

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 Percy](#) 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*

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](#)

Exploring God's Relationship to Time

Written by David Pattillo and Michael Gleghorn

Introduction

Why does time flow the way it does? Can we alter time, or is it beyond our grasp? Is time travel possible? Is God inside or outside of time? Does everyone experience time the same way we

do? When faced with the question, What is time? we encounter one of the most fundamental human inquiries, as well as one of the most difficult philosophical questions. Every person seems to experience the flow of time every single day, yet when asked to define it, we are often at a loss for words. Thus, for the purpose of this article, we shall define time as a relation of events involving earlier than and later than.

Two views of time

When it comes to the philosophy of the nature of time, there are essentially two views: the *dynamic, tensed*, or *A Theory*; and the *static, tenseless*, or *B Theory*. It is traditionally said that on the *A Theory*, the present is ontologically privileged. That is to say, the present is the only thing that is really real; the past has happened and the future will happen. It is much easier to see what distinguishes the *A Theory* when it is compared with the *B Theory*, which holds that all moments are equally real. That is (according to the *B Theory*), from our perspective it is 2007, 1950 is in the past and 2050 is in the future. But for the people in 1950 (who also exist at *that* time), both 2007 and 2050 are in the future. Likewise, for the people in 2050 both 1950 and 2007 are in the past. The *B Theory* holds that it is ignorant to think of our moment of the world as the real moment, or the moment occupying some privileged position. According to the *B Theory*, any tensed idea, or sentence whose verb has tense (i.e., past/present/or future), would actually be more accurate if it were translated into a tenseless idea or sentence (i.e., one that has a tenseless verb and time stamp to say when something happened, rather than a tensed verb) since tensed ideas imply that the present moment of time is superior to, or more real than, all other moments. For instance, according to the *B Theory*, the tensed sentence, JFK was assassinated, would misconstrue reality as if the year 2007 (or any year after 1963) is more real or significant than the years 1907 or 1963, because it has a verb in the past

tense. This theory holds that the sentence would be better put
On November 22, 1963, at 12:30 P.M. CST JFK *is*
assassinated.{2} This tenseless sentence is preferred on the *B Theory* because there is no moment that can claim to be the true present moment; rather, there are just equally real moments. Advocates of the *B Theory* say that reality is one long 4-dimensional block, and we are just experiencing one moment of that block, but all the moments are equally real or existent. The *A Theory*, on the other hand, would say that *tensed verbs* (verbs in the past/present/future tense) do reflect reality; there really is a past, present, and future, and they are always changing as time flows and the future becomes present and then past.

Which one of these views is correct has vast implications for the way we interpret reality. For example, it will have an effect on the way we understand God and His relation to the world. One might think that this would be the proper time to turn to Scripture to see whether it supports an *A* or *B Theory*. However, its important to recognize the fact that Scripture is not entirely clear with respect to this issue. Therefore, we will postpone looking at the Bible until our discussion of Gods relation to time. For the present, we need to discuss which of the two theories is superior and why.

A vs. B

The most powerful argument for the *A Theory* is its intuitiveness. That is, we experience the flow of time in just as real a way as any other experience in our lives. We very directly experience the present. To say that event *e* is occurring now is no different than saying that event *e* is occurring.{3} When we look forward to the future or regret the past, we are experiencing the *A Theory* because, if you think about it, on the *B Theory* there is no difference between past, present, and future.{4} Lastly, when a kid says: I wish it were Christmas morning, or I wish I were already done with

this test, he is expressing the *A Theory*. That is, he wishes that the present moment, say t_1 , were replaced by some other moment, say t_2 . This expresses the idea of *temporal becoming* (the idea that the present moment changes as we pass through time), which is an experience of the *A Theory*. As William Lane Craig puts it, We thereby presuppose the reality of temporal becoming, since our wish expresses our belief in a changing and objective present.{5} Thus the *A Theory* very comfortably coheres with what we experience in everyday life.

Now, the B theorist may ask, Why accept this experience as anything more than an illusion? To answer this we must briefly digress with a discussion of Alvin Plantinga's *epistemology*, or theory of knowledge. When evaluating beliefs, many skeptics want to reject anything that is not certain. This was especially prominent in the philosophy of Ren Descartes, who rejected all his sense experience because it could have been wrong. After all, when you think about it, we could be in the *Matrix*.{6} It could be that everything you think is real is just electrical impulses interpreted by your brain. Or it could be that the world was created five minutes ago, and you were created with all the memories you currently have. Or maybe you are the only mind in the universe, and everyone else is just a robot, cleverly designed to give the appearance of having a human mind. And the list of possibilities goes on and on. None of these can be disproven, but should we conclude that we really don't know whether anyone else actually exists? Plantinga doesn't think so. He has developed a theory that labels these and other similar beliefs as *properly basic beliefs*.

Think about it this way. If you are reading this online, the belief that there is a computer in front of you is properly basic; that is, it is a foundational belief formed in correct circumstances. Therefore, you are warranted in believing it until presented with some *defeater* of your belief. In this case, a *defeater* would have to be some good reason to believe

that your senses are deceiving you. In other words, according to Plantinga, common sense beliefs about sensory experience, memory, the existence of other minds or other similar beliefs should be regarded as innocent until proven guilty (i.e., judged reliable until proven otherwise). Likewise, our experience of real temporal passing and an objective past, present, and future warrants belief in the *A Theory* until a strong counterargument is offered strong enough to cause us to doubt this experience.

Another major argument for the *A Theory* is what is known as the *ineliminability of tense*.[{7}](#) Simply put, this is the idea that tensed statements imply tensed facts which further imply a tensed reality. B theorists have made numerous attempts to show that tensed sentences can be translated into tenseless sentences that do not imply a tensed reality. However, all these attempts have failed. Craig illustrates:

This point is underlined by the ineptness of some of the supposed tenseless translations of tensed sentences. Take, for example, the tensed sentence It is now 4:30. We can imagine situations in which a persons life would depend on his holding such a belief. But the tenseless counterpart of this sentence is either It is 4:30 at 4:30, which is a mere tautology, or It is 4:30 simultaneous with this utterance, which is useless unless we also know that This utterance is occurring now, which is a tensed belief. In both cases the tenseless versions are insufficient to motivate timely action because they do not inform us whether or not it actually is 4:30.[{8}](#)

If tensed sentences lose some meaning when translated into tenseless sentences, then there is some important meaning in tense, namely, that reality is reflected by tense. Therefore, if tenseless sentences cannot capture the facts expressed by tensed sentences, then there must be tensed facts. And thus we have a strong argument for temporal reality.

Next we turn our attention to some problems with the *B Theory* of time. While there are numerous problems, we will discuss just two of them.^{9} First, the *B Theory* of time greatly misconstrues some biblical ideas, one example being the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*. For the B theorist, the universe beginning to exist simply means that it has a starting point, just like a yard stick has a first inch.^{10} The problem is that on this view There is in the actual world no state of affairs of God existing alone without the space-time universe. God never really brings the universe into being; as a whole it co-exists timelessly with Him.^{11} So while the universe depends on God, the idea of *creation ex nihilo* is severely stripped of meaning since the universe always timelessly exists with God. That is, in some sense, God and space-time seem to be equally necessary in their existence.

The other major biblical problem is that evil is never really vanquished.^{12} On the static theory of time [*B Theory*], evil is never really vanquished from the world: It exists just as sturdily as ever at its various locations in space-time, even if those locations are all earlier than some point in cosmic time (for example, Judgment Day).^{13}

Furthermore, events like the crucifixion are never past or done away with. They simply remain timelessly forever, which seems hard to reconcile with Christs victory over death.

A second argument against the *B Theory* has to do with the impossibility of the existence of *actual infinities*. It has now been almost universally agreed upon by mathematicians and philosophers that an actually infinite number of things cannot be actualized in the space-time universe. The idea of *actual infinities* creates many paradoxes. For instance, what is infinity minus infinity? Well mathematically one gets contradictory answers. For example, one could say that the answer is infinity. But the answer could also be 4, or 0, or

any other number you want. This led the great mathematician David Hilbert to say, The infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature, nor provides a legitimate basis for rational thought...the role that remains for the infinite to play is solely that of an idea.[\[14\]](#)

Thus, what we have in the space-time universe are not *actual infinities*, but *potential infinities*. For example, you can start counting 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and continue this process for a potentially infinite time (i.e., you can keep going as long as you want). But you will never reach a moment when you can stand up and exclaim, Im done! Ive counted to infinity! In the same way a line three inches in length can be divided in half, and then in half again, and then in half again, ad infinitum. But it can never actually be divided an infinite number of times. For this reason, in addition to compelling scientific and theological evidence, essentially all philosophers and scientists have now come to believe that time is finite in the past.

However, the future is different. We know that the future is not finite but infinite. We know this both philosophically and biblically by the promise of *everlasting* or *eternal* life. Therefore, most scholars have concluded that the future, like numbers, is potentially infinite. We can keep adding years forever, but we will never reach an end. But this is inconsistent with the *B Theory*. Since every moment of time in fact exists at once, and the future has no end, there is an actually infinite number of years in the future. But since we know that there are no actualized infinities in the real world, we can safely conclude that the *B Theory* is wrong in its description of the future.

So we have seen two strong arguments for the *A Theory*, from our experience of temporal reality and the ineliminability of tense in language, and two ways that the *B Theory* seems clearly implausible, from *creation ex nihilo* and the impossibility of *actual infinities*. Other attempts have been

made to revive the *B Theory*, but suffice it to say that they have been answered thoroughly.[{15}](#)

Gods Relation to Time

We now turn to how an infinite God relates to our passage of time. There are some things of which we are certain. First, time began a finite time ago. We know this from the Bible,[{16}](#) philosophy,[{17}](#) and science.[{18}](#) Second, we know God neither began to exist, nor will He ever cease to exist.[{19}](#) We can further conclude that God existed before time.[{20}](#) This is best exemplified in Jude 25: ...To the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, *before all time* and now and forever. Amen.[{21}](#)

Since we know that God existed before time,[{22}](#) we can conclude that without the universe, God existed timelessly.[{23}](#)

We then must ask ourselves, how does God relate to the universe since it began? Here again we find two common positions. One is that God is timeless. By this it is meant that God, while the creator and sustainer of the world, was not affected by the creation of the world and remains constant outside the universe, just as He was before the act of creation. The other common position is that God is *temporal*. That does not mean that God is limited by time, but rather that He is intimately related to temporal things. He thus has a past, present, and future, just like other temporal things. Since there is no beginning or end to His existence, this position is also sometimes called *omnitemporality*.

There are two main arguments in favor of Gods *omnitemporality*. First, there is the argument from Gods relation to the universe. When God brought the universe into being, He stood in new relationships that He did not have before. Once the universe exists, He now is the sustainer of and is co-existent with the universe.[{24}](#) He could have remained timeless, but since He created the universe He went through an *extrinsic*

change.{25} If God undergoes this change, then surely He must be temporal. That is, we can speak of a past, present and future for God. In the past He had one relation and in the present He has another relation. This provides a way to associate God with time, and that is all the omnitemporal view of God requires.

The second major argument for Gods *omnitemporality* comes from His omniscience specifically, His knowledge of tensed facts.{26} That is, as the present is constantly changing, true sentences are constantly changing. For instance, there are tenseless truths that are always true such as: The World Trade Centers *are* attacked on September 11, 2001. However, on September 10, 2001, the sentence The World Trade Centers *will* be attacked tomorrow was true, but this statement is not true on September 11th. What is true on September 11th is the statement, The World Trade Centers *are* being attacked today. Finally, any time since then, the true statement has been, The World Trade Centers *were* attacked on September 11th. All of these statements can be true or false depending on when they are made. That is because the verbs relate the sentence to the present. Thus, a God who knows only tenseless truths (as the *tenseless view* of God proposes) would seem to be very ignorant indeed, for there are seemingly limitless things He would not know. However, if God does possess knowledge of the truth of tensed sentences, this would seem to make Him temporal. As Dr. Craig puts it, any being which does know tensed facts cannot be timeless, for his knowledge must be in constant flux, as the tensed facts known by him change.{27} Thus we have a second powerful argument for God being temporal .

On the other hand, the major argument for Gods timelessness is what is known as the *incompleteness of temporal life*.{28} This is the idea that temporal life is so limited that a perfect God would not experience it. Certainly the fleetingness of our own lives has led to many existential questions of the meaning of life given that it will all end relatively shortly. Surely

God would not be limited in this way. Well, this is a plausible argument and does carry some weight, but I am not sure how much. For one thing, because of Gods complete omniscience and ability to experience whatever He wants, the past is never really lost to God, which makes temporality far less of a limitation. Secondly, since He never ends, and we His children never cease to be in company with Him (assuming we have received His free gift of eternal life), there really is no need for Him to try to grasp onto fleeting moments as we so often do. So, while this argument seems plausible, it does not seem to me to be remotely powerful enough to call into question the powerful arguments we have for the *omnitemporality* of God.

Thus, it seems we have good reason to think that God is timeless without creation and temporal since creation.[{29}](#) But it is important to remember that He did not have to create. Rather, His free decision to create a temporal world also constitutes a free decision on His part to exist temporally.[{30}](#) Many would now ask how it makes sense for God to exist timelessly and then temporally. It seems plausible to say that time is a relation of events. That is, Gods existence without creation was just simple, unchanging Trinitarian perfection, and it does not make sense to talk about before and after when there was no change. However, at the moment of the creation, we now have an event, and we can start relating events by temporal distance from the creation. Thus we conclude that God existed timelessly, and then created time and space, giving us the first mark of time, and time has been flowing ever since.

So then, we have seen that there is a real past, present, and future. God, though timeless, created, thus giving us temporal relations. We can speak of past, present, and future for God since He is intimately related to temporal things and has temporal knowledge. Since the first event, we now have a flow of time that will never end as we live on into eternity with

or without God.

Notes

1. I owe a great credit to both Dr. William Lane Craig for most of the ideas of this paper, and to Michael Gleghorn for help in developing these ideas.
2. I have picked up Dr. William Lane Craig's use of italics to symbolize a tenseless verb.
3. William Lane Craig. *Time and Eternity, Exploring God's Relationship to Time*. (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois) 133.
4. Ibid., 136.
5. Ibid., 140.
6. Reference to the 1999 film *The Matrix*, in which a complex computer program used unconscious humans to power, and thus perpetuate itself. Human brains were meanwhile tied to an imaginary world, the matrix.
7. Ibid., 115.
8. Ibid., 118.
9. Ibid., 188-215 for a more comprehensive list of the problems.
10. Ibid., 210.
11. Ibid., 213.
12. Ibid., 214.
13. Ibid.
14. *Philosophy of Mathematics*, ed. with an Intro. by Paul Benacerraf and Hilary Putnam (Prentice-Hall, 1964) p. 151.
15. Ibid., 143-188.
16. Gen 1:1; Ps 90:2; Jn 1:1-3; I Cor 2:7; Jude 25.
17. This is supported by arguments and illustrations about the impossibility of the existence of actual infinities (e.g. Hilbert's hotel, etc.). Also, it has been noted that if time never began, we could never reach our current moment. You cannot count up to infinity by adding one number at a time. If the past was infinite, and we only complete one year at a time, we would never reach 2007.
18. This is supported by the second law of thermodynamics, as

well as by arguments for the Big Bang (e.g., the red shift of light from distant galaxies and the cosmic microwave background radiation). For more information see *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* by William Lane Craig.

19. name="text19">That God is the beginningless cause of the universe is the conclusion of the Kalam Cosmological argument. Also see Gen 1:1, Ps 90:2, Is 41:4, Is 57:15, John 1:1-3, II Tim 1:9, Rev 4:8.

20. name="text20">I Cor 2:7, Jn 17:24, Jude 25. See also the conclusions from the Kalam Cosmological argument.

21. name="text21">The Bible, New American Standard Version (Zondervan, Grand Rapids) 2000, emphasis added.

22. name="text22">I say before here to mean God's existing without time, even though it is actually impossible to speak of before time since before is a temporal relation.

23. Some, like Newton, have proposed that God existed in His own infinite past separate from the creation of physical time. However, I feel that this fails to cohere with the biblical and philosophical evidence.

24. William Lane Craig. *Time and Eternity*, Exploring God's Relationship to Time. (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois) 87.

25. Ibid., 87. When a being goes through an extrinsic change, the change does not effect the being's nature. The idea of an extrinsic change is the idea of a change apart from you. For instance, I can be behind you in line and then cut in front of you. You never changed, but you went through extrinsic relational changes in that you were related to me by the in front of relation and now you are related to me by the behind relation.

26. Ibid., 98.

27. Ibid., 99.

28. Ibid., 67.

29. Ibid., 241.

30. Ibid., 87.

Is This the Last Christian Generation? – The Future of American Christianity

Steve Cable joins Josh McDowell in asking about the future of the American church. Do Christians have the will to turn around the degradation of biblical beliefs and restore the church to a state of vibrant belief in Christ touching the lives of everyone in the country? According to Josh's research, we need to change the trends to have a chance of growing the church.

The Concern

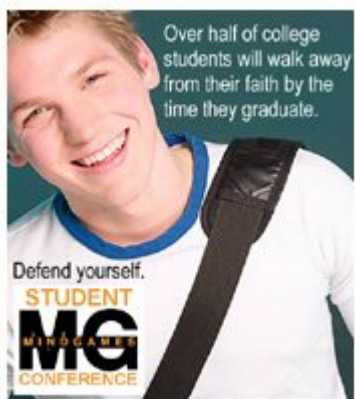
Is this the last Christian generation in America? Mark Oestreicher of Youth Specialties stated recently in *Christianity Today*, "There are a lot of people who've had this nagging sense that we're missing the mark somehow . . . kids seem happy and willing to attend, and engage in our ministries, but five years from now, when they're in college or post-college, they just really aren't connecting with real faith, let alone church."

I know what you are thinking: "This is not new." Of course, I agree. For over thirty years, Probe Ministries has worked to create a strong foundation for Christian teens.

However, some believe it has reached a dangerous new level. This upswing has prompted Josh McDowell to co-write a new book with Dave Bellis. Josh states, "the decision to call this [book] *The Last Christian Generation* was not made lightly nor was it done for sensationalism. I sincerely believe unless something is done now to change the spiritual state of our

young people – you will become the last Christian generation!"[{1}](#)

Is Josh's concern justified? Will this trend correct itself or will we follow in the secular footsteps of Western Europe?



How *are* we doing at converting church involvement by teens into a lifelong relationship with Christ? A 2006 study indicates that over eighty percent of today's teens attend church for a period of at least two months during their teenage years. What an opportunity! The bad news is that only one out of four of those church youth are still spiritually engaged by age twenty-nine;[{2}](#) that is, they are still actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying. In comparison, roughly twice as many adults in their forties are spiritually engaged.

An earlier study looked at the beliefs of teens involved in evangelical churches. Over two-thirds of these young people believe

- that there is no absolute moral truth,
- that Christianity is about showing bad people how to live better,
- that there is no way to tell which religion is true,
- that Jesus is not the Son of the one true God.

And, over half believe

- that Jesus did not rise from the dead.

Is it any wonder that these young people readily abandon their Christian involvement when confronted with a hostile culture?

The Causes

Let's consider some potential causes three out of four churching teens become disengaged from Christianity during their twenties.

One cause may be the way we define and measure youth ministry. As adults abdicate their training responsibility, our youth are isolated as their own congregation. The measure of success is numerical attendance rather than instilling a life long discipline for spiritual growth. Church becomes a series of fun activities interspersed with encouragement to avoid risky behaviors.

A second factor is primarily teaching topical lessons on Christian rules rather than laying a strong foundation of truth. As our teens move into college, professors, peers, and the popular media all portray authentic Christianity in a negative light. It takes a strong foundation to choose to endure hostility when one can adopt a so-called "private faith" and avoid the confrontation. As you know, soldiers participate in exercises simulating the most effective tactics of their opponents before being sent onto the battlefield. Yet, in training our teens, we often avoid exposing them to the tough questions lest some of them are put off by the experience.

A third factor is allowing teens to be content with a second-hand faith. In Joshua, we learn that "Israel served the LORD . . . all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, and had known all the deeds of the LORD" (24:31). After these elders who had personally experienced the Lord died, most in Israel fell away from serving God. More recently, during the Welsh

revival of 1904, over 100,000 conversions were recorded in less than five months. The impact was so pervasive that police duties were reduced to providing quartets for prayer meetings. A century later, church attendance in Wales is at an all-time low. Only nineteen percent of UK teenagers say they had a religious faith (as compared to over seventy percent for US teens). Luis Palau summed up the Welsh experience by noting, "God has no grandchildren." Teens who attend church to live out their parents' faith find it easy to leave the faith to conform to the expectations of their new authority figures.

These three factors have been around since the inception of Probe. A new factor, somewhat unique to today's culture is a "distorted worldview filter" unwittingly adopted by our youth and adults. This filter tells them:

- Truth is relative, not absolute.
- Science and spirituality are at odds.
- Science confirms that I am nothing but insignificant dirt.
- An irrational, spiritual tradition can help me cope with this harsh reality.
- However, I am in no position to critically evaluate someone else's tradition.

With this distorted filter in place, even solid biblical teaching can leave teens unprepared to stand firm in their faith.

The Last Christian Generation lists some of the concepts distorted by this filter, for example: [\[3\]](#)

- Truth now means whatever is right for you.
- Tolerance means accepting that each individual's values and lifestyles are equally valid.

- Moral judgments mean bigoted attitudes we have no right to hold.

Many teens are synthesizing Christian teaching and popular culture into a new personal religion. In their 2005 book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*,^{4} the authors found that religious teens tend to hold a vague group of functionally religious beliefs the authors termed “moralistic therapeutic deism.”^{5} Its key tenets are:

- God is distant and uninvolved in daily life.
- But I can call on God as a “cosmic therapist” when I have a problem.
- My purpose is to be happy and feel good about myself.
- If I avoid being an intolerant jerk, I will go to heaven.

Although these beliefs could be considered theistic, they definitely are not evangelical Christianity.

What happens when these beliefs are put to the test? I’ve known Julie^{6} all her life. Julie consistently attended youth group. She was also tuned into the popular culture. When her circumstances disappointed her, she turned to God as her “cosmic therapist.” When He did not change her circumstances to suit her, she decided that God was not worth her time. Instead, she chose to escape her circumstances through drugs. She had distorted the truth into a perversion that prevented her from having a solid relationship with her Creator.

The Correction

How should we respond to this disturbing trend?

Historically, much of youth ministry has been about getting the crowd in the door and keeping them involved. Recent

studies show we are doing a good job at this function.{7} But we are not doing well if we measure success by how many are still actively involved through their twenties. If the problem is not getting them in the door, it must be in what is happening once they are involved.

Josh McDowell suggests that we need to readjust both what is being taught and how it is being taught.{8} We need to train our youth in a “relational apologetic,” meaning knowing and defending a belief in God as absolute reality revealed through the Bible *and* experiencing this truth lived out in their lives and through the example of others.

What should we teach? Although we should not ignore behavioral issues such as sex, drugs, etc., McDowell calls us to help our teens see the reality of God. If there is a God, it is of paramount importance that we seek to know absolute Truth with a capital T. Consistent with everything the tools of modern science can observe about our universe, they have rational reasons to believe that God has revealed Himself to us through His Word.

McDowell and Bellis suggest teens must learn to know Him as the God of redemption, relationships, and restoration.{9} A clear understanding of each of these aspects serves an important role in countering the tenets of today’s teen religion which we defined above as “moralistic therapeutic deism”:

- Knowing the God of redemption tells them that good people don’t go to heaven; redeemed people go to heaven. Our definition of good is so shallow compared to a transcendent, holy God. We must rely on Him for redemption.
- Knowing the God of relationships tells them God is not a cosmic therapist, but a personal heavenly Father, intimately involved in all aspects of life.

- Knowing the God of restoration highlights that our earthly life is a brief precursor to eternity. This truth changes our central goal to creating eternal value in Christ.

Youth who can articulate these truths have taken a big step to repairing their distorted worldview filter.

Laying a Firm Foundation

McDowell points out that it is not only what we teach but how we teach it that is important.^{10} In America, we have adopted a Hellenistic [Greek] teaching model focused on communicating information and testing whether the student can regurgitate it. In addition, Christianity is often communicated as a set of behavior rules covering one topic at a time, rather than as a deep relationship emulating the character of our heavenly Father. Bits of knowledge and rules for behavior are not a comprehensive worldview.

In contrast to the Hellenistic model, the Hebrew model of Deuteronomy and Proverbs uses a set of ongoing object lessons, applying the character of God to each life situation. The entire inter-generational community is modeling their faith and articulating their biblical worldview. For this model to work, parents and youth leaders must continually express their reasons for believing that Jesus is the truth in a world that says there is no truth. Teens must experience a community of faith willing to trade in a life purpose of being happy and avoiding pain for a life purpose of building eternal value through serving Jesus.

This may sound like a daunting task, but there are ministries that want to come alongside and help in this process. Josh McDowell's ministry is developing study materials and training events specifically designed to fill this need. More information is available at truefoundations.com. Probe Ministries offers the Student *Mind Games* Conference, a week-

long camp designed to equip students to stand firm in their faith through college and beyond.^{11} In addition, Probe offers speakers, curricula and other materials to help parents, youth leaders and students to articulate and live a relational apologetic. You can visit our website at Probe.org.

We know the church will survive and ultimately triumph at the return of Jesus, but there is no promise that America will continue to have a high percentage of evangelical Christians. Four out of five youth in America are giving us a chance to influence the future. I believe God has called all of us to be a part of responding to that challenge.

Notes

1. Josh McDowell & David Bellis, *The Last Christian Generation* (Holiday, Fla.: Green Key Books, 2006).
2. "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years," The Barna Update, Sept. 11, 2006, www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=245.
3. Ibid., 1.
4. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2005).
5. Bruce Murray, "Understanding the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Teenagers," FACSNET, www.facsnet.org/issues/faith/youth.php.
6. Not her real name.
7. Ibid., 2.
8. Ibid., 1.
9. Ibid., 1.
10. Ibid., 1.
11. More information is available on the Probe Web site at probe.org/mindgames.

Does the Future Need Us? The Future of Humanity and Technology

The voices of some educated, thoughtful people are starting to raise questions about just how human we can remain in the face of developing technology. Don Closson examines those concerns and provides a Christian response.

In April of 2000, Bill Joy ignited a heated discussion concerning the role of technology in modern society. His article in *Wired* magazine became the focus of a growing concern that technological advances are coming so quickly and are so dramatic that they threaten the future existence of humanity itself. It is relatively easy for baby-boomers to discount such apocalyptic language since we grew up being entertained by countless movies and books warning of the dire consequences from uncontrolled scientific experimentation. We tend to lump cries of impending doom from technology with fringe lunatics like Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. Kaczynski killed three people and injured others in a seventeen-year attempt to scare away or kill researchers who were close to creating technologies that he felt might have unintended consequences.

But Bill Joy is no Ted Kaczynski. He is the chief scientist for Sun Microsystems, a major player in computer technology and the Internet. He played an important role in the founding of Sun Microsystems and has been instrumental in making UNIX (operating system) the backbone of the Internet. So it is a

surprise to find him warning us that some types of knowledge, some technologies should remain unexplored. Joy is calling for a new set of ethics that will guide our quest for knowledge away from dangerous research.

Another voice with a similar warning is that of Francis Fukuyama, professor of political economy at Johns Hopkins University. His book *Our Posthuman Future* asks disturbing questions about the potential unintended results from the current revolution in biotechnology. He writes, “the most significant threat posed by contemporary biotechnology is the possibility that it will alter human nature and thereby move us into a “posthuman” stage of history.” Once human nature is disrupted, the belief that we are created equal might no longer be tenable causing both civil and economic strife.

There is also a Christian tradition that questions modernity’s unrestrained quest for technological power. C. S. Lewis warned us of a society that has explained away every mystery, and the danger of what he calls “man-molders.” He states that “the man-molders of the new age will be armed with the powers of an omni-competent state and an irresistible scientific technique: we shall get at last a race of conditioners who really can cut out all posterity in what shape they please.”[\[1\]](#) In his book *The Technological Society*, Jacques Ellul argues that we have come to the place where rationally arrived-at methods and absolute efficiency are all that really matters.[\[2\]](#)

Let’s consider the many voices warning us of the unintended consequences of modern technology.

Three Dangerous Technologies

Bill Joy argues that humanity is in danger from technologies that he believes are just around the corner. His concern is that robotics, genetic engineering, and nanotechnology present risks unlike anything we have created in the past. The key to

understanding these new risks is the fact that these technologies share one remarkable potential; that is, self-replication. With all the present talk of weapons of mass destruction, Joy is more concerned about weapons of knowledge-enabled mass destruction. Joy writes:

I think it is no exaggeration to say that we are on the cusp of the further perfection of extreme evil, an evil whose possibility spreads well beyond that which weapons of mass destruction bequeathed to the nation-states, on to a surprising and terrible empowerment of extreme individuals.[\[3\]](#)

Joy believes that we will have intelligent robots by 2030, nano-replicators by 2020, and that the genetic revolution is already upon us. We all have a picture of what an intelligent robot might look like. Hollywood has given us many stories of that kind of technology gone wrong; the Terminator series for example.

The big debate today is whether or not true artificial intelligence is possible. Some like Danny Hillis, co-founder of Thinking Machines Corporation, believe that humans will probably merge with computers at some point. He says, "I'm as fond of my body as anyone, but if I can be 200 with a body of silicon, I'll take it."[\[4\]](#) The human brain would provide the intelligence that computer science has yet to create for smart robots. The combination of human and silicon could make self-replicating robots a reality and challenge the existence of mankind, as we know it today.

Nanotechnology is used to construct very small machines. IBM recently announced that it has succeeded in creating a computer circuit composed of individual carbon monoxide atoms, a remarkable breakthrough. Although dreamed about since the 1950's, nanotechnology has recently made significant progress towards the construction of molecular-level "assemblers" that could solve a myriad of problems for humanity. They could

construct low cost solar power materials, cures for diseases, inexpensive pocket supercomputers, and almost any product of which one could dream. However, they could also be made into weapons, self-replicating weapons. Some have called this the “gray goo” problem. For example, picture molecular sized machines that destroy all edible plant life over a large geographic area.

Surprisingly, Bill Joy concludes “The only realistic alternative I see is relinquishment: to limit development of the technologies that are too dangerous by limiting our pursuit of certain kinds of knowledge.”

The End of Humanity?

History is filled with people who believed that they were racially superior to others; Nazi Germany is one obvious example. An aspect of America’s uniqueness is the belief that all people are created equal and have rights endowed to them by their Creator that cannot easily be taken away. But what if it became overtly obvious that people are not equal, that some, because they could afford new genetic therapy, could have children that were brighter, stronger, and generally more capable than everyone else? This is the question being asked by Francis Fukuyama in his book *Our Posthuman Future*. The answer he comes up with is not comforting.

He contends that technology is at hand to separate humans into distinct genetic camps and that we will not hesitate to use it.

Fukuyama gives us three possible scenarios for the near future. First, he points to the rapid acceptance and widespread use of psychotropic drugs like Prozac and Ritalin as an indication that future mind altering drugs will find a receptive market. What if neuropharmacology continues to advance to the point where psychotropic drugs can be tailored to an individual’s genetic makeup in order to make everyone

“happy,” without the side effects of the current drugs? It might even become possible to adopt different personalities on different days, extroverted and gregarious on Friday, reserve and contemplative for classes or work on Monday.

Next, advances in stem cell research might soon allow us to regenerate any tissue in the body. The immediate result would be to dramatically extend normal human life expectancy, which could have a number of unpleasant social and economic implications. Finally, the feasibility of wealthy parents being able to screen embryos before they are placed in the womb is almost upon us. It would be hard to imagine parents denying their offspring the benefit of genetically enhanced intelligence, or the prospect of living longer lives free from genetic disease.

What will happen to civil rights within democratic nations if these predictions come true? Will we end up with a society split into subspecies with different native abilities and opportunities? What if Europe, for instance, is populated with relatively old, healthy, rich people and Africa continues to suffer economic deprivation with a far younger population ravaged by AIDS and other preventable diseases? Interestingly, Fukuyama believes that the greatest reason not to employ some of these new technologies is that they would alter what it means to be human, and with that our notions of human dignity.

The Christian basis for human dignity is the *imago Dei*, the image of God placed within us by our Creator. Many are questioning the wisdom of chemical and genetic manipulation of humanity, even if it seems like a good idea now.

Early Warnings

There is a long Christian tradition of looking at the surrounding world with suspicion. Whether it's Tertullian asking the question “what has Athens to do with Jerusalem,” or the Mennonite's promotion of simplicity and separation,

Christians everywhere have had to struggle with the admonition to be in the world but not of it. Recent advances in science and technology are not making this struggle any easier.

In his work *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis argued that humanity's so-called power over nature "turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument."[\[5\]](#) His concern is that the modern omni-competent state combined with irresistible scientific techniques will result in Conditioners who have full control over the future of humankind. He feared that modernism and its ability to explain away everything but "nature" would leave us emptied of humanity. All that would be left is our animal instincts. The choice we have is to see humanity as a complex combination of both material and spiritual components or else to be reduced to machines made of meat ruled by other machines with nothing other than natural impulses to guide them.

Lewis writes:

For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men: the solution is a technique; and both, in the practice of this technique, are reading to do things hitherto regarded as disgusting and impious.

The issue of technique and its standardizing effects was central to the thinking of sociologist Jacques Ellul in *The Technological Society*. Ellul argues that as a society becomes more technological it also becomes less interested in human beings. As he puts it, the technical world is the world of material things. When it does show an interest in mankind, it does so by converting him into a material object. Ellul warns that as technological capabilities grow, they result in greater and greater means to accomplish tasks than ever before, and he believes that the line between good and evil

slowly disappears as this power grows.

Ellul worries that the more dependent we become on technology and technique, the more it conforms our behavior to its requirements rather than vice versa. Whether in corporate headquarters or on military bases much has been written about the de-humanizing effect of the employment of modern technique.

Primarily, he fears that even the church might become enamored with the results of technique. The result would be depending less on the power of God to work through Spirit-filled believers and more on our modern organization and technological skills.

Summary

Without a doubt, technology can help to make a society more productive, and growing productivity is a major predictor for future increases in standards of living. Likewise, technology results in greater opportunities to amass wealth both as a society and for individuals. Communication technology can help to unify a society as well as equalize access to information and thus promote social mobility.

On the other hand, technology can cause harm to both the environment and individuals. The Chernobyl nuclear power disaster in Russia and the Bhopal industrial gas tragedy in India resulted in thousands of deaths due to technological negligence. The widespread access to pornography over the Internet is damaging untold numbers of marriages and relationships. Terrorists have a growing number of inexpensive technologies available to use against civilians including anthrax and so-called radioactive dirty bombs that depend on recent technological advances.

However, it must be said that most Christians do not view technology itself as evil. Technology has remarkable potential

for expanding the outreach of ministries and individuals. Probe's Web site is accessed by close to 100,000 people every month from over one hundred different countries. Modern communications technology makes it possible to broadcast the Gospel to virtually any place on the planet around the clock.

However, in our use of technology, Christians need to keep two principles in mind. First, we cannot give in to the modern tendency to define every problem and solution in scientific or technological terms. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a temptation to think naturalistically, reducing human nature and the rest of Creation to its materialistic component. The Bible speaks clearly of an unseen spiritual world and that we fight against these unseen forces when we work to build God's kingdom on earth. Ephesians tells us "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."[\[6\]](#) Scientific techniques alone will not further God's kingdom. We must acknowledge that prayer and the spiritual disciplines are necessary to counter the adversary.

Second, we need to remember the power that sin has to tempt us and to mar our thinking. The types of technologies and their uses should be limited and controlled by biblical ethics, not by our desires for more power or wealth. We are to have dominion over the earth as God's stewards, not as autonomous tyrants seeking greater pleasure and comfort.

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1972), 73.
2. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, (Vintage Books, 1964), p. xxv.
3. Bill Joy, "Why The Future Doesn't Need Us," *Wired*, April 2000.
4. Ibid.

5. Lewis, 69.

6. NIV, Ephesians 6:11-12.

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Millennial Cautions

Over twenty years ago, as a new Christian, I found myself mesmerized by Christian speakers and books that predicted future social and political events with newspaper-like details. I relished sharing those details with less biblically informed friends. They were amazed and sometimes frightened by what I thought the Bible was predicting about tomorrow's events. But as the years have progressed, I now wonder if that was an appropriate way to introduce my friends to Christianity. Many of the predictions that I shared have not come true. Did I make the claims of Christ more believable by focusing on prophecy or did I place roadblocks in the path of some, actually making their understanding of the gospel more difficult?

People seem to have an innate desire to know the future. Perhaps it is part of our need to be in control, see what's coming, and have time to prepare for it. As Charles Kettering once wrote, "My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there." Some people's lives are changed forever by those who claim to know the future. Hitler claimed that he and his followers were establishing a reign that would last a thousand years. A few short years after first making those claims, his nation, and much of the world, lay in ruins as a result of his violent vision. Recent examples of the dangers of unbalanced fascination with prophecy include the odd Heaven's Gate cult, with their predictions of UFOs, death, and resurrection, and the Waco,

Texas, sect led by David Koresh. Both groups, led by self-appointed "visionaries," influenced people in dramatically harmful ways.

On the other hand, a single person with vision can be a powerful force for positive change. William Wilberforce, after converting to evangelical Christianity in 1784, had a life-long desire to see an end to the international slave trade and of slavery itself in England and its colonies. His tenacity and vision had the remarkable impact of rallying both the British people and the powerful British navy toward achieving his goals. Another example of the positive impact that one person with vision can have is seen in the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. His prophetic "I have a Dream" speech on the steps to the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 has had, and continues to have, a profound effect on many people in America and the world regarding racial prejudice. It seems clear that an individual with an exceptionally strong vision for the future can have a great impact on it.

Sharing the truth of Christ's return can no doubt have a positive impact on people. Our Lord's return is a reality that all Christians claim as part of the hope mentioned in 1 Peter 3:15. Unfortunately, I have encountered Christians who spend too much time trying to determine when Christ will return. In fact, some prophecy experts have fallen into the trap of the early heretic Montanus who claimed prophetic powers and claimed to know the time of our Lord's return even though Jesus himself said that no one knows when He will return but the Father (Matt. 24:36).[\(1\)](#)

As we approach the year 2000, prophets and prophecies are expected to multiply in both the secular world and the Church. In this discussion, I will look at examples of prophecy experts who claimed to know more than they could deliver. My purpose is not to endorse one end-times system over another. However, my hope is that Christians will be discouraged from claiming knowledge they do not possess and encouraged to keep

their focus on the gospel message rather than on highly questionable prophetic schemes.

Christ's Return and the Church

A quick scan of the Internet reveals the popularity of prophetic claims. Along with sites on biblical prophecy, there are pages detailing the predictions of Edgar Cayce, the famous "sleeping prophet," and the fairly well-known Nostradamus. But there are many lesser-known prophetic sources as well, like one site called *Millennium Matters*. It has 583 pages of information on something called the "Deoxyribonucleic Hyperdimension," which predicts the awakening of a planetary entity on the earth in the near future. We might make fun of these prophecies, but imagine how Christians appear to others when we make false predictions about the return of Christ.

Attempting to predict the future is condemned in both the Old and New Testaments (Deut. 18; Acts 16) with warnings against divination and interpreting omens. Yet history has recorded the tendency of Christians to predict Christ's coming in every generation. Tertullian, a follower of Montanus in the second century, supported the idea of a near return when he wrote, "What terrible wars, both foreign and domestic! What pestilences, famines . . . and quakings of the earth has history recorded!" [\(2\)](#) He felt that these evidences alone were enough to indicate Christ's return. Novation in the third century and Donatus in the fourth, were both branded as heretics, but gathered a large number of followers by proclaiming the immanent return of Christ. Later, in the sixth century, Pope Gregory was sure that the end of the world was near. He wrote,

Of all the signs described by our Lord as presaging the end of the world, some we see already accomplished.... For we now see that nation arises against nation and that they press and weigh upon the land in our own times as never before in the annals of the past. Earthquakes overwhelm countless cities,

as we often hear from other parts of the world. Pestilence we endure without interruption. It is true that we do not behold signs in the sun and moon and stars but that these are not far off we may infer from the changes of the atmosphere. [\(4\)](#)

Pope Gregory's words sound quite contemporary, and remarkably similar to some current thinking on prophecy.

What I am warning against is not the preaching of Christ's return. Virtually all Christians believe that He will return physically and that a final judgment will follow. How then, do we respond to this truth? Christ uses the parables of the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) and the talents (Matt. 25:14-30) to teach His followers to be constantly ready for His return. We are to be ambassadors for Christ and the Kingdom of God, sharing the message of reconciliation that is found only in Him (2 Cor. 5:18-20).

One potentially damaging aspect of some prophecy teaching is the tendency to look for and find conspiracies that foretell Christ's return. Whether it be a renewed Roman Empire or a one-world government, Christians seem to relish a world of secret connections and commitments. We already know that the world system is hostile to the gospel, Jesus told us as much and warned of persecution. When we tend to see people through the lens of grand conspiracies, the natural response is to fight the conspiracy rather than share the gospel with the individual. The New Testament calls us to build God's Kingdom one heart at a time. We accomplish this not with legal or political power, but by sharing the good news revealed by God in a culturally relevant way.

The First Millennium

Predictions for the end of the world were prolific at the close of the first millennium after Christ. Now we will look at some of these predictions and consider their impact on the

Church.

In A.D. 950 Adso of Montier-en-Der wrote a "Treatise on the Antichrist" which was a response to a number of mid-century crises that had provoked widespread alarm and fear of an end-time apocalypse.[\(5\)](#) Five years later, Abbo of Fleury heard a preacher in Paris who announced that the Antichrist would be unleashed in the year 1000 and that the Last Judgment would soon follow.[\(6\)](#) At about the same time a panic occurred in the German army of Emperor Otto I because of a solar eclipse that the soldiers mistook as a sign of the end of the world.[\(7\)](#) And when the last Carolingian dynasty fell with the death of King Louis V in 987, many saw this event as a precursor to the arrival of the Antichrist. King Otto II of Germany had Charlemagne's body exhumed on Pentecost in the year 1000 supposedly in order to forestall the apocalypse. Both Halley's comet in A.D. 989 and a super nova in A.D. 1006 were interpreted as signs of the end. About the same time, the Moslem caliph, Al Hakim, destroyed the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem prompting apocalyptic fear in the west as well as violent anti-Jewish outbursts.[\(8\)](#)

The Calabrian monk, Joachim of Fiore (ca. A.D. 1135 1202) stands out as a key figure in medieval apocalypticism. On Easter Sunday in 1183 he was inspired to write his massive Exposition on Revelation. Later near the end of his life, he summarized his prophetic knowledge in the Book of Figures. His writings influenced a wide range of medieval events. The Franciscan order was founded on the basis that they would be the spiritual elite described in Joachim's "Age of the Spirit," a future time when God would send revelation directly to believers. Using Joachim's hints, writers concluded that the "Age of Grace" would end and the "Age of the Spirit" would begin in A.D. 1260. This prophecy, mixed with German social unrest, created a myth surrounding Frederick II. Having ruled from 1220 to 1250, many believed that Frederick was the "Emperor of the Last Days" who would usher in the new

Millennium. [\(9\)](#) The myth gained force when Frederick seized Jerusalem in 1229. When he died in 1250, a new myth started that Frederick would return from the dead. Two pseudo-Fredericks were burned at the stake by his successor to the throne. The Book of a Hundred Chapters stated that the returned Frederick would lead a fight against corruption in the state and the church, and that he will instruct his followers to “Go on hitting them” (referring to the Pope and his students) and to “Kill every one of them!” [\(10\)](#)

The Taborites, founded in A.D. 1415, also looked back to Joachim for their prophetic beliefs. They believed that once their persecutors were defeated, Christ would return and rule the world from Mount Tabor, a mountain they had renamed south of Prague. Their communal activities eventually turned bloody, prompted by tracts with lines like, “Accursed be the man who withholds his sword from shedding the blood of the enemies of Christ.” [\(11\)](#) After a crushing defeat at the hands of the German army, the group quickly disbanded.

Although all of these prophecies were misguided, it would be a mistake to doubt the sincerity of the individuals. However, the events surrounding the end of the first millennium should temper our desire to make predictions about the coming new millennium. Next, we will look at more recent predictions that have been just as wrong.

Recent Predictions

People want to know the future and are eager to follow those who claim to predict it. When a Jehovah’s Witness knocks on your door, prophecy is used as a hook to gain entrance. A recent best-selling book *The Bible Code* claims to have uncovered a hidden code in the Old Testament that predicts many modern-day events as well as a nuclear holocaust in the year 2000 or 2006. Many New Age books are sold on the claim that channelers have access to future events when connected to those on another spiritual plane. Because of the emotional

power of prophecy, the temptation for Christians to make dramatic claims about future events is great. Discernment and care must be used so that the integrity of the gospel message is not compromised. There is no doubt that Scripture teaches a Second Coming of Christ and that a final judgment will follow. However, there is considerable disagreement among Bible-believing Christians regarding the signs that foretell these events and our ability to predict when Christ will return.

One of the favorite past-times of date setters is to attempt to identify the Antichrist, a powerful figure who will appear immediately prior to Christ's return. This guessing game has a long tradition, going back to the time right after Jesus' death. The early church fathers Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Augustine all believed that this person would be present immediately prior to Christ's return. During the Middle Ages, some churchmen identified the Antichrist as a Moslem, such as Saladin, but others pointed to a Jew, and some even pointed to the Pope. During the American Revolution it was popular to cast King George III in the role of Antichrist, but the Earl of Bute and British general John Burgoyne also got nominations.

Other familiar names to be included in this long list of suspected Antichrists are Napoleon, the British Parliament, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Joseph Stalin. Since World War II, the Pope still makes the list as does Jewish leader Moshe Dayan, the assassinated Egyptian leader Anwar el-Sadat, Spain's King Juan Carlos, and Korean cult leader Sun Myung Moon. For some, Mikhail Gorbachev and Saddam Hussein are naturals for the job.

The mark of the Beast, the number 666, has been used in very creative ways to support many different Antichrist theories. Although many conservative theologians have seen the number 666 from Revelation 13 as symbolic of all that is evil and a blasphemous parody of the perfection that the Bible attributes to the number 7, others attempt to use the number to identify

an individual.[\(12\)](#) The advent of the computer has caused some to see it as the Beast. One writer noted that if the letter “A”=6 and “B”=12 and “C”=18, and so on, the word computer adds up to 666. The same writer also observed that the words “New York” added up to 666.[\(13\)](#) Some pointed to John Kennedy because he had received 666 votes for the vice-presidency in 1956.[\(14\)](#) Others pointed to Henry Kissinger because his name in Hebrew added up to 111 or 666 divided by 6.[\(15\)](#) Even Ronald Reagan was considered because his first, middle, and last names all had six letters.[\(16\)](#)

The striking number of attempts to identify the Antichrist and the significance of the number 666 should at least give us a sense of humility before adding another name to the list. Perhaps we should follow the example of Irenaus in the second century. Seeing the many efforts to identify the Antichrist in his day, he cautioned against the practice and believed that the name was deliberately concealed until it would be obvious in the day of the Antichrist’s arrival.

The U.S. in Prophecy

As the year 2000 gets closer, prophets and their prophecies will explode in number. A popular topic for prophecy experts is the future of the United States. Although prophecy expert John Walvoord has written, “No specific mention of the United States or any other country in North America or South America can be found in the Bible,”[\(17\)](#) this has not, and probably will not, stop others from seeing detailed references to the U.S. and its future in Scripture.

The depiction of the United States in end-times scenarios has varied over the years. There is a long tradition of seeing the U.S. as the New Israel. Near the end of his life, Christopher Columbus wrote, “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which He spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John . . . and he showed me the spot where to find it.”[\(18\)](#) In 1653 the New England historian Edward Johnson wrote that the

U.S. “is the place where the Lord will create a new heaven and a new earth,” a theme that Jonathan Edwards picked up nearly a hundred years later. [\(19\)](#)

This notion that the colonies held a special place in God’s redemption plan continued to spread as the colonies grew. By the time of the War for Independence, this conception changed from a primarily religious or spiritual role to a civic one as well. In 1808 Elias Smith, a New England evangelist, argued that the Great Awakening in America, as well as the American and French revolutions, had set the foundation for the end-time age described in the Bible. [\(20\)](#) In his book *White Jacket* in 1850, Herman Melville writes, “We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. . . God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls.” [\(20\)](#)

This ardent belief in America’s millennial role reached its peak during the Civil War. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and Lincoln’s “Second Inaugural Address” all contained allusions to Scripture and apocalyptic themes. Although this trend did not disappear, the twentieth century found Christian thinkers beginning to see the U.S. in another light. In 1937 Arno Gaebelein wrote that the U.S. had been overrun by the powers of darkness [\(21\)](#) and in 1949 Wilbur Smith saw American society described in the list of end time evils of 2 Timothy. [\(22\)](#) More and more, America was being identified with Babylon rather than with the New Israel.

Since the 1960s, prophecy writers have pointed out America’s long list of moral failures as evidence that God will soon focus His wrath on us. Many of them hold that the increase in abortion, homosexuality, godless education, divorce, crime, and pornography in our nation will soon seal our fate and lead to our downfall as a nation.

This may be the case, but the many different interpretations of America's future role in God's end-times plan should cause a great deal of humility and prudence concerning our own ability to know what God has in mind for this nation. Once one goes beyond the general principal that God blesses those who conform to His moral guidelines, we are on shaky ground. Perhaps we would be far better off seeking a pure heart rather than trying to discern what role America will play in the millennium or who the Antichrist might be. Jesus is coming again. Worrying about the details or the exact time of His return is pointless if it does not turn us toward a holy life. As Jesus said, "Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matt. 6:27).

Notes

1. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, Harvard University, 1992), p. 46.
2. Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), p. 7.
3. Ibid., p. 11.
4. Ibid., p. 7.
5. <http://www.mille.org/1000-dos.htm>, p.1.
6. Ibid., p. 2.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 6.
9. *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 53.
10. Ibid., p. 54.
11. Ibid., p. 55.
12. Alan F. Johnson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1981), p. 535.
13. *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 283.
14. Ibid., p. 275.
15. Ibid., p. 276.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 247.

18. Ibid., p. 225.
19. Ibid., p. 226.
20. Ibid., p. 227.
21. Ibid., p. 228.
22. Ibid., p. 231.

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