

CHAPTER 2

GETTING PERSPECTIVE

Understanding the Largest Living Generation

We're not telling you anything new when we say that perspective is important. When it comes to challenging and equipping the Millennial generation to engage their calling in the context of discipleship (pursuing both their primary calling and their secondary calling), perspective is critical.

Understanding who Millennials are and what has shaped them leads to more effective ministry. There is so much information and statistics out there about this generation. For this book, we worked to distill and share some thoughts that impact Millennials' journeys to finding their unique contribution in God's Kingdom.

For starters, the majority of Millennials don't think the Church is relevant. According to Barna Research studies that surveyed Millennials, the two most frequent words they used to describe Christianity were "irrelevant" and "extreme."⁹

In their groundbreaking book, *Souls in Transition*, sociological expert and director of the Center for the Study of

Religion and Society Christian Smith and Patricia Snell say that religion is just “in the background” for Millennials.¹⁰

During their childhood, their local church might have been a place where they learned right and wrong. But now that they’ve learned it, Millennials have less need for church. Rather, many are distracted in this “in-between” transitory season when they’re emerging into adulthood and sorting through all kinds of choices they must make to create their identity.

Author, pastor and researcher Ed Stetzer has noted that only one in six unchurched Millennials wanting spiritual guidance said they would look for it in a church. Even more troubling, Stetzer discovered that nine out of ten unchurched Millennials believe they can have a good relationship with God or learn how to be a Christian without the presence of church.¹¹

There are multiple reasons why Millennials are less interested in the Church. Let’s look at three spheres of life contributing to this disturbing reality:

Home: A large number of Christian parents have done a poor job of modeling their faith and raising their children in the Word of God. They have failed to help the next generation see Christianity in a holistic and meaningful way. The truth is before the mass exodus of Millennials from church, there was a mass exodus of fathers and mothers leaving their family. Before Millennials stopped participating in church, their parents stopped putting church as their top priority. Before the doubts got the best of Millennials, fear and doubt were already ingrained in their parents’ lives.

- Many Millennials were brought up in a legalistic family.
- Many of the problems Millennials deal with stem from their parents: divorce, hypocrisy, dysfunctional relationships, legalism, overprotective parenting.

The painful reality is that the transfer of Christian faith from one generation to the next is almost non-existent. A reality that leads to profound regret. We have both heard Christians parents make comments to the effect of, “Every time we see our daughter fail, it reminds us of how we failed her.” Our guess is you have heard similar comments.

According to Christian Smith, “Parents for whom religious faith is quite important are thus likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is quite important, while parents whose faith is not important are likely to be raising teenagers for whom faith is also not important. The fit is not perfect. None of this is guaranteed or determined, and sometimes, in specific instances, things turn out otherwise. But the overall positive association is clean.”¹²

Recent research backs up Smith’s premise. A National Study of Youth and Religion study found that of parents who report that their faith is extremely important in their daily lives, 67 percent of their teens say faith is extremely or very important in their daily lives; only 8 percent of those parents’ teens report that faith is not very, or not important in their lives.¹³

Culture: Christianity isn’t portrayed well in the media. It isn’t politically correct to be a Christian anymore. In today’s culture, it’s more socially acceptable to embrace non-Christian

identities and lifestyles that stand in conflict with a biblical worldview.

Church: Over the last six decades, the American Church has more commonly been known for what it stands against rather than what it stands for. The general culture sees the church as a negative rather than as what Jesus described as a “shining city on a hill” (Matt. 5:14). Millennials are particularly perceptive. Look at the statistics:

- More than one-third of Millennials say their negative perceptions are a result of moral failures in church leadership (35 percent). Substantial majorities of Millennials who aren’t part of a local church say they see Christians as judgmental (87 percent), hypocritical (85 percent), anti-homosexual (91 percent) and insensitive to others (70 percent).¹⁴
- Most worrisome are the two-thirds of Millennials who believe American churchgoers are a lot or somewhat hypocritical (66 percent).¹⁵ To a generation that prides itself on the ability to smell a fake a mile away, hypocrisy is the mother of all indictments.

What Factors Have Shaped Millennials?

The following four primary factors have significantly shaped Millennials.

Helicopter parents – Millennials became the most wanted generation. By 1990, 80 percent of all fathers were in the delivery rooms attending their children’s births, up from 27 percent halfway through Gen Xers’ birth years. In

addition, Millennials desire their parents' involvement in their lives.

According to a study by church researcher Thom Rainer, 77 percent of Millennials seek their parents' advice periodically and regularly. Millennials believe their parents can offer sound wisdom and perspective while many Boomers knew their parents couldn't.¹⁶

Entitlement Culture – From participation trophies on the football field to bouquets of roses after preschool dance recitals, Millennials grew up hearing they were special and unique. In one survey, 96 percent of Millennials agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement, “I can do something great.”¹⁷ Not even one respondent disagreed strongly.

Millennials were age nine before their sports teams started keeping score because a scoreboard would make the losing team feel bad. Everyone received a trophy and participation prizes. If you're a Millennial (or the parent of one) who grew up playing sports, you know exactly what we're talking about here. Your garage is probably filled with boxes of trophies you or your child received before you/they were even ten.

Emerging adulthood –What makes Millennials unique is their life stage. Emerging adulthood is a new life strategy between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood, so anywhere between eighteen to thirty years of age. Just fifty years ago, you became an adult in your early twenties. Most people graduated from high school, secured a job, became financially independent, got married and had kids all before the age of twenty-five.

Now, Millennials lag behind on traditional markers of adulthood. Being a twenty-something today is a completely different experience. For example, Millennials are entering into the fourth Industrial Revolution where the only constant

is change. Seventy to eighty percent of jobs will disappear in the next twenty years. Also, the instability of the job market resulted in 20-somethings pursuing grad schools to stay competitive.

This generation has become the most educated generation. College is the new high school, and grad school is the new college. With the average student loan debt being more than \$30,000, a lot of emerging adults are moving back in with their parents, delaying marriage and even switching jobs.

In 2017, about 31 percent of young adults were living back in their mom and dad's house, according to a new study from CoStar Group.¹⁸ Consider this: an average 20-something will have seven jobs *just in their twenties*.

Ubiquitous technology – Millennials are considered “digital natives,” surrounded by technology. They spend more than fifty-three hours a week with media because they use more than one kind at the same time. Computers were like toys for Millennials growing up. Now, smartphones are like a bodily appendage. McCann Worldgroup, a leading global marketing services company, reports that half of Millennials would give up their sense of smell to keep their computer or mobile phones.¹⁹

How Has the Church Shaped Millennials?

What we see and witness firsthand in the past always shapes who we are today—both as individuals and as generations. The sexual revolution changed how the Boomer generation thought, talked and lived. In the same way, the collapse of the American family has made Generation X'ers and Millennials hesitant to commit to relationships. We

always live with the unintended consequences of those who have gone before us (as a parent, that's scary!).

Unfortunately, the Church is not immune to this phenomenon of shaping their own future ... for better or for worse. That said (just to make sure you hear it loud and clear from both of us), we love the local church and believe Jesus is choosing to use His Bride to redeem the lost.

The Church is made up of imperfect individuals, the great majority of which are doing the best they can with what they have. It's the unintended consequences of our efforts that lead to the shaping of the next generation.

For example, Millennials have watched their parents torn as they were pressured into signing up to serve in a volunteer role in church while never being asked or challenged to consider what ministry might really ignite their passion and lead to a transformed life.

If they think back, they probably saw their parents serve out of obligation with little or no "want to," or be a part of a church system that left the "real pastoring" to the paid staff. If they were lucky, their parents were able to back their way into a volunteer role that matched their church's needs but also got them closer to serving in the sweet spot of their calling.

Growing up, I (Derek), saw this play out in my own home. My dad who has always been an amazingly gifted leader was never maximized in the local churches we attended. He was a world-class salesman--working in the medical device industry. It saddens me to think of how a church could have guided my dad to really impact the Kingdom of God had they found the courage and capacity to walk him into his calling.

They never did. Instead they typically asked him to serve as an usher--he looked great in a suit and was a

talented offering plate shuffler. I am sure seeing my father underutilized plays a role in my passion for seeing men and women released into their calling with their church at their back.

My fear is that for most Millennials, situations just like this turn to bitterness and rejection. Hopefully, the work of Made for More will make it normative that men like my dad are fully engaged in both their common and unique calling. He should have been an usher, but he also should have contributed so much more for the benefit of the Kingdom.

Even if they did find a role that aligned with their personal calling, so many of those volunteers had to set aside a large part of who they were to fit into the constructs of the program they were slotted into.

Unfortunately, that paradigm is alive and well today. The mobilization of disciples is one of the most significant issues the church has today. Few churches are mobilizing God's people the way He designed.

Men and women who are challenged to think creatively and strategically all day, every day, in their vocations are given a script to follow at church. Think about what happens when a willing disciple brings all of themselves to the ministry table and is then asked to stay within a small programmatic box. The church has certainly missed (and is missing) great Kingdom opportunities from men and women who are willing to give all, get creative and truly sacrifice.

A caveat: As part of a local body of believers, we all have a role to play in simply helping the body function and thrive, whatever that expression looks like. As we mentioned in chapter 1, Sometimes, the local body needs us to do activities that don't necessarily ignite or fan our passions.

Regardless of our personal calling, we all need to pull our weight in the family of God. But when we make the mistake as leaders of communicating (by our words or actions) that this service is their personal calling—that’s when we have a mobilization issue.

The Impact

As observers, how has seeing this distorted view and practice of serving and mobilizing people affected Millennials?

In so many aspects of life, the Millennial generation has opted out of “catching” the Christian life from the generations before them. Many have seen the way Baby Boomers and Gen Xers are living out their lives and have decided one of two things:

- First, large portions of Millennials are deciding they want no association with our Christian faith. We have all seen the stats on how we are losing Millennials in droves, not to mention the overwhelming numbers who are never being exposed to the idea of a relationship with Christ. But we’ll give you a few to drive this home: According to Barna Research, U.S. church attendance is the lowest in recent history, and most drastic among millennials:
 - Only two in ten Americans under 30 believe attending a church is important or worthwhile (an all-time low).
 - 59 percent of Millennials raised in a church have dropped out.

- 35 percent of Millennials have an *anti-church* stance, believing the church does more harm than good.
 - Millennials are the least likely age group of anyone to attend church (by far).²⁰
- Second, as Millennials are watching the faith of older generations, they are deciding they want to do it differently. They are the first generation who has options for everything. Millennials have grown up in a world with options—order your hamburger “your way”; purchase a car online with your exact specifications, etc. ... why not live out and express your faith differently?

We’re excited about many of the things we’re seeing from Millennials as they pursue their unique callings in the context of being and making disciples.

As Millennials create the way they live out their faith and shed some of the inauthentic and insincere practices of the older generations, it’s exciting to see their creativity and the spark in the way they give their lives away, blurring the sacred and secular—never considering the idea that they should be operating within a programmatic box.

Just this week at an Exponential Learning Community in Nashville, Tennessee, we have seen Millennials who are more interested in making disciples who make disciples rather than building great cathedrals with consumer Christians.

We have seen Millennials who champion bivocational ministry so that they aren’t beholden to desperate fundraising and they get to rub shoulders with others out in the

marketplace. It is clear, Millennials are ready to fill new wine skins.

A Dangerous Scenario to Look Out For

A word of warning: Along with all the options available to Millennials that we have already mentioned comes the temptation to simply construct the faith and truth they want.

Constructing the way in which you live out your faith and pursue your calling is one thing. Piecemealing and customizing the truth is an altogether different scenario—one that’s so dangerous and tragically, is becoming so pervasive. This is another important reason why helping any Christ follower engage their calling cannot be done outside of discipleship.

Unfortunately, we both have seen multiple thought leaders that captivate Millennial audiences who start to tweak their theology over time, often dropping foundational orthodox teaching. We can’t imagine how confusing this is to men and women who don’t have strong disciple makers to help them sort out some of these thoughts.

One example we see is the fragmented teaching on sin. This is not the place to get into specific theological thoughts on sin, but how incomplete is the gospel without sin creating the need for our Savior?

Collin Hansen, the editorial director of The Gospel Coalition, describes what faith looks like for millennials in the article “Our Secular Age”: “There are no more singular, monolithic, obvious takes on the world. Belief has become less of an on/off switch, and more of a series of dials you can set in various degrees (post-secular, humanist, romantic, libertarian, eco-feminist, and on and on).

“So how do we set the dials today? In the Age of Authenticity (think life post-1960s), the drive is to make sure—whatever else may affect our decision—that we are ‘true to ourselves.’ This is how ‘expressive individualism’ plays a role in belief formation. Some of us may still choose traditional faiths like Roman Catholicism, evangelical Protestantism, or one of the other major world religions.”

“But nobody simply inherits packages of beliefs anymore; we choose to believe (and even construct) the packages for ourselves, often as part of our self-actualization project.”²¹ Yes, creativity in the process of growth, and living out one’s purpose is great. But as leaders, we know that truth is not created by us and thus needs no creativity. It is simply truth.

Thankfully, God baked in more creativity in the truth than we can unpack in a lifetime. In the end, our orthopraxy must follow sound biblical orthodoxy. Our responsibility is to communicate that truth to this generation and help them see the potential implications.

Pastors, a word of encouragement: The faith of Millennials will look different and sometimes *different is challenging*. When I (Derek) found myself a little agitated doing ministry with Millennials and perhaps didn’t even know why, I learned to ask myself if it was because Millennials were simply doing something differently than I would.

Oftentimes, I realized that agitation just under the surface resulted from a difference in style, not substance. Then I would work to understand the differences so that I could discern whether my preferences were being stomped on; or whether I needed to guide an individual through a process of uncovering truth that needed to be addressed—a.k.a. discipleship.

So often I needed to bite my lip and simply let ministry happen in a way that would not be my preference, yet was still consistent with Scripture. I learned that as a Gen X'er, I needed to die to my way of doing things so that Millennials could lean into their design.

For example, when I led a group of leaders at our church, I noticed a difference in how Millennials and older generations led. Older leaders would make decisions in a vacuum: “We are going to meet at 6 p.m. on Sunday nights, and we are going to start by studying this curriculum.”

My tendency is make the best decision with the information I have. Millennials are much more inclusive and collaborative. They always wanted to get feedback from the group. One of the many assets Millennials have is more patience to hear from everyone and give everyone a voice.

When you are working to lead people on a journey, isn't collaboration and buy-in on the front end a better leadership model? I believe it is, and it often takes a different mindset to make it work.

The Challenge of Information

Think for a minute about growing up in a world where there are no gatekeepers to information—for better or for worse. When I (Derek) was growing up, understanding how photosynthesis worked required us to hunt down a biology teacher or head to the library. Or better yet, consult the six-foot row of World Book Encyclopedias that my parents so graciously purchased for us.

But now, with the help of Siri, Google Assistant and Alexa, you don't even need to be able to type to find out about photosynthesis and so much more. You just simply ask.

However, in coaching Millennials we must remember that they might have information and knowledge, but that does not always translate into wisdom.

If there are no gatekeepers to information or knowledge, Millennials often get to the answers prior to a process that leads to wisdom. As men and women coaching Millennials, we must remember that while they might have information and knowledge, that doesn't necessarily translate into wisdom.

We must help younger generations process what they have learned while applying the lens of experience in a way that increases wisdom.

COMMUNITY DISCUSSION (www.millennialscalling.com/community):

- What have you learned about Millennials that everyone should know?
- What victories or failures have you experienced while discipling Millennials in the area of their calling?
- What statistics or characterizations of Millennials seem incongruent with your experiences?