. 2007.

Eck, Brian E., Scott White, and David N. Entwistle. "Teaching Integration to Postmodern and Millennial Students: Implications for the Classroom." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 35, no. 2 (2016): 125-136. Accessed December 9, 2016. http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.bethel.edu/docview/1807903915?accountid=8593

Eswine, Zack. *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons that Connect with our Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. 2008.

Forasteros, Marshall Jr. "Preaching to Unchurched Millennials." *M15 Preconference*. Accessed July 28, 2015. http://www.norvillerogers.com/preaching-to-unchurched-millennials/.

Fry, Richard. "Millennials Overtake Baby Boomers as America's Largest Generation." *Pew Research Center Fact Tank News and the Numbers*. April 25, 2016. Accessed December 12, 2016. http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/25/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/.

Gaertner, Dennis. *The College Press NIV Commentary: Acts*. Joplin, MO: College Press. 1993.

Hawkins, Aly, and David Kinnaman. *You lost me: Why young Christians are Leaving Church – And Rethinking Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group. 2011.

Hirsch, Alan. *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. Ada, MI: Brazos Press. 2009.

_____, and Debra Hirsch. *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. 2010.

_____, and Tim Catchim. *The Permanent Revolution: Apostolic Imagination and Practice for the 21st Century*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. 2012.

Howe, Neil and William Strauss. *Millennials Go to College*. Lifecourse Associates: 2007.

Howell, Brian M. "Multiculturalism, Immigration and the North American Church: Rethinking Contextualization." *Missiology: An International Review* 39, no. 1 (2011): 79-85. Accessed March 1, 2017. http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.bethel.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=2368c633-b731-4c1b-8087-0aff5f32fd38%40sessionmgr102&hid=115.

Internet Movie Database. "The Little Mermaid. Accessed October 29, 2017. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097757/.

Jackman, David. "Preaching that Connects: External Connections: Strategy and Resources." *Trinity Journal* 29, no. 1 (2008): 3-17. Accessed November 16, 2016. http://search.proquest.com/docview/212887113.

Jenkin, Clint and A. Allan Martin. "Engaging Adventist Millennials: A Church Embracing Relationships." *The Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 8, no. 1 (2014): 96-104.

Jones, R.P., D. Cox, and J. Navarro-Rivers. "A Shifting Landscape: A Decade of Change in American Attitudes about Same-sex Marriage and LGBT Issues." (February 24, 2014): 1-60. Public Religion Research Institute. Accessed October 28, 2017. https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014.LGBT_REPORT-1.pdf.

Keener, Craig. *Acts – A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 2012.

_____. "Power of Pentecost: Luke's missiology in Acts 1-2." *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 12, no. 1 (2009): 47-73. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCO*host* (accessed October 17, 2017).

Keller, Timothy. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism.* London. Penguin Books. 2009.

_____. *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Viking. 2015.

Kinnaman, David. *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ... and Why it Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group. 2007.

Leedy, Paul D., and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod. *Practical Research: Planning and Design, Ninth Ed*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill. 2010.

Lipp, Joshua W. "Paul's Areopagus Speech of Acts 17:16-34 as *Both* Critique *and* Propaganda." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 3 (2012): 567-588.

Longenecker, Richard. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Acts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House. 1995.

Lyons, Gabe. *The Next Christians: Seven Ways You Can Live the Gospel and Restore the World*. Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishing. 2010.

Macky, K., D. Gardner, and S. Forsyth. "Generational Differences at Work: Introduction and Overview." *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 23, no. 8 (2008): 857-861. doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/10.1108/02683940810904358.

Martin, Chris. "Sex, God, and a Generation That Can't Tell the Difference." Millennial Evangelical. Last updated April 10, 2015. Accessed April 6, 2017. http://www.millennialevangelical.com/sex-god-and-a-generation-that-cant-tell-the-difference/.

McManus, Erwin. *An Unstoppable Force: Daring to Become the Church God Had in Mind.* Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook. 2013.

Morreale, Sherwyn P. and Constance M. Staley. 2016. "Millennials, Teaching and Learning, and the Elephant in the College Classroom." *Communication Education* 65, no. 3 (2016): 370-373.

Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co. 1989.

Peck, John A. "Preaching to Millennials." *Preacher's Institute*. October 2, 2014. Accessed July 28, 2015. http://preachersinstitute.com/2014/10/02/preaching-to-millennials/.

Pond, Allison, Gregory Smith, and Scott Clement. "Religion Among the Millennials." *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*. (April 15, 2010): 1-26. Accessed December 9, 2016. http://www.pewforum.org/files/2010/02/millennials-report.pdf.

Porter, Adam L. "Role-Playing and Religion: Using Games to Educate Millennials." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 11, no. 4 (2008): 230-235.

Posey, Douglas F. "Effective Preaching to Adults of the Millennial Generation: Discovering how to Preach Effectively to 18 to 32-Year-Olds." Biola University. 2016.

Powell, Kara, Jake Mulder and Brad Griffin. *Growing Young: 6 Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 2016.

Rainer, Thom. "Seven Ways to Draw Millennials to Your Church." *Facts and Trends*. May 20, 2014. Accessed February 27, 2017. http://factsandtrends.net/2014/05/20/7-ways-to-draw-millennials-to-your-church/#.WLSe2rGZNE4.

_____, and J. W. Rainer. *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation*. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman. 2011.

Reed, Randall. "A Book for None? Teaching Biblical Studies to Millennial Nones." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 19, no. 2 (2016): 154.

Reese, Gareth. *New Testament History: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Acts*. Joplin, MO: College Press. 1976.

Riswold, Caryn D. "Teaching the College 'Nones': Christian Privilege and the Religion Professor." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 18 no. 2 (2015): 133-148.

Roberts, David, Lori R. Newman, and Richard M. Schwartzstein. "Twelve Tips for Facilitating Millennials' Learning." *Medical Teacher* 34, no. 4 (2012): 274-278. Accessed November 16, 2016. DOI 10.3109/0142159X.2011.613498.

Robinson, Haddon W. *Biblical Preaching* (Third ed.). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 2014.

Roehling, Patricia Vincent, Thomas Lee Vander Kooi, Stephanie Dykema, Brooke Quisenberry, and Chelsea Vandlen. "Engaging the Millennial Generation in Class Discussions." *College Teaching* 59, no. 1 (2011): 1-6. Accessed October 24, 2016. http://www.informaworld.com/openurl?genre=article&id=doi:10.1080/87567555.2010.484035.

Roxburgh, Alan J. and M. Scott Boren. *Introducing the Missional Church: What it Is, Why it Matters, How to Become One*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009.

Schnabel, Eckhard. *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008.

Senkbeil, Harold L. "Engaging our Culture Faithfully." *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 4 (2014): 292-314.

Setran, David P. *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 2013.

Sharma, Akanksha. "Designing Learning for Millennials. *Training and Development* 70 no. 6 (2016): 60-65.

Shaw, Haydn. *Generational IQ: Christianity Isn't Dying, Millennials Aren't the Problem, and the Future is Bright*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishing. 2015

_____. *Sticking Points: How to Get 4 Generations Working Together in the 12 Places They Come Apart*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishing. 2013.

Smith, Christian. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2009.

_____, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2005.

Soards, Marion L. *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press. 1994.

Stein, Joel. "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation." *Time,* May 9, 2013. Accessed December 9, 2016. http://time.com/247/millennials-the-me-me-me-generation/.

Stott, John. *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press. 1990.

Tapscott, Don. *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World.* New York: McGraw-Hill. 2009.

Trzesniewski, Kali H., and M. Brent Donnellan. "Rethinking 'Generation Me': A Study of Cohort Effects From 1976-2006." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 5, no.1 (2010): 58-75. Accessed December 9, 2016. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/stable/41613310.

_____, M. Brent Donnellan, and Richard W. Robbins. "Is "Generation Me" Really More Narcissistic Than Previous Generations?." *Journal of Personality* 76, no. 4 (2008): 903-918. Accessed December 9, 2016. *EBSCO MegaFILE*, EBSCO*host.*

Twenge, Jean M. "Generational Changes and their Impact in the Classroom: Teaching Generation Me." *Medical Education* 43, no. 5 (2009): 398-405.

_____. *Generation Me - Revised and Updated: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 2014.

_____, and Stacy M. Campbell. "Generational Differences in Psychological Traits and Their Impact on the Workplace." *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 23, no. 8 (2008): 862-877. Accessed December 9, 2016. doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.bethel.edu/10.1108/02683940810904367.

_____, Julie J. Exline, Joshua B. Grubbs, Ramya Sastry, and Keith Campbell. "Generational and Time Differences in American Adolescents: Religious Orientation, 1966-2014." *PLOS One* 10, no. 5 (2015): 1-17. Accessed December 9, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0121454.

_____, Sara Konrath, Joshua D. Foster, W. Keith Campbell, and Brad J. Bushman. "Egos Inflating Over Time: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory." *Journal of Personality* 76, no. 4 (2008): 875-901.

Tyson, Jon. *Sacred Roots: Why the Church Still* Matters. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2013.

Weber, Jeremy. "Millennials Are Fact-Checking Your Sermons." *Gleanings*. October 28, 2013. Accessed July 28, 2015. http://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2013/october-online-only/millennials-are-fact-checking-your-sermons.html.

"What Millennials Want When They Visit Church." *Barna Group*. March 4, 2015. Accessed April 22, 2015. http://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/#.

White, Scott, David N. Entwistle, and Brian Eck. "The Postmodern Context: Teaching Integration in a Changing Culture." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 35 no. 2 (2016): 113. Accessed November 16, 2016. http://search.proquest.com/docview/1807903726.

Willimon, William H. "Postmodern Preaching: Learning to Love the Thickness of the Text." *Journal for Preachers* 19, no. 3 (1996): 32-37.

Witherington III, Ben. 1998. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Woodhull, Kenny. The Art of Parabling: Leveraging the Narrative Parables of Jesus as Models of Missional Engagement. *Missiology: An International Review* 41, no. 1 (2013): 74-86.

Wright, Nicholas Thomas. *Paul in Fresh Perspective*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2005.

_____. *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978-2013*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2013.

Yin, Robert K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods, Fourth Ed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. 2009.

Zylstra Sarah Ekhoff. "What the Latest Bible Research Reveals About Millennials." *Christianity Today*. May 16, 2016. Accessed January 12, 2018. http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/may/what-latest-bible-research-reveals-about-millennials.html.