One Christian Perspective on the Immigration Reform Debate

Steve Cable takes a look at the immigration issue from a biblical point of view. Setting aside all the political rhetoric, what does the Bible really have to say about this topic and how should the church respond with an authenic Christian perspective.

Introduction

Immigration issues have garnered a lot of headlines in recent weeks. Is there a clear biblical position on immigration laws and on how Christians should respond to immigrants?

A January 2006 Gallup poll indicated that "immigration reform" ranked at the bottom of seven national issues behind the war in Iraq, healthcare, and the economy.{1} However, after the large rallies in April, it had moved up into the number two spot behind the war in Iraq. While more Americans are concerned about improving control of our borders than developing a comprehensive strategy for illegal immigrants, over seventy-five percent of those polled consider such a comprehensive strategy "extremely important" or "very important." In part, this is due to a heightened awareness of the approximately twelve million illegal aliens in our country and to the intense interest in the Hispanic community. The concern also feeds on the conflicting desires for low cost labor on the one hand and protection from terrorist infiltration on the other.

At a time when the American public is becoming sensitized to the illegal immigrant issue, the evangelical community has not presented a unified front. As reported in the April 28 (2006) edition of the *Dallas Morning News*, "At a forum . . ., conservative and liberal religious leaders lobbed Bible

verses, unable to agree on what Jesus would do about the nation's nearly 12 million illegal immigrants."{2} Three general positions have emerged among the evangelical community.

One position promotes honoring God through obeying the law, focusing on the responsibility of the government to provide for the security of its people.

A second position focuses on our responsibility to care for the needy, particularly the alien and the stranger.

The third position assumes this is an amoral political and economic issue that the church is wise to stay clear of.

The conundrum was aptly summarized by Dr. Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission:

> *"We have a right to expect the government to fulfill its divinely ordained mandate to punish those who break the laws and reward those who do not. Romans 13. We also have a divine mandate to act redemptively and compassionately toward those who are in need."{3}*

Since we are all created in the image of God, should nations place any restrictions upon our ability to move about and take up residence where we will? Certainly, if we were all Christians, Colossians 3:11 might apply, stating, "there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all." From this verse and others like it, we might argue that we should not make any distinctions between citizens and non-citizens. Yet, the Bible clearly indicates that there will be distinct nations until Jesus returns.

Reasons for Restricted Immigration Policy

As noted above, a simple Christian perspective would welcome everyone to settle in our nation at any time. However, the Bible clearly supports the concept of national sovereignty as a means through which God works in this fallen world. In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, we are called to pray for government officials, not that they would cease to exist, but that they would facilitate a society where we can follow God and share Christ in a secure, peaceful environment. Three common reasons a government may choose to control traffic across its borders and limit citizenship opportunities are as follows:

1. ***National security***—*A nation with enemies has a need to know that those enemies are not dwelling within their land. In Deut. 31:12-13, the foreigners dwelling among the people of Israel were required to enter into the covenant to obey God. Those that did not support God's leadership were not allowed to enter the land. Today, like never before, America must be concerned about enemies attacking from inside her border. The government has a responsibility to protect the security of her people by taking reasonable means to keep threats outside of our borders.*

2. ***Economic prosperity***—*A perception of limited resources may cause a nation to curtail immigration in order to reserve a greater share of those resources for the existing citizens. They may say, "We have the sturdiest and most well stocked lifeboat, but if everyone abandons their inferior lifeboats and flocks to this one, we will go from prosperity and security to sinking and perishing." Under the same motivation, it is common for nations to import foreign workers to perform low paid, menial tasks. There is biblical support for property ownership and rewards for ones labor. It is balanced by the clear teaching to proactively minister to the needy and to beware of being motivated by greed.{4}*

3. ***Cultural integrity***—*A people group may want restrictions on*

> *immigration to protect the integrity of their historic traditions and society. Certainly, God directed the nation of Israel to ensure that all members of society worshiped the God of Abraham and did not introduce other forms of worship into society. In Exodus 12:43-49, foreigners are prohibited from participating in the Passover unless their entire household is circumcised and they covenant to obey God. America has thrived with a cultural and religious diversity, while enforcing a uniform acceptance of the Constitution and the principles of democracy, freedom, and equality.*

Although the Bible does not mandate that nations should have laws to control their borders and manage immigration, it is clear that there are biblically acceptable reasons for a national policy in this area. The two that are the clearest are national security from known enemies and protecting common cultural ideals. Greed often plays a role in establishing immigration policies, an attitude clearly prohibited by our Lord.

The Case for Law and Order

Conflicting positions on immigration policy stake their claim on respect for authority at one end and on compassion for the needy at the other. Let’s consider the matter of law and order.

Romans 13 states:

> *Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God. . . . But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath,*

but also for conscience' sake (vv. 1,2,4,5).{5}

Christians are to be in subjection to governing authorities not only to avoid punishment, but also to be able to minister with a clear conscience. Peter expands on the motivation in 1 Peter 2:13-15 where he writes, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men."

Thus, for Christians, obeying the law is one way honor God. God ordains authority with the responsibility to punish "the one who practices evil." For those who take the law-and-order position, these verses are a clear biblical mandate for dealing with illegal immigration. Not only should we personally obey the law, we should support our governing authorities in enforcing it.

However, those who take a different position argue our imperative to follow Christ's example takes precedence over any laws. Certainly, Jesus and the apostles did not always obey the strict direction of the ruling authorities. One notable example is found in Acts 4:19-20. When commanded not "to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus," Peter replied, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard." Not only did they refuse to submit to the command, they encouraged others to follow their example. However, one should be careful about using these examples as a trump card to justify ignoring any laws that one believes are contrary to the teaching of Christ. Both Jesus and Paul direct us to pay our taxes, knowing full well that some of those tax dollars may be spent in ways that do not honor Christ.

As believers, we are called to obey laws that do not require us to directly disobey God.

The Case for Compassion

Another important consideration is whether Christ's directive to show compassion to the needy should be our primary concern in establishing and enforcing immigration policy. Those who promote this case point to two primary principles in the Scriptures:

> *1. Treat the alien in our midst with fairness, remembering that we too are aliens.*
>
> *2. Minister to the least of these as unto Jesus Himself.*

Deuteronomy 10:18-19 states, "He . . . shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing. So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Remembering their history as aliens dwelling in Egypt, the children of Israel were to show love for the aliens in their midst. We, too, should remember that most of us did nothing to deserve being born in America. We could just as easily be the person seeking a better life by becoming an alien in America.

Does this passage mean that we have a responsibility to care for any person who is able to cross our borders?

The Hebrew word most often translated as "alien" is *ger*. According to Vines, a *ger* "was not simply a foreigner or a stranger. He was a permanent resident, once a citizen of another land, who had moved into his new residence."{6} The Jewish law was clear that these aliens should be afforded equitable treatment under the law (e.g., Num. 15:16, Deut. 1:16). However, special provisions were also in place for the alien. Not being a member of one of the twelve tribes, the alien could not own land. Consequently, the alien was grouped

together with widows and orphans to receive a portion of the tithe (Deut. 14:28-29), access to the gleanings in the field (Deut. 24:19-22) and justice (Deut. 24:17-18). However, these provisions did not apply to the foreigner temporarily in the country for work or other purposes. These temporary visitors did not receive a food allotment and were not allowed to fully participate in society.

We know that God wants us to treat aliens fairly, but the biblical example shows a greater responsibility to those who meet the requirements to become residents.

Compassion is a emphasized in Jesus' command to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," in the parable of the Good Samaritan, and in us observation in Matt 25:40, "to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me." We are called to demonstrate sacrificial love in meeting the needs of both friends and strangers. Each person we meet is created in the image of God, worthy of our love and our concern for their spiritual and physical needs. Whatever our position on immigration policy and enforcement, Christians should be at the forefront of ministering to people far from home.

Responding to Our Current Situation

Is it possible within our current immigration laws to be compassionate *and* to be subject to ruling authorities at the same time? One way to answer that question is to apply the biblical guidelines reviewed earlier to the different roles in the immigration debate.

First, let's consider a *potential immigrant*. Barring a direct threat upon your life, abide by the laws of your current country and America. If you have a desire to work in America, apply through appropriate channels and use all legal means to expedite the process. Desiring more opportunity for your

family is commendable. However, choosing to break the law to achieve that goal is telling God that He cannot be trusted to provide.

Now assume you were an *illegal immigrant*. Report yourself to the appropriate authorities to obtain a hearing and abide by the results. Some argue that it is cruel to separate families. Current laws do not normally force families to be separated. Separation is the result of family members choosing to stay in the U.S. when a person is required to leave the country.

What attitude should be taken by an *employer*? Obey the employment laws. Do not knowingly hire illegal aliens *and* take steps to prevent accidentally hiring illegal aliens.

Finally, consider a *Christian citizen*. Reach out in love to all people regardless of their immigration status. Help them find help in dealing with the process and caring for their family. Counsel those in your flock to come into compliance with any laws they are breaking. Ask your representatives to support legislation which balances security with generosity and compassion. Most Americans desire to protect or improve their standard of living. Doing this at the expense of others is clearly contrary to biblical teaching. At the same time, lowering our standard of living by being less productive is not good stewardship either. We should promote policies that reflect a willingness to reduce our consumption to benefit others while promoting improvements across the board. What might this look like?

- Increased legal immigration for a variety of skill and educational levels, believing that we have the ingenuity to utilize these additional resources productively.
- Fair pay for all jobs with strong penalties for employers who break the laws.
- Requiring immigrants to maintain a record of gainful employment.
- Rapid deportation for those who enter illegally.

- While there is a real terrorist threat, making it difficult to enter our country surreptitiously.
- Pressuring other countries not to exploit their labor force.

Although there is no simple scriptural prescription to "fix" the immigration issue, Christians can model how to reach out in compassion and submit to authority at the same time. Prayerfully consider how God wants you to respond in this area.

Notes

1. "Halting the Flow is American's Illegal Immigration Priority", Lydia Saad, *Gallup News Service*, April 13, 2006
2. Todd J. Gillman, "Christians ask: Can you love thy neighbor but deport him, too?" *Dallas Morning News,* April 28, 2006.
3. Ibid.
4. Luke 12:15
5. All Scripture references from the New American Standard Bible, 1995.
6. Vine's Expository Dictionary of biblical Words, Copyright (c)1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers

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Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths – Evangelical Views Declining

National Study of Youth and Religion

The National Study of Youth and Religion (Wave 3) contains the detailed data from which Christian Smith presented a summary of the results in his book, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. My prior article, "Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America," summarized some of the important results reported in his book. One of his results showed that the number of young adults who identify themselves as not religious or as a religious liberal has grown from one in three young adults in 1976 to almost two out of three young adults in 2008. This huge difference in beliefs reflects that the dominant culture has changed from supporting Christian beliefs to now being basically counter to them. Today's emerging adults are immersed in a postmodern culture that "stressed difference over unity, relativity over universals, subjective experience over rational authorities, feeling over reason."{1}

This culture has produced a set of young Americans who may still claim to be associated with Protestant or Catholic beliefs but in reality have accepted the view that God and Christ are potentially helpful upon death, but are of little value until then. As these young adults moved from teenagers into emerging adults, Smith found that over four out of ten of them became less religious over a five year span. However, he did find that about one in three would identify themselves as evangelical and probably continue to identify themselves that way for the foreseeable future.

However, to look at the data more closely, we can access this study of 18- to 23-year-olds online at the Association of Religious Data Archives.{2} Using this data, we can look at the association between questions in ways that we could not see in Christian Smith's book. As we studied this data, we found an even bleaker view of the future of the evangelical church than that presented by his book.

Along with general demographic information, the questions asked by the survey can be generally divided into four segments: Religious Beliefs, Religious Practices, Cultural Beliefs, and Cultural Practices. When we analyze the data in these four segments, we find a significant disconnect between each of these four segments. One might expect that we would find a small but significant subset that shared an *evangelical* belief and practice *and* that applied those beliefs consistently to their *cultural* beliefs and practices. Instead, what we find is that of 881 evangelicals, a grand total of zero (that is zilch, nada, none) share a common set of beliefs across all four categories. In other words, there is no set of common beliefs amongst these 18- to 23-year-olds who belong to an evangelical church.

It is worth noting here that the 881 evangelicals discussed here are down from the 1064 evangelicals in the study of this same group as teenagers. The 881 includes 728 who were among the 1064 plus 155 new evangelicals. The new evangelicals were about one-third from mainline protestant, one-third from catholic, and one-third from not religious or non-Christian religions. Of the 336 who left evangelical Christianity about half went to other Christian religions and the other half went to nonreligious or indeterminate religious beliefs. Almost undoubtedly, if we were to include these original evangelicals in our evangelical statistics we would get even worse data. We should also note here that this group was 18 to 23 in 2008 so now they are 20 to 25. However, we will refer to them as 18 to 23 in this article.

Religious Beliefs

Let us begin by first considering the data on religious beliefs. By itself, this is very interesting. First, we find that four out of five of those associated with an evangelical church believe in God as a personal being and Jesus as His Son who was raised from the dead. Unfortunately, it also means we

are starting with one-fifth of those still associated with an evangelical church who either don't believe in God or in Jesus as His Son. It is interesting to note that one-third of mainline Protestants and nearly half of Catholics have this same attitude of unbelief. However, the number of evangelicals who believe in God and Christ is still a significant number and is 28% of the total population of 18- to 23-year-olds in America. When we add in the mainline and Catholic believers, we find approximately half of all young adults have a correct view of God and Jesus at this very basic level. Although half is not what we would like, it is probably more than we would expect to find with active Christians.

But when we add in the concepts that only people whose sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ go to heaven and that there is only one true religion, the number of evangelicals in this age group who agree drops to 38%. Thus, only one in three ascribe to the most basic beliefs of evangelical Christianity. When we add in mainline Protestants and Catholics, the percentage of young Americans who believe in salvation only through Jesus Christ drops to less than one in five.

When one adds in the concepts that faith is important, that demons are real beings, and that there are some actions that are always right or wrong, and combine those with attending a worship service at least two times a month, the number among evangelicals drops to less than one in five. That is, four out of five young evangelicals do not agree with these basic concepts. For mainline Protestants and Catholics, the percentages are 9% and 2%, indicating that almost none of them have a basic set of Christian beliefs. Combining these together shows that only 7% of all young adults hold to these basic beliefs.

Clearly, we have a major disconnect of belief for this age group, even among those who are associated with an evangelical church. As we probe beyond God and Jesus, we find that most of

them do not have a set of beliefs consistent with the basic truths of the Bible.

In his book, Smith points out that for emerging adults "evidence and proof trump blind faith."{3} By this he means that most emerging adults view scientific views as based on evidence and truth while religious beliefs are simply blind faith. As one young person put it, "I mean there is proven fact and then there is what's written in the Bible—and they don't match up."{4} Or as another young person put it, "You have to take the Bible as symbolic sometimes. If you take it as literal there's definitely a problem. There's scientific proof [that contradicts it]. So you have to take it piece by piece and choose what you want to believe."{5}

The interesting result of this belief is that it does not primarily apply to the extremely small segment of the Bible which some might consider at odds with scientific theories (e.g., creation of the universe). Rather, they apply it to things like teachings on sexuality, the uniqueness of Jesus, and the beginning of life. So they use the excuse of science to modify any beliefs taught by the Bible that are inconsistent with current cultural beliefs.

Religious Practices

Perhaps we have now found the truly religious 18- to 23-year-olds among the one-out-of-four evangelicals that express a set of core religious beliefs. Even if we add another seven questions on belief in things like life after death, heaven, judgment day, and miracles, we still have almost 15% of evangelical young adults who answer correctly. However, if this 15% is the core group of believers, then their religious behaviors will match their beliefs.

If this group of young adults is the core group, we would expect them to pray on a daily basis and to read the Bible at least once per week. When asked those questions, less than one

in ten evangelical emerging adults hold the religious beliefs and engage in the religious practices. In fact, nearly half of those with the core beliefs do not read their Bibles or pray. When we add on questions about whether they are interested in learning more about their faith and have shared their faith with someone else, the number drops to less than one in twenty of the evangelical young adults. So, over 95 out of 100 young people affiliated with evangelical churches do not believe and practice their belief. Sadly, if we look at those who do these things and attend Sunday School or some weekday group and have read a devotional book in the last year, the number drops to 3% of evangelicals.

This data clearly shows that, for 18- to 23-year-old evangelicals, beyond a belief in God and Jesus there is no common set of beliefs and practices. Virtually every evangelical young adult will depart from the faith on one or more basic core beliefs and practices. It appears that there is *no common core group* of dedicated faithful believers among this age group.

As Christian Smith points out, emerging adults view religious ideas as a cafeteria line where you take the ones you like and leave the rest behind. As he says, "People should take and use what is helpful in it, . . . and they can leave the rest. . . . At least some parts of religions are 'outdated.' Emerging adults are the authorities for themselves on what in religion is good or useful or relevant for them."{6} As one of the emerging adults put it, "Instead of fighting various religions, I just kinda combined religious ideas that were similar or sounded good."{7} So, since the emerging adult is the authority on what religious beliefs to accept rather than the Scriptures, their culture determines their religious beliefs rather than the other way around.

Cultural Beliefs

The data from this survey indicates that there is not a set of doctrinally pure religious believers in the 18 to 23 age range. But perhaps they are clearer on cultural beliefs that should be informed by their faith. To make the analysis easier we will consider two different sets of beliefs. The first set looks at their beliefs about creation, waiting on sex until marriage, and respect for religion in America. The second set considers living meaningful but not guilty lives, caring about the poor, and being against unmarried sex and divorce.

When asked about the creation of the world, approximately half of the evangelical emerging adults said that God created the world without using evolution over a long period of time to create new species. Only one in four young evangelicals believe they should wait to have sex and don't need to try out sex with their partner before they get married. Interestingly, only 16% of mainline Protestants and less than one in ten Catholic young adults believe the same way. As Smith points out, this belief is odd given the numerous studies which show that couples who do not live together before marriage have a significantly greater chance of success than those who do. Forty-eight percent of evangelicals have respect for organized religion in this country and believe it is ok for religious people to try to convert other people to their faith. However when we combine these three beliefs together, i.e. about creation, sex, and evangelism, we find that only one in ten evangelicals, one in twenty mainline Protestants, and only one in a hundred Catholics agree with all three of these areas. Then when we look to see how many have the religious beliefs and practices *and* believe these cultural topics, we find that only 8 evangelicals (< 1%) and no mainline Protestants or Catholics qualify. Thus, we have only 8 people out of over 2500 who have a consistent set of evangelical religious beliefs, religious practices, and cultural beliefs.

Of course that is only a small subset of the cultural beliefs that should be impacted by our religious beliefs. Let's look at few more. Let's consider those who have not felt guilty about things in their life over the last year, who believe their life is meaningful and that they can change important things in their life as needed. We find that approximately one-third of each of the major groups agree with these statements. If we look at how many don't need to buy more and who care about the needs of the poor, we find that about one in four of all young adults agree with these objectives. However, when we combine these two areas, we find that only about one in ten young adults agree. Now add in the idea that unmarried sex and divorce are not okay, a statement with which 28% of evangelicals and 14% of all emerging adults agree. When we combine all three of these belief areas, we discover that only 2% of evangelicals agree with all three areas. If we combine these areas with religious beliefs and practices, we find that only four evangelicals (or less than one in two hundred) agreed.

When we combine both sets of cultural beliefs with the religious beliefs and practices, we find that there is one emerging adult out of over 2500 who agrees with those beliefs.

In both sets of data above, we considered questions dealing with sexual activity. In the first, we saw that the idea of waiting to have sex until marriage was rejected by three out of four of the evangelical, emerging adults. In the second set of data, we saw that a similar number believe that unmarried sex and divorce are okay. These beliefs are clearly counter to the teaching of Christianity, but they are dominant beliefs among evangelical, emerging adults. As Christian Smith put it, "[M]ost emerging adults reduce a certain cognitive dissonance they feel—arising from the conflict of religious teachings against partying and sex before marriage versus their wanting to engage in those behaviors—by mentally discounting the religious teachings and socially distancing themselves from

the source of those teachings." In other words, they discount any religious teachings that would discourage them from doing what the culture promotes as acceptable, contrasted with the Bible which says, "Love not the world neither the things of the world. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, are not of the Father but are of the world."{8}

Cultural Practices

Perhaps the disturbing cultural beliefs are belied by the cultural practices. Let's look at some of the relevant cultural practices addressed in the National Study on Youth and Religion. Let's begin with the number of people who have not smoked pot or engaged in binge drinking in the two weeks before the survey. Among evangelical, emerging adults over half (54%) have not engaged in these two activities. Of course this also means that almost half of them have engaged in one of both of these activities. Amongst Catholic emerging adults, two out of three have engaged in these behaviors.

How many have not engaged in viewing X-rated videos in the last year or unmarried sex (including oral sex)? This number begins at approximately one third of evangelicals not engaging in unmarried sex but drops to only one fifth when X-rated videos are added. So, 4 out of 5 evangelical, emerging adults are engaged in sexual sin, most of them on a regular basis.

On another venue of behavior, how many emerging adults have given money for charitable purposes, volunteered, and don't admire people based on how much money they have? We find that approximately 15% of evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and Catholics have done so. So, over 8 out of 10 have not given of themselves to help others.

Certainly Christians are called to "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess. 5:18) and to "set their minds on heavenly things" (Col. 3:2). So let's consider those who are

grateful for the present and sometimes think about the future. This includes about half of all emerging adults. Thus, over half of emerging adults seldom give thanks and rarely think about the future.

Now let's combine these thoughts and actions together and we find that only about 2% of all emerging adults hold to a biblical set of practices. So even though over half hold to a belief in abstaining from drugs and binge drinking, one-fifth affirm abstaining from illicit sexual activity, half hold to an attitude of gratitude for the present and the future, and 15% have given in some way of their time or money, when you combine them together only 2% have done all four items.

If we combine the four categories, Religious Beliefs, Religious Practices, Cultural Beliefs, and Cultural Practices, we find that no one holds to the set of beliefs which are most consistent with Scripture.

Conclusions

There are many conclusions that could be drawn from the data above. Two of the most important conclusions are as follows. First, the basic religious beliefs of emerging adults largely depart from the Bible, and when you add in religious practices and cultural beliefs and practices we find that no one maintains a distinctly biblical worldview. Second, there does not appear to be uniformity in the beliefs of emerging adults. Rather than having a subset of evangelicals, say 15%, holding to a distinctly biblical worldview, you end up with none because they trip up in different areas.

As Christian Smith pointed out, "emerging adults felt entirely comfortable describing various religious beliefs that they affirmed but that appeared to have no connection whatsoever to the living of their lives."{9} This is because religious teachings are not the authority on this world. Rather, it is what you choose to believe that is your authority for the

"truth" in your life. As one emerging adult put it, "I think that what you believe depends on you. I don't think I could say that Hinduism is wrong or Catholicism is wrong . . . I think it just depends on what you believe."{10} This concept results in a set of evangelical, emerging adults who don't hold to a set of common beliefs about God, Jesus, religion, and cultural practices, but instead hold to a wide variety of beliefs which are counter to the Bible. We must not say because they go to church that they believe the truth of the Bible. This survey shows that almost certainly they do not.

At Probe, we are committed to making a difference in this emerging generation. Over the next decade, we are committed to freeing the minds of 50 million Christians and converting them into confident ambassadors for Christ. If we and others like us are not successful, the children of these emerging adults may have no Christian example to follow.

Notes

1. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 101.

2. www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NSYRW3.asp, "The National Study of Youth and Religion, www.youthandreligion.org, whose data were used by permission here, was generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., under the direction of Christian Smith, of the Department of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame.

3. Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 158.

4. Ibid., 158.

5. Ibid., 158.

6. Ibid., 157.

7. Ibid., 157.

8. 1 John 2:15-16 (NASU)

9. Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 155.

10. Ibid p. 156

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See Also:

Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America
Emerging Adults A Closer Look
The Importance of Parents in the Faith of Emerging Adults
Cultural Captives – a book on the faith of emerging adults

Emerging Adults: A Closer Look at Issues Facing Young Christians

"Emerging adults" is a term coined by sociologists to capture the new reality of 18- to 30-year-old Americans who have not fully assumed the responsibilities of classic adulthood. In previous articles, we looked at disturbing information on the beliefs of emerging adults in America from surveys by Christian Smith of Notre Dame, by Probe Ministries, and by others. In them, we found clear evidence of accelerating erosion in accepting and adhering to basic biblical truths for living, even among those who were born again. Our emerging cultural milieu of pop post-modernism is clearly taking many young adult Christians captive to the "philosophies of men" (Col. 2:8). Here we will take a closer look at the erosion of belief in several important areas.

Christian Smith and his fellow researchers at Notre Dame published an initial book, *Souls in Transition*, covering the results of their 2008 survey of the religious beliefs and actions of emerging adults from age 18 through 23. We discussed their findings in two earlier articles: *Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America*, and *Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths*. Their deep distress over some of the results of their surveys and interviews led them to publish a follow-up book in 2011 entitled *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. In this book, they focus on five specific areas of concern identified by their earlier research:

1. *Moral aimlessness*
2. *Materialistic consumerism*
3. *Intoxicated living*
4. *Deep troubles from sexually liberated behavior*
5. *Lack of interest in civic and political life*

The troubling characteristics of emerging adult life in America in the early years of the twenty-first century remind us of what Paul warned of in 2 Timothy when he wrote: “in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, . . . arrogant, . . . ungrateful, . . . without self-control, . . . reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power” (2 Tim 3:1-5).

One major factor in the growth of these problems is the widespread acceptance of pop post-modernism throughout our culture. As Smith points out, the post-modern theory became “democratized and vulgarized in U.S. culture” becoming a “simple-minded ideology presupposing the cultural construction of everything, individualistic subjectivism, soft ontological

antirealism and absolute moral relativism."{1}

This popularized post-modern view says there is no objective truth, only the practical truth I choose to live by with my friends. This view leads to a basic disconnect with the teaching of Jesus who claimed His purpose was to "testify to the truth" (Jn. 18:37) because He is the truth.

Dale Tackett, author of The Truth Project, put the problem this way, "When what is right is what's good for me, you will find all of the moral chaos that we see today."{2}

In what follows, we will focus on three of the five areas of concern: moral aimlessness, materialistic consumerism, and the lack of interest in civic and political life.

Moral Viewpoint – A Floating Standard

In his study of American emerging adults, Smith found that their morality is adrift with no standard to hold it in place.

What is morality in the first place? Morality is defined as "a system of ideas of right and wrong conduct."{3} For Christians, this system is set out for us in the Bible, particularly in the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Jesus, and the New Testament epistles. The Bible makes it clear that God is the source of true morality. It is our responsibility to learn and apply His moral precepts. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Or as Paul instructed in 1Thessalonians, "examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil" (5:21-22). Paul is saying hold fast to the morality taught by Christ.

In a Christian nation, how can there be any confusion about morality? Well, sixty percent of emerging adults say that

“morality is a personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decision. Moral rights and wrongs are essentially matters of individual opinion, in their view.”{4} And where do these opinions come from? One emerging adult put it this way, “Like just kinda things that I thought up, that I decided was right for me. So I don’t know. I honestly don’t. It just kinda came outta thin air.”{5} So, we can either look for the Bible as the source of our morality or we can just create it out of thin air.

When faced with a moral choice, almost half of them said they would do what made them feel happy or would help them get ahead. Less than one out of five said they would “do what God or the scripture” says is right. Many of them said they would not really know if their choice was right or wrong until after it was done and they could evaluate how they felt about it.

Not only do they not look to the Bible or society for their moral compass; they believe that it is morally wrong to assume there is a common morality that applies to all. Because we must be tolerant and accept other’s views as right for them, we must not apply our moral precepts to their actions. As Smith put it, “Giving voice to one’s own moral views is itself nearly immoral.” What they fail to realize is that complete moral relativism and tolerance actually dishonor the beliefs of others. With this view, they cannot accept new views which are superior to their own or act to correct views which are inferior. What someone else thinks is about morality is immaterial to them.

This type of thinking will ultimately lead to disaster for the people embracing it. As Chuck Colson said, “So often, the great disasters (of the past) were caused by people disregarding God’s standard of right and wrong and doing what was right in their own eyes . . . We’ve stopped moral teaching in our country and we are seeing the inevitable consequence of failing to teach moral values to a culture. We are seeing chaos.”{6}

The whole topic of morality is not something most emerging adults give much thought to. One third of them could not think of any moral dilemmas that they had faced in their lives, while another third of them offered examples that were not actually moral dilemmas. For example, one of them stated, “I guess renting the apartment thing, whether or not I would be able to afford it.” That is a dilemma but it is not a moral dilemma. So through their education from their parents and schools, the vast majority of emerging adults really have not gained a good working knowledge of the concept of morality much less its importance to society. Yet in 1 Peter, Peter makes it clear that our moral actions are one of the most important ways that Christians can share the good news of Jesus Christ. As he said, “For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men” (2:15).

Consumerism – The True Objective of Life

What impact has consumer culture had on the lives of emerging adults?

As Christians, our lives are to be about far more than how much we are able to consume. Jesus never gave his disciples instructions on how to increase their economic wealth. Instead, He sent his disciples out to minister with little more than the clothes on their backs. Similarly, Paul learned to be content with whatever the Lord provided. He states, “I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:12-14). To be clear, the Bible does teach us much about how to operate successfully in the business world. But, it is also clear that our purpose in life is to be focused on things with eternal value and not on how much we can accumulate and consume on this earth.

Yet, as a whole, the young, emerging adults in this nation have missed the call of Christ to focus our lives on the eternal rather than the temporal. Instead, not only have they bought into consumerism as the primary goal of life, but they appear to be unable to consider any shortcomings in a life focused on what they can consume. Smith reports, "Contemporary emerging adults are either true believers or complacent conformists when it comes to mass consumerism."{7}

As one emerging adult put it, "It feels good to be able to get things that you want and you work for the money. If you want something, you go get it. It makes your life more comfortable and I guess it just make you feel good about yourself as well."{8} That statement by itself might not seem so bad until you realize that it is their sole method to feel good about themselves. The more you can consume the better. They miss the balanced view of material things taught in the Bible. For example, in Proverbs we are told,

> *Give me neither poverty nor riches;*
>
> *Feed me with the food that is my portion,*
>
> *That I not be full and deny You and say, "Who is the LORD?"*
>
> *Or that I not be in want and steal,*
>
> *And profane the name of my God (Prov. 30:8,9).*

In addition, the idea of limiting one's consumption in order to have the resources to help others is foreign to most emerging adults. Many of them would like to see the needs of the starving people met, "just not by me, not now." If they ever reach a state in life where all their consumer desires are met, then they may consider using some resources for charitable causes. One obvious problem with this approach is that our consumer conscious society always has something new and better that you must purchase and experience.

This attitude is in contrast to that of the Macedonians Paul commends in his second letter to the Corinthian church:

> *. . . that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God (2 Cor. 8:1-6).*

Rather than "seeking the kingdom of God and his righteousness" and letting the material things be of secondary importance, most young America adults are seeking consumer nirvana and its false sense of well being. With no external moral compass for guidance, they are unwilling to express concerns about the grossest forms of excessive consumerism. As most of them said when asked, "If someone wants it, who am I to say that they are wrong?" When emerging adults refer to a good life, they talk about what they want to possess rather than the good that they can contribute to the world. I find it sad to think about being remembered for how much I consumed rather that how much I contributed. But this thought does not seem to bother these emerging adults.

Civic and Political Involvement – Not For Me

Let continue by examining another disturbing characteristic of young, emerging adults identified by Christian Smith through his extensive surveys and interviews over the last five years: their perception of civic and political involvement. Smith summarizes their attitude by saying, "The vast majority of the emerging adults we interviewed remain . . . politically disengaged, uninformed, and distrustful. Most in fact feel

disempowered, apathetic, and sometimes even despairing when it comes to the larger social, civic, and political world beyond their own lives."{9} When we consider that the polls and interviews driving this assessment occurred in the summer of 2008 during the perceived youth movement which brought President Obama into office, this result on political involvement is particularly surprising.

Some might say that being actively involved in politics is not the right course of action for Christians. And, thus, they may applaud this result. We certainly agree that our primary purpose as Christians will not and cannot be fulfilled through political action. However, what we are talking about here is not a lack of political activism, but rather a disengagement from active participation in the political process. As Paul instructed Timothy, "I urge that entreaties, prayers, petitions and thanksgivings be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity" (1 Tim. 2:1-2). We are to be concerned about the impact of government on our lives. If the people Paul were writing to had the right to vote, I am confident he would have said to pray for and exercise your right to vote.

Through his research, Smith identified six different attitudes toward civic involvement among emerging adults. These attitudes are:

> *1. The apathetic are completely uninterested in politics and make up twenty-seven percent of emerging adults. It is important to note that these individuals were not apathetic in general, just about this area of life.*
>
> *2. The uninformed said their lack of interest was driven by their lack of knowledge about the issues and the players. The uninformed made up thirteen percent of emerging adults.*
>
> *3. The distrustful know a reasonable amount about political*

issues but do not participate because they distrust the political system and politicians. They believe exercising their right to vote will not make any difference.

4. The disempowered point to their inability to change the world (rather than distrust of the process) as their reason to be uninvolved. Around ten percent of emerging adults fall into this category.

5. The marginally political represent those who expressed some interest in politics but whose interest did not appear to lead to actual involvement in the process. These marginally political emerging adults make up twenty-seven percent of those interviewed.

6. That leaves four percent of emerging adults (all males) who appear to be genuinely political; that is, interested and involved in the process.

In summary, their interviews found two-thirds of the emerging adult population completely uninvolved and almost one-third with a very limited involvement. This meant only four percent considered the process an important responsibility in life.

This seemingly fatalistic view of politics was found to carry over in other areas of civic involvement such as volunteering and charitable giving. Smith summarized their results saying, "Contrary to some of the stories told in the popular media, most emerging adults in America have extremely modest hopes, if any, that they can change society or the world for the better, whether by volunteering or anything else."{10} With that perception, providing help to others is not a requirement for righteousness, but simply an optional personal choice that most are not prepared to make.

Thinking back to our earlier discussion on the lack of a moral viewpoint, Smith's research found a significant association between those who believe all morality is relative and

individualistic and an attitude of apathy, ignorance, and distrust of the political process. In addition, Smith found a significant relationship between "enthusiasm for mass consumerism and lack of interest in political participation."{11} So these three attitudes (no moral standards, consumer consumption as our primary objective, and no real political or civic involvement) appear to be common elements of the emerging adult belief system.

Emerging Adults – Where Will They Take Us?

One root cause of the attitudes expressed by emerging adults in American is pop post-modern individualism. Each individual must decide what is true for him or her and must not accept a common truth. Therefore, most emerging adults cannot grasp the concept of an objective reality beyond their individual selves that would have any bearing on their lives. As we have seen, this concept undermines their moral compass, their attitudes about consumer consumption, and their involvement in society through politics, volunteering, and charitable giving.

These dominant patterns of emerging adult thought in America should make us consider: "What does it mean?" and, "How can we do something about it?" Some might say it is just the way young people are. We were that way when we were young. They will snap out of it. To that idea Smith would say, "It is a different world today. . . . To think otherwise is to self-impose a blurred vision that cannot recognize real life as it is experienced today and so cannot take emerging adults seriously."{12}

Others may say that is not what I hear on the news. Our young adults are leading a new wave of service and public involvement. To which Smith would say, "The fact that anyone ever believed that idea simply tells us how flimsy the empirical evidence that so many journalistic media stories are

based upon is and how unaccountable to empirical reality high-profile journalism can be. . . . we – without joy – can set the record straight here: almost all emerging adults today are either apathetic, uninformed, distrustful, disempowered, or , at most marginally interested when it comes to politics and public life. Both the fact itself and the reasons for it speak poorly of the condition of our larger culture and society."{13} He continues: "One tendency is to claim that emerging adults are deeply committed to social justice, passionately engaged in political activism, actively volunteering in their local communities, devoting themselves to building a greener, more peaceful and just world. Almost nothing could be further from the truth."{14}

Although the vast majority of emerging adults are disengaged from involvement in the public sphere, they are quite engaged in a different way. As Smith points out, "they pursue these private-sphere emotional and relational investments with fervent devotion. . . . progressing yet further toward the nearly total submersion of self into fluidly constructed, private networks of technologically managed intimates and associates."{15} He is referring of course to their disconnected connections via Facebook, Twitter, and other electronic social media.

We believe that there are several positive actions that we can take as Christians to improve this situation.

First, we need to examine ourselves. Are we living our lives under the direction of the ultimate source of morality, Jesus Christ? Are we consumed by consumerism or are we living for eternity? Are we taking an active part in impacting our society so that we may live godly and peaceful lives for Christ?

Next, we need to recognize that emerging adults under the age of thirty are, for the most part, not taking on the full responsibilities of adulthood. They are still emerging and,

consequently, still need coaching. However, as Smith points out, “One of the striking social features of emerging adulthood is how structurally disconnected most emerging adults are from older adults. . . Most emerging adults live this crucial decade of life surrounded mostly by their peers . . . who have no more experience, insight, wisdom, perspective, or balance than they do.”{16} As parents, pastors, co-workers, we should continue to actively engage them in a mentor role. It is important that:

1. They understand we look to the Bible as the source for our moral decisions.

2. We are living in this world as citizens of heaven and as such consumer consumption is not our purpose for living.

3. We have a responsibility to be engaged in our society to keep our freedom to lead godly lives serving the Lord.

The apostle Peter put it this way: “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles so that in the thing in which they slander you as evil doers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:11,12).

Finally, we need to reach out to emerging adults who are already involved in evangelical churches. We need to let them know that it is okay to engage others with their worldview and their source of truth, Jesus Christ. When they don’t share their worldview with others as a gift from God, they are effectively consigning those others to hell. Probe is in the midst of preparing materials that you can use in your church to directly address these issues.

Christian Smith captured the essence of this problem when he wrote, “Might it be true that the farthest boundary of sight

that youth today can envision as real and being worth pursuit is entirely imminent, purely material, and completely mundane?”{17} As Christians, our boundary extends beyond this universe to the halls of heaven and puts our lives in a new perspective. Let that eternal perspective been seen in every area of your life.

As historian Christopher Lasch put it, “There is only one cure for the malady that afflicts our culture, and that is to speak the truth about it.”{18}

Notes

1. Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 15.

2. Del Tackett and Chuck Colson, *The Way Out: God’s Solution to Moral Chaos in America*, 2011, www.truthinaction.org/index.php/landing-doing-the-right-thing-full-episode/

3. *American Heritage Dictionary*, s.v. “Morality.”

4. Smith, *Lost*, 21.

5. Ibid., 22.

6. Tackett and Colson, *The Way Out*.

7. Smith, *Lost*, 72.

8. Ibid., 73.

9. Ibid., 196.

10. Ibid., 211.

11. Ibid., 218.

12. Ibid., 227.

13. Ibid., 224-5.

14. Ibid., 228.

15. Ibid., 223.

16. Ibid., 234.

17. Ibid., 236.

18. Christopher Lasch, "Give Youth Cause to Believe in Tomorrow," *International Herald Tribune*, December 29, 1989.

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See Also:

Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America
Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths
The Importance of Parents in the Faith of Emerging Adults
Cultural Captives – a book on the faith of emerging adults

Defending Your Faith – Additional Readings

Defending Your Faith – *Additional Readings for Probe's course on basic apologetics*

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- The Christian Mind: www.probe.org/the-christian-mind
- Hindrances of the Mind: www.probe.org/hindrances-of-the-mind-the-scandal-of-evangelical-thinking
- Faith and Reason: www.probe.org/faith-and-reason

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- Worldviews Through History: www.probe.org/worldviews-through-history
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- Christianity & Religious Pluralism Access article by clicking here.

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Complete in Christ and Captive to Empty Deception

Steve Cable examines four types of cultural captivity that holds Christians in bondage: naturalism, legalism, mysticism and asceticism.

Problem of Captivity

God has laid a powerful vision on Probe Ministries, calling us to free the minds of fifty million culturally captive Christians and build them into confident ambassadors for Christ by the year 2020. Our survey analysis has shown that cultural captivity is a growing problem within the church.{1} To be effective in this mission, we need to understand the different forms cultural captivity can take individually and collectively.

Does the Bible provide any insight into cultural captivity and the tools for setting believers free? In an earlier article, we looked at the differing types of cultural captivity: carnal, confused, compromised, and contented Christians.{2} In this article we will see insights from the second chapter of Colossians.

In Colossians 2:8, Paul warns the local Christians, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception," and then he reminds them that they are "complete in [Christ]."{3} What does this thing look like that can capture someone who is complete in Christ? How can I avoid it or free myself from it in the power of Christ? Surely, the Christians in Colossae were asking the same things. Paul thought as much for he points out four different views that may take genuine Christians captive and keep them from doing their part in the war of ideas.

In Colossians 2:1-4, Paul warns us that we need a true knowledge of "Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." If we don't completely understand the fullness of Christ and His work of redemption, we are setting ourselves up for those who would "delude you with persuasive arguments."{4} We must fully grasp that Christ alone is necessary and sufficient for our salvation. We must believe it in the day to day living of our lives—being "rooted and grounded in Him."{5}

In the remainder of the second chapter of Colossians, Paul lists four specific ways that our thinking can be taken captive by the philosophy of men through persuasive arguments. It is important to remember that these arguments are called "persuasive," meaning that they appear to make good sense and have the power to sway our thinking. It is only by examining these arguments in the light of Christ's truth that their falsehood comes to light. I want to examine each of the four, considering how they would appear to the Colossian Christians of that day and how they might play out in this decade.

The examples of cultural captivity exposed by Paul and still relevant to our lives today are naturalism, legalism, mysticism and asceticism. We'll begin with naturalism.

Naturalism: Captive to Scientific Deception

The first type of cultural captivity highlighted in Colossians is found in our key verse, chapter 2 verse 8:

> See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

This verse has the only occurrence of the word "philosophy" in the Bible. The Greek word literally means "the investigation of truth and nature"{6} as emphasized by the remainder of this verse. Thinking in accordance with the tradition of men and the elementary principles of the world can captivate us. The ways in which man explains how the world works and how we fit into it can be a deceptive trap.

In Galatians 4:3, Paul tells us that apart from Christ we are held in bondage by the elementary principles of the world. When we try to limit the forces at work in our universe to

simply those elementary forces operating in our daily lives, we are missing out on the powerful work of Christ in our world far above and beyond the everyday forces of nature.

So what are the elementary principles that lure us into captivity today? Certainly, one of the most influential is neo-Darwinism. As discussed in many articles at Probe.org, neo-Darwinism says the world is the result of the strictly natural processes of random mutations and natural selection. This theory attempting to describe the current diversity and complexity of life on this earth is the dominant view in our society. It is seen by many as the culmination of understanding our existence in this world. In fact, it is full of problems, having no plausible explanation for 1) the existence of a life-supporting planet, 2) the first occurrence of life on this planet, or 3) the irreducible complexity of life forms on this planet.

I would suggest that those Christians who put Christ's role in our creation at a level below that of these elementary principles are allowing themselves to be taken captive. If one believes these principles are lord over Christ instead of the other way around, that person is living practically as a citizen of this earth rather than as a citizen of heaven.

Legalism: Captive to Self-Made Godliness

A second form of cultural captivity, identified in the letter to the Colossians, is legalism. Paul writes:

> Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ (Col 2:16-17).

Paul was warning against those attempting to take Christians captive through the subtle lies of legalism, telling the new, Gentile followers that believing in Christ was a good start,

but you also need to follow some of the laws of Moses if you are to be righteous before God.

Notice that the items listed in this verse are not instructions on purity and righteous behavior. Rather, they are specific practices given to Israel as precursors of the coming Messiah. For example, the festival of Passover is a marvelous foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice of Himself as the Lamb of God to deliver us from slavery to the world of sin and separation from God. But, why celebrate the Passover when one can celebrate the real event? These behaviors designed to prepare us for the coming of Christ are no longer necessary now that we have the presence of Christ in our lives.

In the American culture, legalism appears to have been more prevalent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries than it is today. But there are certainly forms of legalism which take people captive today. If you are more interested in passing laws to make some form of Christian behavior the law of the land than you are in changing the hearts of men through the gospel of Jesus Christ, you may be captive to legalistic thinking.

Another form of legalism is the practice of picking only parts of the truth as applicable to you. Jesus noted in Matthew 15:3-6 that this type of legalism was present in the Pharisaical view of committing their resources to God so that they would not have to help their mothers and fathers. Today, I can customize my religious beliefs to conform to what I expect from my religion rather than what my religion sets as a standard for my life. The National Survey of Youth and Religion tells us that over fifty-one percent of 18- to 23-year-olds in American say "it is okay to pick and choose their religious beliefs without having to accept the teachings of their religious faith as a whole."{7}

Mysticism: Captive to Man's Composite View of God

Earlier, we saw naturalism and legalism as two forms of cultural captivity for Christians. Now we will consider another form which can take us captive, mysticism. In Colossians 2:18-19, Paul writes:

> Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.

Here Paul is describing someone who drifts away by delighting in self-derived sources of truth, that is, "visions he has seen," and other religious practices not taught by Christ. This person delights in mixing together teachings from different religions to come up with one's own personalized religious experience. But Christ calls us to worship the Father and the Son, not angels or our own self sacrifice.

Your first reaction may be that this is not a major area of captivity for today's Christians. However, when we begin to consider examples of this type of thinking, we realize that it is very prevalent in our society.

For example, consider the millions of people who joined Oprah Winfrey in extolling and following the teachings of Eckhardt Tolle, author of *A New Earth, Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. Tolle teaches a version of Eastern mysticism which he discovered in a vision. Taking his stand on visions, he teaches we are all part of the universal life force to which we should desire to return. He selectively misquotes Jesus throughout the book, identifying Him as one of the early proponents of this mystic religion. Most of Tolle's followers come from Christian backgrounds, professing to be Christians

trying to find a way to integrate his teaching with the teachings of Jesus.

One feature of Tolle's teaching is the view that Jesus was one of many who are bringing a form of truth to us. He believes Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed are all trying to communicate the same truth in different ways. This viewpoint is seen in the National Study of Youth and Religion where over seventy percent of American 18- to 23-year-olds disagreed with the idea that only one religion was true. In our study of American born-agains between 18 and 40, we found that less than half of these born-agains believe that Jesus is the only way to heaven, not Mohammed or Buddha.

Asceticism: Captive to Focusing on the Flesh

A fourth form of cultural captivity identified in Colossians is asceticism. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines asceticism as "the doctrine that a life of extreme self-denial and austerity releases the soul from bondage with the body and permits union with the divine." Asceticism was promoted in Jesus' time by the Essenes of the Jewish culture and the Stoics of the Greek culture.

Since our hope is rooted in an imperishable life in heaven, one could adopt the view that this earthly body needs to be denied in light of our heavenly home. However, Paul warns us:

> If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) – in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no

value against fleshly indulgence (Col 2:20-23).

Paul warns the Christians at Colossae not to fall for the idea that we must remove our body from all pleasures of the world to partake of the divine. He points out that obsession with self-abasement and severe treatment of the body actually focus our attention on the flesh. Thus, our focus is on eliminating fleshly indulgence rather than on living lives that please Jesus.

In our post-modern American culture, severe treatment of the body does not appear to be attractive to most young adults (except for extreme cases such as anorexia). Perhaps, though, it is evidenced by some forms of the "buy green" movement. What we do see is the opposite extreme, where an emphasis on bodily enhancement for the here and now takes our focus off the work of Christ. Of course, in other parts of the world such as South America, extreme asceticism is practiced among some believers.

We have seen four types of false thinking that could take Christians captive in Colossae of the first century and can in America today. The four types are naturalism, legalism, mysticism, and asceticism. If we recognize these forms of captivity, as Christians, we can be free of them. We must ask ourselves, Does this way of thinking add anything to the fullness of Christ? If I am already "complete in Him",{8} how can these add-ons make me more complete? Obviously they cannot. So leave them behind and "as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord so walk in Him."{9}

Notes

1. Steve Cable, "Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America,"; "Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths," ; "The True State of American Evangelicals in 2011," .

2. Cable, "Examining Our Cultural Captivity,"

www.probe.org/examining-our-cultural-captivity/.
3. Colossians 2:10
4. Colossians 2:4
5. Colossians 2:7
6. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.
7. www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Descriptions/NSYRW3.asp. "The National Study of Youth and Religion," www.youthandreligion.org, whose data were used by permission here, was generously funded by Lilly Endowment Inc., under the direction of Christian Smith of the Department of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame.
8. Colossians 2:10
9. Colossians 2:6

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Bringing the Truth of Christ to Your Generation

Are you a believer wondering if you're part of a dwindling population? Do people who follow hard after Christ—and show it by their actions and attitudes—seem to be a vanishing breed? Do you get the feeling that we're living in a post-Christian culture? We're not announcing the end of the Church in America and the West, but there is much cause for concern. We have the evidence straight from the mouths of believers—many of them caught up in captivity to the culture.

Here at Probe, we have been analyzing both existing and new original survey data to obtain a better grip on the realities of born-again faith in America today. Although the evangelical church has remained fairly constant in size as a percentage of our population over the last twenty years, these surveys show

its impact on our society has continued to decline as the percentage of non–Christians has grown considerably over the same period. We see two reasons for this change:

> *1. The increased acceptance of pluralism removes the felt need to share our faith with others. In our new Barna survey, almost one half of all born-again 18- to 40-year-olds believe that Jesus is one way to eternal life, but Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. when followed well, will also result in eternal life.*
>
> *2. Captivity to the culture rather than to Christ's truth shapes believers' perspectives on nearly every aspect of life. The recent National Study of Youth & Religion, a survey of 18- to 23-year-olds, shows that only a quarter of those affiliated with an evangelical church have a consistent set of biblical theological beliefs and that less than 2% of them combine those theological beliefs with a consistent set of biblical beliefs on behaviors and attitudes.*

A combination of pluralism and cultural captivity eliminates both the reason for and the evidence of changed lives needed to effectively share the great news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, these problems are not unique to our time and country. In fact, these problems were key issues addressed in the letters of Peter, John and Paul back in the first century. In this article, we will use the writings of Peter to introduce Paul's response to this problem as laid out in the book of Colossians with special emphasis on Col. 4:2-6.

As advocates of apologetics and a biblical worldview, we often focus on 1 Peter 3:15, which exhorts us to always be ready to give a defense for the hope of the gospel to anyone who asks. However, Peter points out that our testimony for Christ, goes far beyond our ability to make a reasoned defense. In the first chapter of his letter, Peter provides an excellent description of the hope of the gospel. He makes it clear that

only through the resurrection of Christ can we can receive eternal life. He then goes on to describe the ways that we are called to "proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light." Specifically, we are told to proclaim Christ through:

- *our excellent behavior (1 Peter 2:11-17),*
- *our right relationships with others (1 Peter 2:18–3:14),*
- *a verbal explanation of why we believe the good news (1 Peter 3:15-16), and*
- *sound judgment for the purpose of prayer (1 Peter 4:7)*

As our behavior and relationships cause observers to ask us to fully explain the hope that is driving these actions, we have the opportunity to speak the truth to them with words empowered by prayer (1 Peter 3:15-16). So Peter makes it clear that pluralism and cultural captivity are counter to the message of the gospel as portrayed in the lives of genuine believers.

Given this message from Peter, let's take a more in–depth look at how Paul addresses this topic in his letter to the Colossians. In the first two chapters, Paul gives an in–depth description of what the gospel is and what it is not. In the New American Standard version, the reader is told to "set your mind on the things above" where we are living with Christ. Because we are residents of heaven, we need to consider our life on earth from that eternal perspective. From this point on in the letter, Paul lays out the same four instructions as Peter laid out on how we are to share Christ in this world.

In Colossians 3:5–17, we are given the standard for excellent behavior that our *new self* is being renewed to live in accordance with. As Paul makes clear in the first two chapters, this excellent behavior is not a qualification for

heaven; after all, according to Colossians 2:9, the audience of believers is already "complete in Christ." Rather, the purpose of our excellent behavior is so the world can get a savory taste of heavenly living.

Then, in Colossians 3:18–4:1, Paul instructs us on the importance of **good relationships** in our families and at work. It is through our good relationships that the world can see the true meaning of "love your neighbor as you love yourself." As Paul points out, in all of these relationships "it is the Lord Christ whom you serve."

Paul then points to the remaining aspects of fully proclaiming Christ: through **our prayers** and **our words**. He addresses our prayer life as follows:

> *Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving; praying at the same time for us as well, that God will open up to us a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned; that I may make it clear in the way I ought to speak (Col. 4:2-4).*

First, we are to devote ourselves to **prayer**, making it a strong player in ordering our lives. I think that "keeping alert in it" gives us the idea that we are to be ready to take something to prayer at any time during our busy daily schedule. Prayer is not to be strictly relegated to a set prayer time, but rather a real–time, always–on communication with God in response to the interactions and challenges of our day. Paul also indicates we should not be praying as a rote habit, but rather with an attitude of thanksgiving, knowing that God hears and responds to our prayers.

Secondly, Paul gives us a consistent topic for our **prayers**: that God would open up a door for the word in the lives of those who need to hear. We may live a life characterized by excellent behavior and good relationships. But, if we are not

praying that God will use our lives to open up a door for the gospel, then we are short–circuiting the purpose of God in our lives. Let me say it directly to you: If you are not seeing doors opening for the word through your life, perhaps you should ask, "What am I praying for? Am I praying that God will open up opportunities for me to share Christ with others?"

Note that in the first chapter of Colossians, Paul explains the mystery of Christ we are to "speak forth" saying,

> *. . .That I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the **mystery** which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory**" (Col. 1:25-27).*

We are praying for an open door to speak forth so that everyone can receive the promise of eternal glory through receiving Christ in their lives. In other words, we need to actively ask God to give us entrée into others' lives to communicate the gospel so they can receive the riches of eternal life along with us. Do we really want this? It's a prayer God is sure to answer. If so, we're living according to a biblical worldview in one more essential way. If not, we risk the loss of succeeding generations.

Finally, Paul addresses the importance of our **words** in fulfilling our purpose as followers of Christ:

> *Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person (Col. 4:5-6).*

We need to be wise in our relationships with those who don't know Christ. The verse literally says we are to redeem the

time spent with unbelievers. As followers of Christ, we have the privilege of taking the most temporal and earth–bound thing in the world, time, and converting it into something of eternal value through our behavior, our relationships, our prayers and the words we speak.

We are to make the most of each opportunity to season our speech with the grace of Christ. If our speech is regularly salted with references to God's grace in our lives, we can tell from someone's reaction how we should respond to them. If we are not looking for it, how can we know when God answers our prayers to provide an open door for the gospel? And why would we be praying for it unless we value what God is saying to us here?

In summary, we must make clear to upcoming generations of evangelicals that we have a consistent message from Christ and His apostles on these two points:

> *1. Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God and the only possible way to eternal life. Religious pluralism just doesn't work.*
>
> *2. We are called to live distinctly different lives–as captives of Christ not our culture–in our behavior, relationships, prayers and speech. Why? In order to be representatives of the good news of Jesus Christ in a world that desperately needs Him.*

If we choose to live our lives as if these statements are untrue, we have allowed ourselves to be deceived by the persuasive arguments of the world. Let's make the choice not to be taken captive and, instead, be bold and caring in proclaiming the truth for our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

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Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America

Steve Cable looks at the results of the National Study on Youth and Religion and concludes the real need for evangelicals in America is not redirecting a pent–up spiritual interest into orthodox Christianity, or overcoming an emotional aversion to organized religion, but instead, demonstrating that spiritual issues are worthy of any real attention at all.

This article examines the trajectory of Christianity in America by looking at what researchers are learning about "the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults." This last phrase is the subtitle of a recent book by Christian Smith and Patricia Snell which summarizes the results of a groundbreaking study based on the results of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NYSR).{1} In 2002/3, Smith and his team surveyed over three thousand teenagers and conducted detailed interviews with over 250 of the survey respondents. These same people were surveyed again in 2005 and again in 2007/8. The 2007/8 survey also included over 230 in–depth interviews. Through this effort, we can gain insight not only into the current beliefs and practices of these young adults but also how those beliefs and practices have changed over the five year transition from teenager to young adult.

Emerging Adults: A New Life Stage

These 18– to 23–year–olds represent the future leaders of our nation and our churches and will be the parents of the children who will lead America into the second half of the twenty–first century. Barring a major change in our culture,

their attitudes toward Christianity are a preview of the role of Christianity in America in the near future. Those of us committed to Jesus' Great Commission should recognize the importance of understanding these cultural trends so that we effectively communicate the truth of the gospel to an increasingly confused culture.

Let's begin by highlighting a few aspects of the culture which shape the thinking and actions of these young adults. The first point that Smith and Snell make is that a new life phase has developed in American culture. The experience of young Americans as they age from 18 to 30 is much different today than during most of the twentieth century. Full adulthood "is culturally defined as the end of schooling, a stable career job, financial independence, and new family formation."{2} Four factors have contributed to making the transition to full adulthood an extended, complex process:

1. *the dramatic growth in higher education*
2. *the delay of marriage*
3. *the expectation of an unstable career*
4. *the willingness of parents to extend support well into their children's twenties*

Because of these factors, most young adults assume that they will go through an extended period of transition, trying different life experiences, living arrangements, careers, relationships, and viewpoints until they finally are able to stand on their own and settle down. Many of those surveyed are smarting from poor life choices and harmful lifestyles, yet they profess to have "no regrets" and are generally optimistic about their personal future when they finally get to the point they are able to stand on their own. Some researchers refer to this recently created life phase as "emerging adulthood," covering the period from 18 to 29. Through the rest of this article, we will refer to this age range as *emerging adults*. Keep in mind that the surveys and interviews are limited to

the range from 18 to 23 and there will certainly be some difference between 29–year–olds and this lower range.

Although, these emerging adults face a period of significant changes, we will see that for many that profess to be Christians, they have already established a set of beliefs and attitudes that have them on a trajectory moving away from a vital Christian walk with Jesus Christ. To put it in the words of Paul, they have already been "taken captive" by their culture (Col. 2:8).

Emerging Adults: Cultural Themes

Through their interviews and the results of other studies, Smith and his team identified over forty cultural themes that impact the overall religious perspective of emerging adults. A sample of those themes gives a feel for the general cultural milieu shaping the lives of today's emerging adults.

Theme #1: Reality and morality are personal and subjective, not objective.

Most emerging adults cannot even conceive of, much less believe in, the existence of a common shared reality that applies to all people. According to Smith and Snell, "They cannot, for whatever reason, believe in–or sometimes even conceive of–a given, objective truth, fact, reality, or nature of the world that is independent of their subjective self–experience and that in relation to which they and others might learn or be persuaded to change. . . . People are thus trying to communicate with each other in order to simply be able to get along and enjoy life as they see fit. Beyond that, anything truly objectively shared or common or real seems impossible to access."{3} It appears that the perceived inability to know objective truth causes emerging adults to settle for getting along and enjoying life as the highest good they can aspire to. This cultural theme is driving them into

the life of vanity Solomon warns us of in Ecclesiastes rather than the life of higher calling Paul knew when he wrote:

> *One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal*

This subjective view of reality is clearly reflected in the conversations of emerging adults. Based on their interviews, the authors report,

> *The phrase "I feel that" has nearly ubiquitously replaced the phrases "I think that," "I believe that," and "I would argue that"—a shift in language use that express[es] an essentially subjectivistic and emotivistic approach to moral reasoning and rational argument . . . which leads to speech in which claims are not staked, rational arguments are not developed, differences are not engaged, nature is not referenced, and universals are not recognized. Rather, differences in viewpoints and ways of life are mostly acknowledged, respected, and then set aside as incommensurate and off limits for evaluation."[{4}]*

Our young people are growing up into a culture where there is no context for real dialogue about truth and truth's impact on our life choices.

The inability to believe in or search for objective truth stands in contrast to Jesus' claims that He came "to testify to the Truth" (John 18:37) and that He is "the Truth" (John 14:6) and Paul's instruction to Christians to "speak the truth in love" (Eph 4:15).

Without any concept of an objective standard, morality is determined by one's individual feelings. If you feel good about an action then it is right. If you feel bad about an action it is wrong. Most emerging adults would say, "If something would hurt another person, it is probably bad; if it

does not and is not illegal, it's probably fine."{5}

Theme #2: It's up to the individual, but don't expect to change the world.

Most emerging adults have no concept of a common good that would motivate us to put another's interests ahead of our own or to attempt to influence another's behavior for the common good. "The most one should ever do toward influencing another person is to ask him or her to consider what one thinks. Nobody is bound to any course of action by virtue of belonging to a group or because of a common good."{6}

The authors continue:

> *Again, any notion of the responsibilities of a common humanity, a transcendent call to protect the life and dignity of one's neighbor, or a moral responsibility to seek the common good was almost entirely absent among the respondents. . . .{7}*

> *Most emerging adults in America have extremely modest to no expectations for ways society or the world can be changed for the better. . . . Many are totally disconnected from politics, and countless others are only marginally aware of what today's pressing political issues might be. . . . The rest of the world will continue to have its good and bad sides. All you can do is live in it, such as it is, and make out the best you can.{8}*

Theme #3: Uncertain about purpose, but consumerism is good stuff.

Most emerging adults are still unsure as to what their purpose in life might be. Is there something greater that they should devote themselves to? Lacking any concept of a common good takes the teeth out God's command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39) and to "regard others as more important

than yourself, do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil 2:3–4).

Self–sacrifice for others was clearly not a part of their life purpose, but almost all of them are sure that being able to buy the things they want and to live a comfortable affluent lifestyle are key aspects of their purpose. There does not appear to be any tension in their thinking between loving God and loving material things as well. "Not only was there no danger of leading emerging adults into expressing false opposition to materialistic consumerism; interviewers could not, no matter how hard they pushed, get emerging adults to express any serious concerns about any aspect of mass–consumer materialism."{9} In this cultural environment, Jesus' admonition in Luke 12 is desperately needed:

> *Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions (Luke 12:15).*

Theme #4: Sex is not a moral issue.

Partying, hooking up, having sex, and cohabitating are generally viewed as an essential aspect of the transition from teen years to adulthood. This cultural theme creates a dissonance with their attitude toward serious practice of religion since they recognize that most religions are not favorable towards partying and sex outside of marriage. Choosing to ignore any religious moral teaching from their teen years, "the vast majority of emerging adults nonetheless believe that cohabiting is a smart if not absolutely necessary experience and phase for moving toward an eventual successful and happy marriage. . . . None of the emerging adults who are enthusiastic about cohabiting as a means to prevent unsuccessful marriages seem aware that nearly all studies consistently show that couples who live together before they marry are more, not less, likely to later divorce than couples

who did not live together before their weddings."{10}

Emerging Adults: Cultural Perspective on Religion

Within these broader cultural themes, Smith and Snell identified a set of prevailing religious cultural themes which create a framework for how many emerging adults view religion. These themes were dominant messages across the 230 interviews and the survey results, but do not reflect the views of all emerging adults.

Feelings towards religion

The general feelings of emerging adults toward religion appear to be driven by their years of diversity training and adherence to religious pluralism. Religion does not seem to be viewed as a controversial topic by emerging adults. They are not averse to talking about religion, but they are not very likely to bring it up for discussion. As the authors discovered,

> *there are many more important things to think and talk about. In any case, for most it's just not a big issue, not a problem, nothing to get worked up over. . . . For very many emerging adults, religion is mostly a matter of indifference. Once one has gotten belief in God figured out . . . and . . . feels confident about going to heaven . . . there is really not much more to think about or pay attention to. In this way, religion has a status on the relevance structures or priority lists of most emerging adults that are similar to, say, the oil refinery industry.{11}*

Even though they realize that religions claim to be different and to have the truth, most emerging adults believe that all religions share the same basic principles. Basically, religion is about belief in God and learning to be a good person. One

respondent put it this way: “The line of thought that I follow is that it doesn’t matter what you practice. Faith is important to everybody, and it does the same thing for everybody, no matter what your religion is.” Another said, “I find it really hard to believe that one religion is exactly true. I would say that if anything’s right, it would be probably something common in most religions.”{12}

Consequently, even for the faith that you affiliate with it is fine to only select those aspects that feel right to you and mix in aspects from other faiths to find what works for you.

Purpose of religion

All major world religions answer the major questions of life: Where did I come from? Why am I here? What happens when I die? Is there anything I can do during this life which will impact what happens to me after I die? Consequently, religions provide a perspective on how to be in a right relationship with our creator during this life and how to maximize our benefits in the afterlife (or after–lives, for some religions). However, most emerging adults take a more pragmatic view. According to the interviews, “The real point of religion, ultimately, in the eyes of most emerging adults, is to help people be good, to live good lives.”{13}

In fact, it is not really important if they have true answers to these key questions. As one of the interviewees stated, “What do you mean by religious truth? Because all religions pretty much have a good message that people can follow. I would say that basic premise of the religions, like where they get their message from, is false, but the message itself is good.”{14}

Kids learn right and wrong from church activities. “By the time a kid becomes a teenager or young adult, that person has pretty much learned his or her morals and so can effectively ‘graduate’ and stop attending services at the congregation.

What is the point, after all, of staying in school after you have been taught everything it has to teach?”{15}

The results of this research confirm that the “cultural captivity” or “sacred/secular split” (identified by Nancy Pearcy as a major challenge for American Christianity) is a dominant factor among emerging adults. Most emerging adults have religious beliefs, but “they do not particularly drive the majority’s priorities, commitments, values, or goals.” One observed, “I don’t think it’s the basis of how I live, it’s just, I guess I’m just learning about my religion and my beliefs. But I still kinda’ retain my own decision or at least a lot of it on situations I’ve had and experiences.”{16}

Perhaps the most chilling quote from Smith and Snell is their conclusion on this theme: “It was clear in many interviews that emerging adults felt entirely comfortable describing various religious beliefs that they affirmed but that appeared to have no connection whatsoever to the living of their lives.”{17}

These insights make it very clear that it is not enough to equip teenagers with a set of basic Christian doctrines that define a good Christian. We must also get them to understand that these truths relate to the real, everyday world, and that we can trust them to inform and enlighten our daily choices, attitudes, and activities.

Some of the other themes identified by Smith and Snell are listed below:

- *The family’s faith is associated with dependence.*
- *Religious congregations are not a place of real belonging.*
- *Friends hardly talk about religion.*
- *Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD) is still alive and well. (see “Is This the Last Christian Generation.”)*
- *What seems right to me” is authoritative.*
- *Take or leave what you want.*

- *Evidence and proof trump "blind faith."{18}*
- *Mainstream religion is fine, probably.*
- *Religion is a personal choice—not social or institutional.*
- *There is no way to finally know what is true.*

Emerging Adults: Trends in Religious Participation and Belief

What impact does this postmodern cultural milieu have on the religious lives of emerging adults? The survey results provide a lot of insight into that question.

First we find that these emerging adults are much less involved in organized religion and personal religious practice than are older adults. For example, the percentage of emerging adults praying daily is only about two—thirds of the percentage of Baby Boomers who currently are daily pray—ers. Similarly, the percentage of emerging adults who regularly attend worship services is only about half of the percentage of Baby Boomers who currently are regular worship service attendees. It is important to note that when these metrics are compared against the behavior of Baby Boomers when they were in their twenties, the Baby Boomers had numbers that were almost as low as today's emerging adults. This comparison gives some reason to believe that today's emerging adults will exhibit increased levels of religious involvement as they mature.

However, before banking on that historical trend, we need to remember that these emerging adults will be entering their thirties in a culture very different than the culture of the late 70s and early 80s. During this period, as Smith points out, "the larger popular culture of that era was still oriented around the outlook of ideological modernity." This outlook supported the ideal that if we applied ourselves diligently we could uncover absolute truths on which to base a

successful life. Today's emerging adults are immersed in a postmodern culture that "stressed difference over unity, relativity over universals, subjective experience over rational authorities, feeling over reason." In this cultural environment there is little reason to be hostile toward organized religion, but there is also little reason to pursue it either.

The effects of this can be seen in two major differences between the religious practices of Baby Boomers during their early twenties and those of today's emerging adults. First, the survey results show that the number of mainline Protestants and Catholic young adults regularly attending church has dropped by almost fifty percent from the 1970s to today. Today, less than fifteen percent of Catholic emerging adults and less than ten percent of mainline Protestants attend religious services on a weekly basis. In contrast, the attendance percentage for evangelical Protestants has actually grown slightly over the same time period. Second, the number of young adults who identify themselves as not religious or as a religious liberal has grown from thirty–seven percent in 1976 to sixty–one percent in 2006; an increase of sixty–five percent.

The NSYR not only gives us insight into the differences between generations and age groups, it also lets us examine the changes in the practices and thinking of these young people as they moved from teenage high school students into their early twenties. For our purposes, we will look at two primary areas of change: religious affiliation and religious beliefs. At the top level, these surveys show that there is a high degree of continuity in these two areas. That is, the majority of the young adults surveyed have retained the same affiliation and basic beliefs through this five year period. At the same time, there is a large minority that has experienced changes in these areas.

Over one third of the emerging adults surveyed are now

affiliated with a different religious group than they were five years ago. On the positive side, twenty–five percent of those who originally identified themselves as Not Religious are now affiliated with a Christian religion (mostly evangelical denominations). However, over the same period, seventeen percent of those who originally identified themselves as Christian now identify themselves as Not Religious. The greatest changes were seen among mainline Protestant denominations where fully one half of the emerging adults changed their affiliations with half of those identifying as Not Religious and most of the rest now affiliated with evangelical Protestant denominations.

Lest we mistake these changes for a positive trend, keep in mind that the absolute number of emerging adults converting to Not Religious is five times the number of those converting from Not Religious to a Christian affiliation. In fact, when we analyze the change in religious beliefs and activities as those surveyed moved from teenagers to emerging adults, we find that over forty–one percent of them became less religious over the five year span while only 3.6 percent of them became more religious during that period.

If we define cultural captivity as looking to the culture rather than to Christ and the Bible as truth and our primary guide for living, then the following seven beliefs would give a good indication of someone who is not culturally captive.

Percent of those surveyed who ascribed to a particular religious belief

Belief	U.S.	CP		MP
	2008	2003	2008	2008

My religious faith is very or extremely important in shaping my daily life.	44	70	57	33
Jesus was the Son of God who was raised from the dead.	68		83	59
Only people whose sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus go to heaven.	43		64	33
Only one religion is true.	29	49	45	22
Morals are not relative; there is a standard.	51		65	50
God is a personal being involved in the lives of people today.	63	79	74	57
Demons or evil spirits exist.	47	66	63	32
Ascribe to seven biblical beliefs above (based on 2008 affiliation).	10		22	10

CP – Conservative Protestant MP – Mainline Protestant

As seen in the last row of the table, nine out of ten emerging adults do not hold to a consistent set of basic biblical teachings. For those affiliated with an evangelical Protestant church the number drops to about eight out of ten, an alarming figure for denominations which stress the authority and accuracy of the Bible. For those affiliated with a mainline Protestant church, the number remains at nine out of ten, consistent with the average for all emerging adults.

Christian Smith and other researchers suggest that one interpretation of this data is that it is a result of the success of liberal Protestantism capturing the culture. The views taken by the majority of emerging adults are more consistent with those espoused by liberal Protestant theologians than by those espoused by conservative theologians. However, this success has the effect of making mainline Protestant churches irrelevant to the younger generations since the church offers the same relativism as the culture.

Emerging Adults: Teenage Factors Influencing Current Behavior

One topic of interest to evangelicals is what aspects of a teenager's life will most impact their religious beliefs and behaviors as an emerging adult. In his study, Smith analyzed the religious trajectories from the teenage years into emerging adulthood. As these teenagers left home for college and careers, moving out from under the more or less watchful eyes of their parents, how did their religious beliefs and behaviors change? Overall, they found a significant decline in religiousness with the percent of the group that was highly religious dropping from thirty–four percent in 2003 down to twenty–two percent in 2008. Basically, one in three highly religious teenagers is no longer highly religious as an emerging adult.

Smith and his team used statistical analysis techniques, comparing the original teenage survey results with the emerging adult survey results taken five years later, to identify the factors in teenage lives that were associated with significantly higher levels of religiousness during emerging adulthood. The teenage period factors they found consistently very important in producing emerging adults with higher involvement in their religion were:

- *frequent personal prayer and scripture reading*
- *parents who were strongly religious*
- *a high importance placed on their own religious faith*
- *having few religious doubts*
- *having religious experiences (e.g., making a commitment to God, answered prayers, experiencing a miracle)*

Some teenage practices had a surprisingly weak correlation with emerging adult religious involvement. These weaker factors included:

- *level of education*
- *frequency of religious service attendance*
- *frequency of Sunday School attendance*
- *participating in mission trips*
- *attending a religious high school*

Let’s explore some of these influencing factors to see what lessons we can glean.

Religiously Strong Parents

First, teenagers who view their parents as strongly committed to their religion are more likely to be highly religious as emerging adults. Even though the teenage years begin the process of developing independence from one’s parents, it does not mean that what parents think, do, and say is not important. As Smith points out,

> *the best empirical evidence shows that . . . when it comes to religion, parents are in fact hugely important . . . By contrast it is well worth noting, the direct religious influence of peers during the teenage years . . . proved to have a significantly weaker and more qualified influence on emerging adult religious outcomes than parents. Parental influences, in short, trump peer influences.{19}*

Note this result is true regardless of whether the emerging adult felt close to their parents during their teen years. These results led Smith to chastise American adults for swallowing the myth that "parents of teenagers are irrelevant." He encourages us not to back away from discussing and promoting our religious beliefs with our children during their teenage years when they are first able to begin asking some of life's basic questions.

Personal Religious Disciplines

Second, the analysis showed that it was not participation in religious events, trips, or peer groups, but rather commitment to individual religious disciplines that was a strong factor in predicting high religious involvement as an emerging adult. In other words, putting teenagers into a religious setting is not sufficient. However, if they come to the point where they realize the value of personal interaction with God through prayer and Scripture, they are much more likely to continue in that path. One reason for that correlation is that the practice of personal devotion which is *not* directly observed by peers, parents, or youth leaders, indicate a teenager that has placed a high value on the role of God and His truth in their lives. Another reason is that a consistent intake of God's truth helps to confirm the power and validity of the Scriptures as our guide for living. As Jesus told his followers, "If you abide in My Word, you are truly disciples of mine and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

One take–away from this finding: perhaps we should judge the success of our youth groups less on the number of teenagers attending events, trips, and classes and more on the number who are committed to personal spiritual disciplines because they recognize the value they bring. Perhaps it is worth risking the "attendance hit" of having fewer fun times in order teach them the importance of "longing for the pure milk of the Word" (1 Peter 2:2).

College vs. Culture

One somewhat surprising result dealt with the impact of college attendance on religious faith and practice. Prior research on Baby Boomers has shown that higher education had an undermining effect on the religious and spiritual lives of young adults in these preceding generations. Many of us Baby Boomers discovered that the social network of our high school years which was generally supportive of religious belief and involvement was in stark contrast to our college campus where those beliefs were often viewed as backward and inappropriate for a college educated person. This environment contributed to a higher decline in religiousness among college attendees compared to those who did not attend college. Today, however, several studies, including the NYSR, have shown that "in fact those who do not attend college are the most likely to experience declines in religious service attendance, self–reported importance of religion and religious affiliation."{20} For most measures, the differences are not large, but they are certainly counter to the results from the 70s and 80s.

Smith and other researchers have suggested several reasons for this major change. These possible causes include:

· the growing influence of campus–based religious groups
· colleges changing attitudes to be more supportive of religious interests
· a growing number of committed Christian faculty

· the growth of religious colleges and universities
· the major long-term decline in American college students' interest in answering questions about the meaning of life
· the influence of postmodern relativism which undercuts the authority of the professors as a source of truth
· adolescents who are less rebellious and more conventional than earlier generations

However, I would suggest that if all of these factors were significant, we should see less decline in religiousness from the teen to emerging adult years than we saw for the Baby Boomer generation. As we saw earlier, this is not the case. The decline in religious involvement and belief is greater for today's emerging adults as a whole than it was for the Baby Boomers. The transition period is just as corrosive if not more so. A reasonable conclusion would be that the culture itself has become just as corrosive as the college. Movies, television, music, and public schools are promoting the same counter-religious message once found primarily in academia.

Other studies have found that many teenagers have already conformed to the culture in their "real lives" before leaving high school and are maintaining the appearance of religiousness to please their parents and authority figures. Once they leave that environment to attend college or pursue a career, they are relieved to be able to set aside their faux religion and focus on their real-life pursuits.

One conclusion I would propose is that this data shows that the types of training and perspective that Probe offers to prepare students for the college environment are equally important for those students who are not headed for college. All teenagers need to be shown why they should value the perspectives taught in the Bible over the perspectives of their popular culture because the biblical perspectives are rooted in verifiable reality rather than the subjective postmodern morass of our popular culture.

Emerging Adults: Exposing Some Myths

As is often the case, a careful examination of well–designed cultural research identifies weaknesses in popularly held perceptions of reality; that is, facts often expose myths. Let's look at three popular myths that must be modified or discarded in the light of the NYSR results.

Myth 1: Emerging adults are very spiritual but are not into religion.

A popular perception is that although most young adults are not that interested in the external practice of organized religion, they are strongly committed to a personal faith and development of their spirituality. Although their outward involvement has declined, their inward commitment remains strong and their public involvement can be expected to return as they settle down into marriage and children. However, the data does not support this perception. As Smith states, "little evidence supports the idea that emerging adults who decline in regular external religious practice nonetheless retain over time high levels of subjectively important, privately committed, internal religious faith. Quite the contrary is indicated by our analysis."{21}

Smith and his team used the survey responses to categorize the respondents into six different religious types. Four of these types, representing seventy percent of emerging adults, are generally indifferent to both traditional religions and spiritual topics. Of the remaining thirty percent, half of those are what Smith labels Committed Traditionalists who are actively involved with organized religion. Another half of the remaining (i.e., fifteen percent of the total) are labeled Spiritually Open. It is important to understand that Spiritually Open is not the same as Spiritually Interested. Smith reports, "Most are in fact nothing more than simply *open.* They are not *actively* seeking, not taking a lot of initiative in pursuit of the spiritual."{22} So, when the data

is analyzed, it appears that less than five percent of emerging adults could be considered as spiritual but not religious.

Consequently, it appears that the challenge for the church is not redirecting a pent–up spiritual interest into orthodox Christianity, but, instead, demonstrating that spiritual issues are worthy of any real attention at all.

Myth 2: Emerging adults are hostile toward the church.

Several recent books have suggested that the dominant attitude of unchurched young adults is one of critical hostility toward the church.{23} Their research suggests that emerging adults view the church as hypocritical, hateful and irrelevant. Although he acknowledges that some of these feelings exist, Smith believes that the data demonstrates that these attitudes are not as prevalent as others suggest. In fact, eight out of ten emerging adults state that they have "a lot of respect for organized religion in this country" and seven out of ten disagree that "organized religion is usually a big turnoff for me." Going a step further, a strong majority of emerging adults would disagree with the statement that "most mainstream religion is irrelevant to the needs and concerns of most people my age."{24}

Given these results, why are we presented with strong cases to the contrary? First, there are a significant minority who view the church as an irrelevant turnoff, and a majority who believe that too many religious people are negative, angry, and judgmental. Second, Smith surmises that some of this perception comes from conducting "interviews with non–representative samples of emerging adults . . . by authors who are themselves alienated from mainstream religion . . . (or) by pastoral and ecclesial reformers within mainstream religion who want to make the case that traditional churches are failing to reach young people today and so need to be dramatically transformed in a postmodern or some other

allegedly promising way."{25}

Once again this is a good news / bad news story. The good news is that most emerging adults do not have strong emotional barriers build up against organized religion. However, the vast majority of them are indifferent to religion and confused about its role in life. According to Smith,

> *Most emerging adults are okay with talking about religion as a topic, although they are largely indifferent to it—religion is just not that important to most of them. . . . To whatever extent they do talk about it, most of them think that most religions share the same core principles, which they generally believe are good.{26}*

Myth 3: Religious practice does not impact personal behavior.

Another common perception is that religiously devoted young adults are not appreciably different from other young adults in their actual life practices when it comes to sexuality, generosity, community service, drug use, and integrity. We are often told that out of wedlock pregnancy, cheating, and drug use are the same for evangelical young adults as for the rest of society. It is certainly true that affiliation with an evangelical denomination makes only a small difference in those behaviors. But does a deep personal commitment to a relationship with Jesus Christ make a difference? The survey data allowed Smith and his team to differentiate between simple affiliation and devotion. What he discovered is that those emerging adults who are devoted to their faith exhibit significantly different lifestyles than the norm. In particular, these devoted emerging adults are:

- *more than twice as likely to give and volunteer their time*
- *more than four times less likely to engage in binge drinking or drugs*
- *twenty-five percent more likely to have attended college*
- *almost two times less likely to think that buying more*

things would make them happier
· twice as likely to abstain from pornography
· more than twice as likely to have abstained from sexual intercourse outside of marriage

The results clearly show that a deep commitment to a Christian religious faith has a significant impact on one's lifestyle. As Smith concludes, "emerging adult religion—whatever its depth, character, and substance—correlates significantly with, and we think actually often acts as a causal influence producing, what most consider to be more positive outcomes in life for emerging adults."{27}

Exposing these myths helps us focus on the key challenge for the future. It is not redirecting a pent-up spiritual interest into orthodox Christianity, or overcoming an emotional aversion to organized religion, but instead, demonstrating that spiritual issues are worthy of any real attention at all.

Notes

1. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
2. Ibid., 5.
3. Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 46.
4. Ibid., 51
5. Ibid., 47.
6. Ibid., 49
7. Ibid., 68.
8. Ibid., 72
9. Ibid., 67.
10. Ibid., 63.
11. Ibid., 145.
12. Ibid., 146.
13. Ibid., 148.
14. Ibid., 149.

15. Ibid., 149.
16. Ibid., 154.
17. Ibid., 154.
18. Meaning, since religion belongs to the category of faith, there can only be knowledge and truth in other areas.
19. Ibid., 285.
20. Ibid., 249.
21. Ibid., 252
22. Ibid., 296.
23. For example, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . And Why it Matters* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2007).
24. Smith and Snell, Souls in Transition, 133, Table 4.15.
25. Ibid., 296.
26. Ibid., 286.
27. Ibid., 297.

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See Also:

Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths
Emerging Adults A Closer Look
The Importance of Parents in the Faith of Emerging Adults
Cultural Captives – a book on the faith of emerging adults

Examining Our Cultural Captivity – A Christian Look at the Impact of Popular

Thought on the Church

Steve Cable looks at the current epidemic of cultural captivity as a repeat of the concerns introduced by the Apostle Paul in the second chapter of Colossians. When Christians give up their biblical worldview and take on the ideas of the culture around them it weakens their witness to a dying world. He offers practical ideas to combat the types of captivity identified: carnal, confused, compromised and contented.

A common theme of many science fiction tales is mass delusion. From *The Matrix* to *The Truman Show*, we find fictional characters who think they are making decisions on their own volition based on an accurate perception of their situation. In each of these cases, the people are actually experiencing a false reality manipulated by outside forces using them for their own purposes.

Sadly, many of us are unwittingly being manipulated by distorted perceptions of reality. And, just as in these fictional tales, these distortions are not an accident. They are promoted by the spiritual forces of darkness to keep us from being effective agents of light in this world.

As the Apostle Peter explained, to fulfill our purpose of proclaiming Christ in a world of darkness, we must

> Keep (our) behavior excellent . . . so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. (1 Pet. 2:12)

Distinctive thoughts produce distinctive behavior. Only by applying Christ to every aspect of life will we be able to "keep our behavior excellent" even as we are being slandered by the world. This is why Paul commands us:

> See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Col. 2:8-9)

Paul is not talking about physical bars or chains. He is warning us about invisible chains constraining our minds to think like the world. Whenever we assume that the perspective of the world overrides the truth of Christ in some aspect of life, we are allowing ourselves to be taken captive. Paul also says that "in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3) Since that is true, we need to filter all truth claims through biblical revelation about the nature of God, man and the universe.

Let's be honest. Most of us are oblivious to the invisible bars of cultural captivity. We think we are A-OK in balancing our spiritual beliefs with our everyday lives. However, most of us must be captive to some degree or the church would not be conforming to a degraded culture. As believers, we have the resources to escape from cultural captivity, but we need to make it a priority.

In this article we look at four types of captive believers: ***carnal, confused, compromised*** and ***contented***.

As we consider these different manifestations of captivity, let's ask God to make us aware of areas of captivity in our own lives.

Carnal Christians

Just as there are different types of prisons, there are different ways that captivity can affect the lives of believers. **Carnal Christians** are believers who have misplaced priorities. As citizens of heaven,{1} they are living as if they are citizens of earth. The apostle Paul introduces us to these believers in his first letter to the Corinthians:

> And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. . . .. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? (1 Cor 3:1-3 NKJV)

The word *carnal* comes from the Greek word that literally means *fleshly*. These are believers who are focused on serving their flesh rather than on using their flesh to serve God. The carnal Christian looks upon salvation as an opportunity to cater to the flesh while avoiding eternal consequences.

For example, carnal Christians view marriage as a means to meet their needs. As one young husband told his pastor, "God wants me to be happy. I am not happy in my marriage. So, God must want me to get a divorce."{2} A 2008 survey found the divorce rate among "born again" Christians was the same as the rate among the population as a whole: about one in three (33%).{3} However, the rate of divorce among those who regularly attend church is much lower, about 1 in 4.{4,5} And my personal observation among actively growing Christians is a rate of less than 1 in 10.

Another area where carnality is evident is in business practices. We all drop our heads when we read about a "respected" church member who has been caught applying unethical and sometimes illegal business practices. It is highly likely that these individuals viewed the Scriptures as supporting their unethical attempts for temporal riches.

As Paul points out, minds that view the world through a fleshly perspective often lead to division and strife within the church. In fact, if the church is dominated by carnal Christians it may be worse than the world as "cheap grace" turns into license.

Let's examine ourselves. Do we elevate the temporal above the eternal? What do our daily decisions reveal about our

perspective? Is it carnal or spiritual?

A Christian struggling with a carnal perspective needs to start asking the question, "Which decision or course of action has the most positive benefits for eternity?" In Christ, we are no longer slaves to our flesh, so when we start turning control over to the Holy Spirit, the flesh cannot keep its control over us.

[For helpful articles on divorce: Probe's Marriage and Family section

On business: Business and Ethics and Can the Just Succeed?]

Confused Christians

Confused Christians desire to please God, but they are confused about what God wants. Unlike the carnal Christian, confused Christians are concerned about the spiritual life. However, instead of being grounded in the Bible, they create their own spiritual truth from multiple sources.

Two thousand years ago, Paul warned believers that people will try to "delude you with persuasive arguments" (Col. 2:5) based on "the trickery of men, by craftiness and deceitful scheming" (Eph. 4:14). Today, believers are still bombarded with deceptive ideas designed to prevent them from living in a way that exalts Christ.

Recent surveys by the Barna Group show that this approach is prevalent among those between the ages of 18 and 25. According to their surveys, 78% of young adults identify themselves as Christians,{6} but more than half of them believe that the Qur'an and Book of Mormon offer the same spiritual truths as the Bible.{7} Is it any wonder that many sincere believers are confused?

Confused Christians are often influenced by those who offer to enhance their Christian experience with new insights.

Recently, Oprah hosted a popular webinar with Eckhart Tolle. His repackaged Eastern mysticism is counter to the teachings of Christ on almost every topic. However, many of the participants were Christian women duped into believing that this false teaching was what Jesus was really trying to say all along.

One woman asked, "It's really opened my eyes up to a new way of thinking; . . . that doesn't always align with the teachings of Christianity. . . . Oprah, how have you reconciled these spiritual teachings with your Christian beliefs?"

In part, Oprah's reply was "I took God out of the box. . . I'm a free-thinking Christian who believes in my way, but I don't believe that it's the only way, ..." In other words, "I am going to abandon the God of the Bible and create my own God who thinks like me."

Confused Christians often misapply God's character of love and compassion. We see this confusion in the debates on abortion, same sex marriage and homosexual clergy.

[For more information on these issues see these Probe articles:
Abortion
Arguments Against Abortion
The Dark Underside of Abortion

Same Sex Marriage: A Facade of Normalcy
Answering Arguments for Same Sex Marriage]

Once again, we need to examine ourselves. Am I confident that my beliefs are based on the principles revealed in the Bible? Am I confusing the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of Christ?

The primary prescription for a confused Christian is a steady dose of God's word through personal study and trusted teachers

who understand the Bible as the ultimate source of truth.

Compromised Christians

Compromised Christians profess a set of beliefs generally consistent with a biblical worldview, but compromise those beliefs by living like the world in one or more areas.

Jesus may have been referring to compromised Christians when He said,

> And others are the ones on whom seed was sown among the thorns; these are the ones who have heard the word, but the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. (Mark 4:18-19)

Knowing that they are called to a fruitful life, they allow the pressures and the temptations of the world to take precedence over the truth of Christ. They have allowed their concern for the things of the world to compromise their walk.

Some Christians are compromised by the desires of the flesh, addictions to alcohol, drugs or pornography. The high percentage of Christian men struggling with pornography is an example. Satan promotes the lie that this is a secret sin that can be kept from compromising one’s public witness for Christ. Yet, anytime we consistently make provision for the flesh, it is going to result in a compromised walk. I distinctly remember the day my friend and fellow church leader who had been struggling with pornography had to confess to his wife that he had committed adultery. Even with his sincere heart for restoration and reconciliation, the healing process was painful.

Other Christians are compromised by their pride or desire for earthly success. As Jesus warned the Jewish leaders,

> How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God? (John 5:44-45)

They rationalize unethical practices, questionable morals and exploitation of others as worth the price to achieve success. These Christians embrace the sacred/secular split described by Nancy Pearcey in her book *Total Truth*. They partition their lives and their minds so that biblical truth only applies to their spiritual, church life while pragmatism determines what is true for every other aspect.

Let's examine our lives to see if we are rationalizing un-Christlike behavior to satisfy our own selfish desires. Are we choosing to conform to the world because we think we will enjoy that more than conforming to Christ?

If you are struggling with compromise, look for others who can help hold you accountable, mature believers who can join with us in allowing God's Spirit to "destroy fortresses and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God."{8}

Contented Christians

Contented Christians are actively choosing the truth of Christ for their own lives, yet they are content to allow others to continue in cultural captivity. Either from fear of persecution or concern with hurting others or time pressures, these Christians avoid confronting others to unmask the deceptive, destructive ideas crippling their witness.

Although the apostle Paul was always content despite his physical circumstances,{9} he was never satisfied with the spiritual condition of the world. Paul said:

> We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving

> according to His power, which mightily works within me. (Col. 1:28-29)

Mature Christians are called to impart their understanding to others, particularly carnal, confused and compromised Christians. The fact that we have not been doing so in recent decades can been seen in the diminished influence of the church on public life.

For example, over 87% of Congress members are affiliated with a Christian denomination. Yet, this Congress recently passed so-called “hate crimes” legislation which will limit the ability of Christians to speak biblical truth on sexuality. While abhorring any crimes, we realize that one of the most loving things we can do is to point out to others when they are engaged in destructive behavior. Yet contented Christians stood by as a nation with a Christian majority elected national leaders who seem to be carnal, confused and compromised.

As contented Christians, we have let family hour on television move from “Father Knows Best” to “The Secret Life of Teenagers” which feeds American youth a constant diet of promiscuity and disrespect for authority.

As contented Christians, we have let carnal, confused and compromised believers set the example for our younger generations. Is it any wonder that these generations are largely confused about their beliefs? Recent surveys indicate that although over one in three young adults can be identified as born again, less than one in a hundred has beliefs consistent with a biblical worldview.

So let’s examine ourselves. Do I sit on the sidelines watching other believers conforming to the world without attempting to intervene?

We are not spectators seeking to keep from getting stains on our white, linen knickers; instead, we are called to be

warriors in the battle for the fate of our fellows. If we do not stand firm and confront error, we are just as much captives of our culture as the others.

Notes

1. Philippians 3:20
2. Al Janssen, *The Marriage Masterpiece* (Colorado Springs: Focus Publishing, 2001).
3. Barna Group, New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released, March 31, 2008, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released
4. Ibid.
5. Bradley Wright, Divorce Rates Among Christians by Church Attendance, December 4, 2006, brewright.blogspot.com/2006/12/divorce-rates-among-christians-by.html
6. Barna Group, Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years
7. Barna Group, New Research Shows How Different Generations View and Use the Bible, October 19, 2009, www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/317-new-research-explores-how-different-generations-view-and-use-the-bible
8. 2 Corinthians 10:4
9. Philippians 4:11-13

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Apologetics and the Age of the Universe

Appendix B: Apologetics and the Age of the Universe

Note: This is one of two appendices for Steve Cable's article Are We Significant in This Vast Universe?

Is the apparent age of the universe a critical issue for Christian apologetics? I would argue that when we make it a critical issue, we are likely to add another barrier to belief rather than tearing down barriers against belief in Jesus Christ as our Savior.

How should we look at the age of the universe in applying emerging scientific observations in defending our faith? In this appendix, we will take a brief look at this question.

The vast majority of theologians and researchers agree that the actions of the inorganic world are normally governed by a set of physical laws and forces: e.g. gravity, subatomic forces, magnetism, and light waves. By understanding these laws, we can predict both the future and past behavior of physical objects ranging from galaxies to our solar system to airplanes to golf balls. As Christians, we recognize that our Creator God can and does intervene at times to suspend or alter these laws in order to accomplish His purpose: e.g. Jesus walking on the water, healing of the sick. Thus, one of the ways to recognize the presence of our Creator is when we use our understanding of these laws to model backward from our present state and we come to a state in the past that is inconsistent with our current reality. In other words, it appears that some power must have intervened with the natural processes we currently observe because it would be practically

impossible to get to our present state simply through natural processes.

Following this logic, there is a growing body of evidence from scientific observation consistent with the following two hypotheses:

1. Life as it exists on this earth is the result of the intentional work of an intelligent designer

2. Humans are significant to the designer of this universe

These two hypotheses are obviously consistent with the Bible. As apologists these hypotheses are very important because they support a biblical prerequisite for coming to God:

> And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Heb 11:6).

According to this passage, in order to come to God, we must believe that a God exists and that He wants us to seek Him. In many cases, if we can debunk the popular notion that science proves that there is no Creator God who cares about us, we can open the door to see what the Bible tells us about Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection.

The empirical evidence supporting these two hypotheses is strong whether the earth is 13.7 billion years old or 6,000 years old. However, some of the evidence for the significance of life on earth is based on looking at what it would take to get from an ancient creation event, e.g. big bang, to the current, observable universe. Should we ignore that evidence because it does not assume a young universe interpretation of Genesis 1? Or should we use this evidence to show that even the oldest estimated age for our universe still demands a transcendent Creator to account for life on this earth? I suggest that we don’t have to make the age of the universe the central point in defending our faith against those who do not

believe in our Creator God and who need to understand that God sacrificed His Son, Jesus to provide for their redemption from this decaying universe.

One of the areas where this tension between fixed physical laws and supernatural intervention applies is in scientific theories for the origin of the universe. The prevailing scientific view is that the universe is expanding at an increasing rate. Combining this view with what we know about the relevant natural forces implies that all the matter in the universe began expanding from a single point approximately 13.7 billion years ago. If we take as an axiom that the correct interpretation of general revelation through scientific observation and special revelation through the Bible must be consistent, there are three possible situations consonant with that axiom:

1. The scientific data is incomplete, corrupted, or misinterpreted. There are many instances where the current prevailing view of science has been shown by new evidence to be wrong, so this is a definite possibility.

2. The universe is indeed expanding, but it is much less than 13.7 billion years old because it was created at a point where it was already spread out to near its current volume. This is the apparent age argument, i.e., when God creates a living being such as Adam, Adam is going to appear to be physically mature even when he was only seconds old. There are issues with applying this apparent age concept to the age of the universe. For example, we can observe supernovae that are hundreds of thousands of light years away. If the earth is less than 10,000 years old, then we are observing the explosions of stars that never really existed. Why would God want to confuse us in this way? Perhaps because these “past” supernovae are consistent with what would have happened to create the current state of our universe.

3. The interpretation of Genesis 1 as defining the time from

the beginning of the universe to the creation of Adam as literally 120 hours is not actually the intent of that passage. This interpretation issue is a continuing topic of debate among evangelical scholars who believe that the Bible is God's inerrant special revelation.

I can appreciate those who consider finding out which of these three alternatives is correct to be an important life issue. But, it seems clear that selecting the right answer is not a prerequisite for salvation (e.g. see Romans 10:9-10). I encourage Christians to understand how the current state of scientific knowledge can be used as a bridge to share the gospel. For a more detailed discussion of contrasting Christian views on the origins of the universe, see the article "Christian Views of Science and Earth History" on our website.

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Theology vs. Science or Theology plus Science?

Appendix A: Theology vs. Science or Theology plus Science?

Note: This is one of two appendices for Steve Cable's article Are We Significant in This Vast Universe?

Are science and religion mortal enemies, or collaborating partners, or denizens of different realms with no common ground? Is the ultimate objective of science to unmask the fictitious myths behind all religions freeing mankind to

pursue a rational utopia as espoused by Daniel Dennett{1} and other atheist academics? Or should we subscribe to the prevailing Western view of a clear secular vs. sacred split, segregating out thoughts so that science and theology are not allowed to deal with any topics which intersect?{2} Or will unbiased scientific inquiry lead us to a deeper appreciation and understanding of our Creator as espoused by early formulators of the modern scientific method, such as Isaac Newton, as well as many respected researchers, such as leading nanotechnologist, Dr. James Tour, who stated, "I stand in awe of God because of what he has done through his creation. Only a rookie who knows nothing about science would say science takes away from faith. If you really study science, it will bring you closer to God."{3}

The current view promoted as dogma by many in academia is that acceptable, genuine science is based on a theological presupposition, namely, that any possibility of intervention by a transcendent Creator or other non-physical entity must be excluded from consideration in evaluating possible explanations for any phenomena observed in the physical world. It is ironic that Carl Sagan, one of the popular promoters of this dogma, would take fundamental issue with his own dogma when he wrote,

> A central lesson of science is that to understand complex issues (or even simple ones), we must try to free our minds of dogma and to guarantee the freedom to publish, to contradict, and to experiment. Arguments from authority are unacceptable.{4}

In a similar fashion, a common viewpoint promoted in some theological circles is that theology trumps science in any areas in which they have an intersecting interest, i.e. a viewpoint that looks only at the Bible without allowing its interpretation of Scripture to be informed by the findings of science. From this viewpoint, science is at best a limited field of study looking at only a small part of reality, and at

worst is spending large amounts of resources studying an illusion masquerading as reality. It is assumed that science cannot provide insights to help deepen our understanding of theology.

I propose that both of these viewpoints share a common shortcoming of prejudging the result before examining the evidence. Both scientist and theologians should be free to follow the evidence where it leads, whether the evidence comes from observation of the physical aspects of our universe, or from philosophy and logic, or from divine revelation.

One area where this clash of viewpoints is reaching a fever pitch is in the field of Intelligent Design science. Researchers in this emerging field say, let us follow the evidence where it leads. If the makeup of the physical realm includes evidence of an intelligent designer, let's admit it and pass the information on to the theologians. If the physical makeup is more indicative of the handiwork of random variations and natural processes, let's cite it and pass that information along as well. As demonstrated in the 2008 documentary, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, these researchers are facing stiff opposition and even persecution from the defenders of the scientific establishment. Ironically, but not unexpectedly, the more we learn about the fine tuning required to support life, the history of our planet, and the complexity of living organisms, the more the evidence aligns with the presence of an intelligent designer rather than the results of random, undirected processes. As one scientist observed,

> [O]n whatever volume scale researchers make their observations – the universe, galaxy cluster, galaxy, planetary system, planet, planetary surface, cell, atom, fundamental particle, or string – the evidence for extreme fine-tuning for life's sake, and in particular for humanity's benefit, persists.{5}

As Christians, we need not fear science. If the Bible is revelation from our actual Creator, it will not crumble in the presence of scientific studies into the nature of our universe. We do need to be concerned about agenda-driven science which is focused on manipulating scientific results and the popular public perception of those results to prove a predetermined theological point, whether it is atheism or a particular interpretation of the Bible.

If God is the Creator of the universe and the Bible is revelation directly from God, then accurate observation of the universe will ultimately prove to be consistent with His revelation. By combining the general revelation of science with the special revelation of the Bible, we should be rewarded with a greater understanding of the nature of our Creator and His intentions for mankind.

Notes

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