

Generation X – How They Fit in the Christian Community

Generation X! Are you familiar with this phrase? It is highly probable that you have heard or read the phrase at least once. What does it bring to your mind? Does it provoke fear, confusion, despair, misunderstandings, or is it just another in a long line of such expressions used to label youth? Generation X has quickly entered our vocabulary as an easily recognizable moniker for the children of another definable generation: the “baby boomers.” Thus this generation of teenagers also has come to be known as the “baby busters.” “Xers” and “busters” normally don’t elicit positive thoughts about our youth. Is this a legitimate response? Or are we maligning a significant portion of our population with such terms?

In 1991 a Canadian named Douglas Coupland published a novel entitled *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. Coupland’s book “is the first major work to take twentysomethings seriously, even if the book is humorous and fictional.”^{1} Thus he is the originator of the phrase that presently describes a particular generation. But he is just one of many who have given thought to youth culture, both present and past.

A Brief History of American Youth

It seems that youth have always received the attention of adults. Teenagers, as they have come to be called, have been analyzed, diagnosed, and reprimanded because older generations just don’t know what to make of them. “Juvenile delinquents,” “the beat generation,” “hippies,” “yuppies” and numerous other titles have been used to describe certain generational distinctives. “The contemporary youth crisis is only the latest variation on centuries-old problems.”^{2} For example,

in the 1730s in New England youth activities such as “night ‘walking’ and ‘company- keeping,’ also known as ‘revels,’ helped produce some of the highest premarital pregnancy rates in American history.”[\[3\]](#) And during the early nineteenth century, student riots became a tradition on many campuses such as Brown, North Carolina, Princeton, Harvard, Yale, and Columbia. These riots included “boycotting classes, barricading college buildings, breaking windows, trashing the commons and/or chapel, setting fires around or to college buildings, beating faculty members, and whipping the president or trustees.”[\[4\]](#) Such behavior—almost two hundred years ago—probably reminds us of what took place on many campuses during the Vietnam War years.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, youth became the focus of the burgeoning social sciences. “An intellectual enterprise struggled to redefine what ‘youth’ was or ought to be. That concept was labeled ‘adolescence’ and has prevailed ever since.”[\[5\]](#) It is especially interesting to note that these early social scientists didn’t discover adolescence, they invented it. “Adolescence was essentially a conception of behavior imposed on youth, rather than an empirical assessment of the way in which young people behaved.”[\[6\]](#) This is important when we understand that the world view premises of the social scientists “came from Darwinian recapitulation theory: the individual life-course replicated the evolutionary progress of the entire race. Adolescence was a distinct ‘stage’ through which each person passed on the way from childhood (the ‘primitive’ stage) to adulthood (the ‘civilized’ stage). Adolescence therefore was transitional but essential, its traits dangerous but its labor vital for attaining maturity. Squelching it was just as bad as giving it free rein.”[\[7\]](#) The fruit of such concepts can be seen in the “lifestyles” that are now so ingrained in our cultural fabric.

The Web of Adolescence

What do the “lifestyles” of adults have to do with adolescents? “Since ‘lifestyle’ has come to define not just doing but their very being, adults have now become dependent on the very psychological experts who wove the web of adolescence in the first place. The classic youth tasks of ‘growth,’ ‘finding oneself,’ and preparing for one’s life-work have become the American life-work, even into the golden years’ of retirement.”[\[8\]](#) Thus the concerns we have for our youth are concerns we have for ourselves. The “web of adolescence” touches all of us. As George Barna has stated, “taking the time to have a positive impact [on our youth] is more than just ‘worth the effort’; it is a vital responsibility of every adult and a contribution to the future of our own existence.”[\[9\]](#) The importance of this cannot be overemphasized as we contemplate the sometimes-puzzling segment of our population called “Generation X.”

Who Are These People?

What is a “Generation Xer” or a “baby buster”? What is the “doofus generation” or “the nowhere generation”? These phrases, and many others, may be used to characterize the present generation of youth. Not very encouraging phrases, are they? More frequently than not, adults always have evaluated youth in pessimistic terms. Even the ancient Greeks were frustrated with their youth.

Today the descriptions are especially derogatory. “Words used to describe them have included: whiny, cynical, angry, perplexed, tuned out, timid, searching, vegged out—the latest lost generation.”[\[10\]](#) Are these terms accurate, or do they reek of hyperbole? As is true with most generalizations of people, there is a measure of truth to them. But we make a grave mistake if we allow them to preclude us from a more complete consideration of this generation. As George Barna has

written: "You cannot conduct serious research among teenagers these days without concluding that, contrary to popular assumptions, there is substance to these young people."[\[11\]](#) Having served among and with youth of this generation for many years, I emphatically concur with Mr. Barna. Generation Xers consist of "41 million Americans born between 1965 and 1976 plus the 3 million more in that age group who have immigrated here."[\[12\]](#) Most of them are children of the "baby boomers," who comprise over 77 million of the population. This dramatic decrease in the number of births has left them with the "baby buster" label. Their parents have left a legacy that has produced a "birth dearth" and its accompanying social consequences. There are at least six contributors to this population decline.

First, the U.S. became the site for the world's highest divorce rate. Second, birth control became increasingly prominent with the introduction of the pill. Women began to experience more freedom in planning their lives. Third, a college education was more accessible for more people, especially for women who began to take more influential positions in the work force. Fourth, social change, including women's liberation, encouraged more women to consider careers other than being homemakers. Fifth, abortion reached a rate of over 1.5 million per year. Sixth, the economy led many women to work because they had to, or because they were the sole breadwinner.[\[13\]](#)

So we can see that this generation has entered a culture enmeshed in dramatic changes, especially regarding the family. These changes have produced certain characteristics, some positive, others negative, that are generally descriptive of contemporary youth.

How Do You Describe a "Buster"?

How do you describe someone who is labeled as a "baby buster"? We may be tempted to answer this question in a despairing

tone, especially if we haven't taken time to see a clear picture of a "buster." Consider the following characteristics:

First, they are serious about life. For example, the quality of life issues they have inherited have challenged them to give consideration to critical decisions both for the present and future. Second, they are stressed out. School, family, peer pressure, sexuality, techno-stress, finances, crime, and even political correctness contribute to their stressful lives. Third, they are self-reliant. One indicator of this concerns religious faith; the baby buster believes he alone can make sense of it. Fourth, they are skeptical, which is often a defense against disappointment. Fifth, they are highly spiritual. This doesn't mean they are focusing on Christianity, but it does mean there is a realization that it is important to take spiritual understanding of some kind into daily life. Sixth, they are survivors. This is not apparent to adults who usually share a different worldview concerning progress and motivation. This generation is not "driven" as much as their predecessors. They are realistic, not idealistic.{14}

Do these characteristics match your perceptions? If not, it may be because this generation has received little public attention. And what attention it has received has leaned in a negative direction because of inaccurate observation. The baby busters' parents, the baby boomers, have been the focus of businesses, education, churches, and other institutions simply because of their massive numbers and their market potential. It's time to rectify this if we have the wisdom to see the impact busters will have in the not-too-distant future.

What About the Church and Busters?

Let's survey a few other attributes of Generation X as we attempt to bring this group into sharper focus. These attributes should be especially important to those of us in the Christian community who desire to understand and relate to

our youth.

Because of “the loneliness and alienation of splintered family attachments” this generation’s strongest desires are acceptance and belonging.^{15} Our churches need to become *accepting* places first and *expecting* places second. That is, our youth need to sense that they are not first *expected* to conform or perform. Rather, they are to sense that the church is a place where they can first find *acceptance*. My years of ministry among youth have led me to the conclusion that one of the consistent shortcomings of our churches is the proverbial “generation gap” that stubbornly *expects* youth to dress a certain way, talk a certain way, socialize in a certain way, etc., without *accepting* them in Christ’s way.

Another important attribute of this generation is how they learn. “They determine truth in a different way: not rationally, but relationally.”^{16} Closely aligned with this is the observation that “interaction is their primary way of learning.”^{17} In order for the church to respond, it may be necessary to do a great deal of “retooling” on the way we teach.

Lastly, busters are seeking purpose and meaning in life. Of course this search culminates in a relationship with the risen Jesus. It should be obvious that ultimately this is the most important contribution the church can offer. If we fail to respond to this, the greatest need of this generation or any other, surely we should repent and seek the Lord’s guidance.

Listening to Busters

Let’s eavesdrop on a conversation taking place on a college campus between a Generation X student and a pastor:

Pastor: We have a special gathering of college students at our church each Sunday. It would be great to see you there.

Student: No, thanks. I’ve been to things like that before.

What's offered is too superficial. Besides, I don't trust institutions like churches.

Pastor: Well, I think you'll find this to be different.

Student: Who's in charge?

Pastor: Usually it's me and a group of others from the church.

Student: No students?

Pastor: Well, uh, no, not at the moment.

Student: How can you have a gathering for students and yet the students have nothing to do with what happens?

Pastor: That's a good question. I haven't really thought much about it.

Student: By the way, is there a good ethnic and cultural mix in the group?

Pastor: It's not as good as it could be.

Student: Why is that?

Pastor: I haven't really thought about that, either.

Student: Cliques. I've noticed that a lot of groups like yours are very "cliquish." Is that true at your church?

Pastor: We're trying to rid ourselves of that. But do you spend time with friends?

Student: Of course! But I don't put on a "show of acceptance."

Pastor: I appreciate that! We certainly don't want to do that! We sincerely want to share the truth with anyone.

Student: Truth? I don't think you can be so bold as to say there is any such thing.

Pastor: That's a good point. I can't claim truth, but Jesus can.

Student: I'm sure that's comforting for you, but it's too narrow for anyone to claim such a thing. We all choose our own paths.

Pastor: Jesus didn't have such a broad perspective.

Student: That may be, but he could have been wrong, you know. Look, I'm late for class. Maybe we can talk another time, as long as you'll listen and not preach to me.

Pastor: That sounds good. I'm here often. I'll look for you. Have a great day!

This fictitious encounter serves to illustrate how baby busters challenge us to find ways of communicating that transcend what may have been the norm just a few years ago.

New Rules

George Barna has gleaned a set of "rules" that define and direct youth of the mid- and late-90s:

Rule #1: Personal relationships count. Institutions don't.

Rule #2: The process is more important than the product.

Rule #3: Aggressively pursue diversity among people.

Rule #4: Enjoying people and life opportunities is more important than productivity, profitability, or achievement.

Rule #5: Change is good.

Rule #6: The development of character is more crucial than achievement.

Rule #7: You can't always count on your family to be there for you, but it is your best hope for emotional support.

Rule #8: Each individual must assume responsibility for his or her own world.

Rule #9: Whenever necessary, gain control and use it wisely.

Rule #10: Don't waste time searching for absolutes. There are none.

Rule #11: One person can make a difference in the world but not much.

Rule #12: Life is hard and then we die; but because it's the only life we've got, we may as well endure it, enhance it, and enjoy it as best we can.

Rule #13: Spiritual truth may take many forms.

Rule #14: Express your rage.

Rule #15: Technology is our natural ally.[{18}](#)

Now let's consider how parents and other adults might best respond to these rules.

What Do They Hear From Us?

Try to put yourself into the mind and body of a contemporary teenager for a moment. Imagine that you've been asked to share the kinds of things you hear most often from your parents or adult leaders. Your list may sound something like this:

- "Do as I say, not as I do."
- "I'm the adult. I'm right."
- "Because I said so, that's why."
- "You want to be *what*?"
- "This room's a pig sty."
- "Can't you do anything right?"
- "Where did you find him?"
- "You did *what*?"
- "Do you mind if we talk about something else?"

- “I’m kind of busy right now. Could you come back later?”

These statements sound rather overwhelming when taken together, don’t they? And yet too many of our youth hear similar phrases too frequently. As we conclude our series pertaining to the youth of Generation X, let’s focus on how we might better communicate and minister to them. In his book *Ten Mistakes Parents Make With Teenagers*, Jay Kesler has shared wise advice we should take to heart and consistently apply to our lives among youth.[\[19\]](#)

Advice to Parents and Other Adults

- Be a consistent model. We can’t just preach to them and expect them to follow our advice if we don’t live what we say. Consistency is crucial in the eyes of a buster.
- Admit when you are wrong. Just because you are the adult and the one with authority doesn’t mean you can use your position as a “cop out” for mistakes. Youth will understand sincere repentance and will be encouraged to respond in kind.
- Give honest answers to honest questions. Youth like to ask questions. We need to see this as a positive sign and respond honestly.
- Let teenagers develop a personal identity. Too often youth bare the brunt of their parents’ expectations. In particular, parents will sometimes make the mistake of living through their children. Encourage them in their own legitimate endeavors.
- Major on the majors and minor on the minors. In my experience, adults will concentrate on things like appearance to the detriment of character. Our youth need to know that we know what is truly important.
- Communicate approval and acceptance. As we stated earlier in this essay, this generation is under too much stress. Let’s make encouragement our goal, not discouragement.
- When possible, approve their friends. This one can be especially difficult for many of us. Be sure to take time to

go beyond the surface and really know their friends.

- Give teens the right to fail. We can't protect them all their lives. Remind them that they can learn from mistakes.
- Discuss the uncomfortable. If they don't sense they can talk with you, they will seek someone else who may not share your convictions.
- Spend time with your teens. Do the kinds of things they like to do. Give them your concentration. They'll never forget it.

This generation of youth, and all those to come, need parents and adults who demonstrate these qualities. When youth receive this kind of attention, our churches will benefit, our schools will benefit, our families will benefit, and our country will benefit. And, most importantly, I believe the Lord will be pleased.

Notes

1. William Dunn, *The Baby Bust: A Generation Comes of Age* (Ithaca, N.Y.: American Demographics Books, 1993), 112.
2. Quentin J. Schultze, ed., *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 14.
3. Ibid., 19.
4. Steven J. Novak, *The Rights of Youth: American Colleges and Student Revolt, 1798-1815* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1977), 17-25. Quoted in Schultze, *Dancing in the Dark*, 23.
5. Schultze, 33.
6. Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 243. Quoted in Schultze, *Dancing in the Dark*, 35.
7. Schultze, 35.
8. Ibid., 45.
9. George Barna, *Generation Next: What You Need to Know About Today's Youth* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1995), 11.
10. Dunn, x.
11. Barna, 18.
12. Dunn, x.

13. Ibid., 16.
14. Barna, 18-21.
15. Jan Johnson, "Getting the Gospel to the Baby Busters," *Moody Monthly* (May 1995): 50.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 51.
18. Barna, 108-15.
19. Jay Kesler, *Ten Mistakes Parents Make With Teenagers (And How to Avoid Them)* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1988).

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The Jesus Seminar

Jimmy Williams provides analysis of the Jesus Seminar findings in light of five critical areas: Identify purpose of the Jesus Fellows, Presuppositisms, Canonical Gospels, Chronology and Christological differences.

Introduction

- *"Jesus did not ask us to believe that his death was a blood sacrifice, that he was going to die for our sins."*
- *"Jesus did not ask us to believe that he was the messiah. He certainly never suggested that he was the second person of the trinity. In fact, he rarely referred to himself at all."*
- *"Jesus did not call upon people to repent, or fast, or observe the sabbath. He did not threaten with hell or promise heaven."*
- *"Jesus did not ask us to believe that he would be raised*

from the dead.”

- *“Jesus did not ask us to believe that he was born of a virgin.”*
- *“Jesus did not regard scripture as infallible or even inspired.”*

So says Robert W. Funk, Architect and Founder of the Jesus Seminar, in a Keynote Address to the Jesus Seminar Fellows in the spring of 1994.(1) The Jesus Seminar has been receiving extensive coverage lately in such periodicals as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, as well as on network television.

Biographical

The Jesus Seminar Fellows

The Jesus Seminar is a group of New Testament scholars who have been meeting periodically since 1985. The initial two hundred has now dwindled to about seventy-four active members. They initially focused on the sayings of Jesus within the four Gospels to determine the probability of His actually having said the things attributed to Him in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each scholar offered his/her opinion on each “Jesus” statement by voting with different colored beads:

- *Red: Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it.*
- *Pink: Jesus probably or might have said something like this.*
- *Gray: Jesus did not say this, but the ideas are close to His own.*
- *Black: Jesus did not say this; it represents a later tradition.*

Their voting conclusions: Over 80% of the statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are, by voting consensus, either gray or black. This means that only 20% of Jesus' statements are likely to have been spoken by Him. The other 80% are most assuredly, they say, unlikely to have ever been uttered by Jesus.

Their conclusions were published in 1993 in a book entitled *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. The primary author of the book, Robert W. Funk, also the Founder and Chair of the Jesus Seminar, crafted the results of their deliberations in a slick, color-coded format with charts, graphics, appendices, and copious footnotes. (The Gospel of Thomas is to be included with the traditional four gospels, they say.)

Who are these scholars, and what are their credentials? Robert W. Funk, former professor of the New Testament at the University of Montana is the most prominent leader. He is joined by two other major contributors, John Dominic Crossan, of DePaul University, Chicago, who has authored several books including *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, *The Essential Jesus*, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, and Marcus Borg of Oregon State University, also the author of several books including: *Jesus: A New Vision* and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*.

Of the remaining active participants, only fourteen are well-known scholars in New Testament studies. Another twenty are recognizable within the narrow confines of the discipline, but they are not widely published beyond a few journal articles or dissertations. The remaining forty are virtually unknowns, and most of them are either at Harvard, Vanderbilt, or Claremont College, three universities widely considered among the most liberal in the field.

The public, exposed by the mass of publicity and attention

given to the Jesus Seminar by the media has been inclined to assume that the theories of these scholars represent the “cutting edge,” the mainstream of current New Testament thought. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Nearly all of these scholars are American. European scholarship is nearly non-existent and, that being the case, it would be inaccurate, if not deceiving for the Jesus Seminar participants to present themselves, their work, and their conclusions as a broad, representative consensus of worldwide New Testament scholarship.

While the media and the general public may tend to be gullible and naive about the authority and findings of the Jesus Seminar, Christians need not be intimidated.

Philosophical

Why is this movement important? Should Christians be concerned with this? Haven't the gospel traditions had their skeptics and critics for centuries? What is different about the Jesus Seminar?

Scholars since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century have questioned such things as the miracles, the prophecies, and the extraordinary claims of Christ in the Gospels.

Beginning in Germany, a separation began to occur between the “Jesus of History” and the “Christ of Faith”; that is, it came to be popularly believed that a man named Jesus really lived, but that fantastic myths grew up around Him and about His powers and claims, and thus He became for many the “Christ of Faith” in story, symbol, and worship. Scholars promoting this separation conclude that biblical history is not what is important; but rather, one's personal experience, one's search for meaning and timeless truths. Those are of primary importance to an individual.

The Jesus Seminar stands in this tradition. But what is most

significant about their work is that it has widened the circle of awareness (i.e., the general public) to New Testament studies and criticism, and a focus upon issues which up until now have been primarily restricted to academic discussions among New Testament scholars.

This group has brought into question the very authenticity and validity of the gospels which lie at the center of Christianity's credibility. If what the Jesus Seminar espouses is historically accurate, the sooner the naive Christian community can be educated to these facts the better, according to these scholars.

A major presupposition of the Jesus Seminar, therefore, is philosophical naturalistic worldview which categorically denies the supernatural. Therefore they say one must be wary of the following in the Gospels:

- **Prophetic statements.** *Predictions by Jesus of such things as the destruction of the Temple, or of Jerusalem, or His own resurrection are later literary additions or interpolations. How do we know this? Because no one can predict the future. So they MUST have been added later by zealous followers.*

- **Miracles.** *Since miracles are not possible, every recorded miracle in the Gospels must be a later elaboration by an admiring disciple or follower, or must be explained on the basis of some physical or natural cause (i.e., the Feeding of the 5,000: Jesus gave the signal, and all those present reached beneath their cloaks, pulled out their own "sack lunches," and ate together!).*

- **Claims of Jesus.** *Christ claimed to be God, Savior, Messiah, Judge, Forgiver of sin, sacrificial Lamb of God, etc. All of these, say the Jesus Fellows, are the later work of His devoted followers. The historical Jesus never claimed these things for Himself, as Funk infers in his above-mentioned statements. Reality isn't like this. It couldn't be true.*

Therefore the Jesus Fellows assert that the Gospels could not have been written by eyewitnesses in the mid-first century. On the basis of this philosophical presupposition, the Jesus Seminar considers itself personally and collectively free to select or discard any statement of the Gospels which is philosophically repugnant.

There is nothing new about this approach in New Testament scholarship. Thomas Jefferson, a great American patriot and president did the same thing in the late 1700s with almost identical results. He admired Jesus as a moral man, but like the Jesus Fellows, he assumed all supernatural and extraordinary elements in the Gospels were unreliable and could not be true. With scissors and paste, Jefferson cut out of the Gospels any and everything which contravened the laws of nature and his own reason.

When he had finished his project, only 82 columns of the four Gospels out of his King James Bible remained from an original 700. The other nine-tenths lay on the cutting room floor. Jefferson entitled his creation *The Life and Morals of Jesus*, and his book ended with the words, "There laid they Jesus . . . and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher and departed." (2)

Jefferson and the Jesus Fellows, like all skeptics, prefer their own reason and biases over the possibility that the Gospels are accurate in what they say about miracles, prophecy, and the claims of Christ. They are like the man who visited the psychiatrist and informed him of a grave problem: "I think I'm dead!" The psychiatrist said, "That is a serious problem. May I ask you a question? Do you believe that dead men bleed?" The man quickly answered, "Of course not. Dead men don't bleed." The psychiatrist reached forward, and taking a hat pin, he pricked the man's finger. The man looked down at his bleeding finger and exclaimed, "Well, what do you know! Dead men bleed after all!"

Canonical

The Jesus Fellows, on the basis of their naturalistic bias, conclude that at least the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) could not have been written at the time tradition and many New Testament scholars assume they were. The "Priority of Mark" as the earliest gospel written has strong (but not universal) support. And yet Mark 13 records Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple, something that did not actually occur until A.D. 70.

Since the Jesus Fellows do not believe prophecy is possible, they judge Mark, the "earliest" of the Gospels, to have been written after the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in A.D. 70 by the Romans. If Mark was written in the early 70s, still later dates are then required for Matthew and Luke, to say nothing of the Book of Acts which must follow them with an even later date.

Now, this gives the Jesus Scholars a "window" of about 40 years from the time of Jesus' death (a A.D. 32.) to the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) to look for earlier sources devoid of miracles and extraordinary claims. They think they have found two such primary sources which fit their assumptions. The first of these is the "Q" source, or "Quelle."

Synoptics/Quelle

It has long been observed that Matthew, Mark, and Luke must have had some kind of symbiotic relationship, as if they were aware of one another, or used the same sources, or some of the same sources. The prevailing theory is that Mark (the shortest of the three) was written first, and was later substantially incorporated into both Matthew and Luke. There is a high, but not total agreement, in the parallel accounts of Matthew and Luke where the two reflect the book of Mark.

But Matthew and Luke have additional material, some 250 verses (i.e., the Christmas stories, greater elaboration on the

resurrection events, etc.). And there are some verses which are common to both Matthew and Luke, but not found in Mark. Thus many scholars conclude there was some other document or source available to Matthew and Luke which explains why they contain these additional 250 verses along with the corpus of Mark. The scholars have designated this material as "Q," or "Quelle," which is the German word for "Source." Outside of the Synoptic gospels, there is no written documentary evidence to substantiate Quelle.

A number of New Testament scholars thus claim that Quelle must have been an early, written document which preceded the writing of the Synoptic gospels and was incorporated into them. And they claim that in these 250 verses we only find a very "normal, human" Jesus who is more likely to have been the historical man.

The Gospel of Thomas

The second source given high priority and preference by the Jesus Seminar Fellows is the Gospel of Thomas. In fact, they value it so highly they have placed it alongside the four traditional ones, giving it equal, if not superior, value and historical authenticity.

A complete copy of The Gospel of Thomas was discovered in the 1940s at an Egyptian site called Nag Hammadi, where archaeologists found an entire library of ancient texts including the Gospel of Thomas. It was dated around A.D. 400 and written in Coptic, the language of the ancient Egyptian church. This astonishing cache consisted of early Christian and Gnostic texts.

This Gospel of Thomas has now been studied for forty years, and the overwhelming conclusion of scholars worldwide has been that the document carries many of the identifying marks of a Gnostic literary genre, from a sect prominent in Egypt and the Nile Valley during the second, third, and fourth centuries.

It has been almost universally assumed that the parallels in Thomas to the New Testament Gospels and epistles were copied or paraphrased (not the reverse, as the Jesus Fellows claim) to suit Gnostic purposes, teachings which were opposed to all ideas about a supernatural God in the flesh Who could perform miracles, forgive sin, and rise from the dead. The Jesus Seminar Scholars have fit Thomas nicely together with "Q" to frame an historical portrait of Jesus based primarily upon these two sources.

The Jesus Scholars have declared that the Gospel of Thomas and the Q Source were written within the forty years between Jesus' death and the fall of Jerusalem, pushing forward the writing of the four canonical gospels (a necessity on their part to uphold their theory) to very late in the first century.

Chronological

Apart from completely ignoring Paul's epistles which were written between A.D. 45 and his martyrdom at the hands of Nero in A.D. 68, the Jesus Fellows have a critical problem in fitting their theory into first century chronology.

In the last chapter of the Book of Acts (28), Luke leaves us with the impression that Paul is in Rome, and still alive. Tradition tells us he died in A.D. 68. In Acts, Luke shows keen awareness of people, places and contemporary events, both within and without the church. And he records the martyrdoms of both Stephen and James. It is highly unlikely, if the deaths of Paul and Peter and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) had already occurred when Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles, that he would have failed to record these most important events.

New Testament scholars are in strong agreement that whoever wrote Acts also wrote the Gospel of Luke two volumes by one author, both addressed to a man named "Theophilus." And since

Luke is supposed to have incorporated Mark and the Q Source material into the writing of his own Gospel, and Acts was written after Luke, but before Paul's death (A.D. 68) and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70), then Mark and Quelle must have been written by the mid 60s. The same difficulty in Luke exists with Mark, who is said to have written his gospel with Peter as his source, Peter having been martyred in Rome about the same time as Paul.

It is highly unlikely that these two obscure sources, Quelle and the Gospel of Thomas, could have been circulating throughout the Christian community and having such impact that they overshadowed what Paul was at the very same time saying about Jesus in all of his epistles.

Real church history is not kind to the Jesus Fellows at this point. The church did not first flourish in the Nile Valley and spread elsewhere. The clear pattern of expansion from both biblical and the earliest patristic writings is from Jerusalem to Antioch, Asia Minor, Greece, and finally Rome. Ironically, the earliest of the Church Fathers, Clement of Rome (ca. A.D. 30 to ca. A.D. 100) writes from Rome at the end of the first century an epistle to the Corinthians (1 Clement) which is considered to be the oldest extant letter after the writings of the Apostles. It had such stature in the early church that it was initially considered by some to be a part of the Canon. All the other early church fathers (2nd century) are scattered around in cities within the areas mentioned above, with the exception of Clement of Alexandria (c. A.D. 150 to c. A.D. 215) who reflects some Gnostic ideas in his teachings.

The more traditional and accepted chronology for the documents under consideration is as follows:

Dating/chronology of First Century Authorship

(All dates are A.D.)

Uncontested:

End of First Century: 100
Fall of Jerusalem: 70
Martyrdom of Paul and Peter: 68
Epistles of Paul: 45-68
Some Oral Tradition: 32-70
Crucifixion of Jesus: 32

Traditional:(3)

Clement of Rome: 96
Revelation (John): 96
Epistles of John: 90-94
Gospel of John: 85-90
Acts of Apostles: 66-68
Matthew & Luke: 64-66
Gospel of Mark: 64-65

Jesus Seminar:(4)

Gospel of John: 85-90
Acts of Apostles: 80-100
Gospel of Luke: 80-100
Gospel of Matthew: 80-90
Gospel of Mark: 70-80
Gospel of Thomas: 70-100

In comparing the two chronologies, it appears there simply is not enough time for the simple Jesus of history to evolve into the Christ of faith. Myths and legends need time to develop. There is none available in the first century to accommodate the Jesus Seminar's theory.

Christological

On the basis of the Gospel of Thomas and Quelle, the Jesus Fellows believe the historical Jesus was simply a sage, a spinner of one- liners, a teller of parables, an effective preacher. This is what He was historically according to these scholars. The "high Christology" (supernatural phenomena, the messianic claims, the miracles, the substitutionary atonement,

the resurrection) all came as a result of a persecuted church community which needed a more powerful God for encouragement and worship. His suffering, ardent followers are responsible for these embellishments which created the "Christ of Faith." The real Jesus was a winsome, bright, articulate peasant, sort of like Will Rogers.

Various other portraits of Jesus have proliferated among the Jesus Fellows, suggesting that he was a religious genius, a social revolutionary, an eschatological prophet. He was all of these things, we would say, but offer that He was something more.

The Jesus Seminar assumes a "low christology" (Jesus as a peasant sage) preceded the "high christology" created later by the church. Is there anything that would suggest otherwise?

The Epistles of Paul

The Apostle Paul conducted his church-planting ministry between approximately 40 to the time of his death, A.D. 68. It was also during this time that he wrote all of his epistles. While some New Testament scholars question the authenticity of Paul's authorship of a number of these epistles, virtually all, even the most liberal, will accept Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians as genuinely Pauline.

What kind of "Christology" do we find in these epistles? A high christology. The Jesus Seminar is asking us to believe that at the very same time the Gospel of Thomas and the Q source were alleged to have been written portraying Jesus as a wise, peasant sage, Paul was planting churches across the Mediterranean world and ascribing to Jesus the same high christology found later in the four gospels!

The Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15 clearly indicates that Paul was aware of and connected to Jerusalem and its church leadership (Peter and James). After the Council Paul and Barnabas were given the express task of taking and

distributing to the churches a written document of the Council's instructions about how Gentiles were to be incorporated into the church.

The Jesus Seminar simply chooses to ignore this mass of clear, Pauline evidence almost universally accepted by New Testament scholars. The notion that a high christology (the Gospels and the epistles) evolved from a low christology (the Gospel of Thomas, Quelle) is unsupportable.

Jesus the Sage

If we accept the Jesus Seminar notion that the historical Jesus was a simple peasant later revered and deified, with what are we left? Jesus is so stripped down that He becomes the "Christian dummy" of the first century church! The community is more brilliant than the leader! Even Renan, the French skeptic said, "It would take a Jesus to forge a Jesus." Further, if Jesus was such a "regular guy," why was He crucified? Crucifixion by the Romans was used only for deviants, malcontents, and political revolutionaries (like Barabbas). What did this simple peasant do to create such a stir that He would suffer such a death?

The Jesus Seminar portrayal of Jesus simply cannot explain the explosion of Christianity in the first and second centuries. With their view of Christ, they cannot create a cause monumental enough to explain the documented, historical effects that even they must accept.

Notes

1. Robert W. Funk, "The Gospel of Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels," *The Fourth R* (November/December, 1993), p. 8.
2. Smithsonian.
3. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody, 1967), Matthew, 470ff (Mt), 493 (Mk), 511 (Lk), 543 (Jn), 567 (Acts).
4. Robert J. Miller, Editor. *The Complete Gospels* (Harper

San Francisco, a division of Harper Collins Publishers, 1994). pp. 10 (Mk), 56 (Mt), 198 (Jn). Note: a date for Luke-Acts is not provided, but on the basis of the book's date for Mark, we would assume 80 to 100 A.D.

5. James R. Edwards, "Who Do Scholars Say That I Am?" *Christianity Today*: March 4, 1996, p. 17.

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Is It Just Entertainment?

The Christian enters the world of entertainment equipped with the knowledge of the clear biblical statements of God's will. He then applies that knowledge to the decisions he makes in regard to entertainment.

Picture a grocery store in your mind. There are many aisles filled with a variety of products. Fresh fruit, vegetables, canned foods, bread, cereal, meat, dairy products, frozen foods, soap, and numerous other items can be found. When we shop in such a store we need to be aware of certain things. These may include the price, size, weight, variety, brand, quality, and freshness. After analyzing all of this, we are left with the most important part of the shopping trip—the decision! We must decide which of the products we will buy.

Our world is a lot like a grocery store. There are a variety of ideas (worldviews) to be considered. Those ideas can be seen and heard through television, music, movies, magazines, books, billboards, and bumper stickers, and other sources. In a sense, we are shopping in the grocery store of ideas. As Christians, we need to be aware of the products. We need to consider what is being sold. Then we need to decide if we should make a purchase.

Most of us want to be physically healthy. Unfortunately, sometimes we don't eat as if that were true. The same is true of our minds. We want to be mentally healthy. But too often we don't "eat" as if that were true! Our minds are often filled with things that are unhealthy. This can be especially true of the entertainment we choose.

How can we become more aware of the products and make the right purchases when we "go shopping" in the world of entertainment? It is our intent to help answer this question.

A Christian is usually encouraged to think of God's Word, the Bible, as the guide for life. Of course the challenge of such a position is found in practice, not theory. Living by the tenets of Scripture is not always an easy thing. And we can be tempted to think that God's ideas are restrictive, negative, and life-rejecting. The "don'ts" of biblical teachings can appear to overshadow a more positive, life-affirming perspective.

Does God Intend for Us to Enjoy Life?

Think of a series of three questions. First, if you make the Bible your standard for living, do you think that means life will be dull? Some Christians tend to live as if the answer is "yes." This certainly applies to entertainment. It appears that we are to be so separate from the world that we can't enjoy any part of it. Second, if you wrote a song, a poem, a novel, or if you painted a picture, sculpted a statue, etc., do you think you would know best how it should be sung, read, or understood? Of course the answer is "yes." It came from your mind and imagination. You "brought it to life." Third, if God created all things and knows everything about you, do you believe He knows how to bring true joy into your life? Again, the answer is obviously "yes." You came from His mind and imagination. He "brought you to life." He knows best how you should be sung, read, and understood. And He relays that information through His word, the Bible. He wants you to enjoy

life, but with His guidelines in mind.

What is God's Will for Entertainment?

Just what are those guidelines? What is God's will for us concerning entertainment?

Before this question is answered, it is important to understand that the Bible clearly teaches God's will for much of life. Too often we tend to think of pursuing God's will for reasons that include such things as a particular occupation or marriage partner, and other such important decisions that are not stated clearly in Scripture. But the Bible frequently teaches the will of God for daily living in obvious ways. The following passages demonstrate this:

- A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is arrogant and careless (Prov. 14:16).
- Flee immorality (1 Cor. 6:18a).
- Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things (Phil. 4:8).

Obviously various types of contemporary entertainment are not mentioned in these verses. The Bible "does not endeavor to specify rules for the whole of life." (1) Thus we are challenged to make decisions about entertainment based upon the application of biblical principles. The Christian must know the "principles for conduct: which apply here, which do not, and why. Then he must decide and act. Thus, by this terrifying and responsible process, he matures ethically. There is no other way." (2) In fact, this process signifies our continual spiritual growth, or sanctification. As Hebrews 5:14 states: "Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." Most of us probably don't think of "training our senses," but such a

concept surely should be a part of our thinking continually. And the application of such training to entertainment should be clear.

Years ago I had an opportunity to demonstrate the use of “trained senses” when I attended a heavy metal rock concert at the invitation of a sixteen-year-old friend. He was a new Christian then, and we were spending a lot of time together. He had entered his new life after years of attachment to a certain popular rock musician who was the main act of the concert.

During the evening the musicians heavily emphasized the themes of sex, drugs, and violence, and the crowd of adolescents and pre-adolescents was encouraged to respond, and did. After awhile I asked my friend how Jesus would respond to what we heard and saw. His response indicated that for the first time he had begun to think about this form of entertainment—which had been very important to him—with Christian principles in mind.

Perhaps the most succinct statement of Christian ethical principles is found in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” Can you think of anything more than “whatever” or “all”? These all-encompassing words are to be applied to all of life, including our entertainment choices. My young friend made this discovery that night.

What Types of Entertainment are Evil?

What types of entertainment are evil? A simple answer to this is, “None!” For example, the rhythm of rock music is not evil; television is not evil; movies are not evil; video games are not evil; novels are not evil, etc.

Of course it is possible for some to claim, for instance, that pre-marital sex is legitimate entertainment. But the clear

admonition of Scripture forbids such activity. And the underlying point is that sex is not intrinsically evil. The one who is engaged in such activity is taking what is good and misusing it for evil. So evil does not reside in sex, rock music, television, etc. Types of entertainment are conduits for good or evil. People are evil. People who provide entertainment and people who use it can abuse it. A basic premise of theology is that man has a sin nature. We are prone to abuse all things. As Genesis 8:21 states, The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth.

What About Content?

So the Christian is free to make entertainment a part of his life with an understanding that evil resides in people, not forms. But caution and discernment must be applied. We must be alert to the importance of our minds and what they can absorb through entertainment.

Perhaps we need to stop doing some of the things we normally do while listening to music, watching television, etc., so we can concentrate on the ideas that are entering our minds. We might be amazed at the ideas we'll notice if we take the time to concentrate. For example, an old TV commercial says, "Turn it loose! Don't hold back"! We may want to ask what "it" refers to, and we may want to know what is to be "held back." Such a commercial is a thinly-veiled espousal of hedonism, an ancient philosophy that says pleasure is the ultimate good. Ideas are powerful, and they have consequences, even when they come from something as seemingly innocuous as a TV commercial.

Consider the following illustration. Think of your mind as a sponge. A sponge absorbs moisture not unlike the way your mind absorbs ideas. (The difference is you are making choices and the sponge is not.) In order to remove the moisture, you must squeeze the sponge. If someone were to do the same with your "sponge brain," what would come out? Would you be embarrassed if the Lord were to be present? Biblical teaching says He is

always present. If we honor Him, we'll enjoy life in the process.

If we are using our minds and thinking Christianly about entertainment we will be more alert concerning content. All entertainment is making a statement. A worldview, or philosophy of life, is being espoused through what we read, hear, or watch. Movies, for example, can range from the introspective existential comedies of Woody Allen to the euphoric pantheistic conjectures of Shirley MacLaine. We are challenged to respond to such content with our Christian worldview intact.

Are We in a Battle?

We must take care of our minds. A battle is taking place in the marketplace of ideas. Entertainment can be seen as one of the battlefields where ideas are vying for recognition and influence. As 2 Corinthians 10:5 states, "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." And Colossians 2:8 warns us: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ."

What About the Conscience?

The place of the conscience should also be considered. We must be aware of the possibility of defiling our conscience (1 Cor. 8:7). As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:12, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable." The believer who cannot visit the world without making it his home has no right to visit it at his weak points.⁽³⁾ It is the responsibility of each of us to be sensitive to what the conscience is telling us when we encounter those weak points and respond in a way that honors God.

Thus I suggest three steps in cultivating sensitivity to our consciences. First, we should consider what our conscience is relating prior to the entertainment. Is there something about what we've heard or seen that brings discomfort? If so, it may be a signal to stay away from it. Second, consider the conscience during the entertainment. If we're already watching and listening, are we mentally and spiritually comfortable? If not, we may need to get away from it. Unfortunately, too often the tendency is to linger too long and in the process we find that what may have disturbed us previously is now taken for granted. Third, consider the conscience after the entertainment. Now that it's over, what are we thinking and feeling? We should be alert to what the Lord is showing us about what we have just made a part of our lives.

What Do Others Say?

In addition to an awareness of the conscience, we may benefit from what others have to say. Perhaps the advertising will provide information that will prove to be of help before we decide to participate. Frequently ads will tell us things about the content and the intent of the producers. Also, we may find it beneficial to be alert to what friends may say. The things we hear from them may indicate warning signs, especially if they are Christian friends who are attempting to apply biblical principles to their lives. In addition, some objective critics can offer insightful comments. There are ministries around the country, for example, dedicated to analyzing the latest movies. And there are others that attempt to cover a broader spectrum of entertainment from a Christian perspective. You may benefit from subscribing to their publications.

Of course this encouragement to consider what others say cannot exempt us from personal responsibility. To rely completely on others is an unhealthy practice that can lead to mental and spiritual stagnation. Each of us must be mentally

and spiritually alert to the content of entertainment.

Isn't It "Just Entertainment"?

Maybe you've heard someone say, "It's just entertainment"! Is this true?

The principles we have affirmed can lead to several common objections. Our answers to these objections can help us gain additional insight into how we think about contemporary entertainment.

First, some may say that what has been shown in a movie or some other entertainment is "just reality." But is reality a legitimate guideline for living? Do we derive an "ought" from an "is"? Saying that reality has been portrayed says nothing about the way things ought to be from God's perspective. Reality needs analysis and it often needs correction.

Second, a common statement is, "I'm just killing time." The person who says this may be doing exactly that, but what else is being killed in the process? The Christian redeems time; he doesn't kill it. As Ephesians 5:15-16 states, "Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil."

Third, "It won't affect me" is a common objection. Tragically, these can be the proverbial "famous last words" for some. Ted Bundy, a serial killer who was executed for his crimes, began to look at pornography when he was very young. If you had warned him of the potential consequences of his actions in those early years, he probably would have said it wouldn't affect him. We can't predict the outcome of our actions with absolute clarity. In addition, we may not recognize the consequences when they appear because we have been blinded subtly over a period of time.

Fourth, others may say, "There's nothing else to do." This is a sad commentary on contemporary life. If that is true, then

God has done a poor job of supplying us with imagination. Spending hours watching TV each day, for instance, says a great deal about our priorities and use of our God-given abilities and spiritual gifts.

Fifth, young people in particular tend to say, "Everybody's doing it." It is highly doubtful that is true. More importantly, though, we must understand that God's principles don't rely on democracy. We may be called to stand alone, as difficult as that may be. Sixth, some may say, "No one will know." Humanly, this is absurd. The person who says this knows. He's somebody, and he has to live with himself. And if he is a Christian his worldview informs him that God knows. Is he trying to please God or himself?

Seventh, "It's just entertainment" can be the response. No, it's not just entertainment. We can't afford to approach contemporary entertainment with the word just. There is too much at stake if we care about our minds, our witness, and our future.

So what should we do? Should we become separatists? No, the answer to the challenge of entertainment is not to seclude ourselves in "holy huddles" of legalism and cultural isolation. Should we become consumers? No, not without discernment. As we said in the beginning of this series, when it comes to entertainment, we should be as selective in that "grocery store of ideas" as we are in the food market. Should we become salt and light? Yes! We are to analyze entertainment with a Christian worldview, and we are to "infect" the world of entertainment with that same vision.

Notes

1. Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1957), 419.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 428.

Additional Reading

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