The Emerging Generation

Kerby Anderson examines the characteristics of the millennial generation and how pastors, Christian leaders, and the church can reach out to this emerging generation.

Millennial Generation and Faith

Awhile back *USA Today* had a front page article on the millennial generation and faith.{1} It demonstrates that even mainstream newspapers are noticing a disturbing trend that many of us in the Christian world have been talking about for some time.

The article started out by saying, "Most young adults today don't pray, don't worship and don't read the Bible." Those are conclusions that come not only from *USA Today* but from research done by the Barna Research Group, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, and LifeWay Christian Resources. Although the numbers differ slightly between groups, they all come to essentially the same conclusion. This emerging generation is less religious and less committed to the Christian faith than any generation preceding it.

The LifeWay study concluded that two-thirds (65%) rarely or never pray with others. Two thirds (65%) rarely or never attend worship services. And two-thirds (67%) don't read the Bible or other sacred texts. As you might imagine, their theology is not orthodox. For example, when asked if Jesus is the only path to heaven, half say yes and half say no. Not surprisingly, only 17% say they read the Bible daily.

How important is faith or spirituality to the millennial generation? Apparently, it isn't very important. When asked what was "really important in life," two thirds (68%) did not mention faith, religion, or spirituality. And that term "spirituality" is an important one to remember. Almost three-

fourths (72%) agree that they're more spiritual than religious. This reflects their world. Lots of books, movies, and Web sites now promote spirituality that is anything but Christian.

Among the two thirds (65%) who call themselves Christians, "many are either mushy Christians or Christians in name only." That is the conclusion of Thom Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources. "Most are just indifferent. The more precisely you try to measure their Christianity, the fewer you find committed to the faith."

This also shows up in behavior and personal morality. This generation is twice as likely as the baby boom generation to have had multiple sex partners by age eighteen.{2} Substance abuse and cheating are common. There is a tendency toward "short-horizon thinking" with a "live today, for tomorrow we die" ethic. After all, they live in a pop culture with no absolutes that is awash in moral relativism.

Thom Rainer believes the church needs to take responsibility. He says, "We have dumbed down what it means to be part of the church so much that it means almost nothing, even to people who already say they are part of the church."

It is time for Christian leaders and pastors to get serious about what is happening to this generation. They need to take note and develop creative ways to reach out to a generation that has not connected with church and basic Christian doctrine.

Psychological Characteristics

A special report on the millennial generation describes several aspects of what many are calling the emerging generation in addition to faith.{3}

One characteristic is narcissism. Jean Twenge and Keith

Campbell talk about the “narcissism epidemic” in their book to describe the soaring rates of self-obsession, attention-seeking, and an entitlement mindset among the youth.{4} They report that narcissistic personality traits have risen as fast as obesity from the 1980s to the present.

The emerging generation is also uninhibited. They are much more likely than previous generations to be open about the intimate details of their lives. They are casual about personal matters and lack understanding of appropriate boundaries and propriety. They also show disrespect for privacy. They will often post details online in an exhibitionist manner not found in previous generations. We will talk about this later when discussing their connectedness through social networks like Facebook and MySpace.

The emerging generation is overly self-confident. Millennials are rarely told no. They have also felt special and have inflated expectations of their own abilities and potential. Part of that optimism comes from the fact that they have rarely been allowed to fail. They have played in organized sports where everyone gets a trophy. They go to school where grade inflation is rampant.

The emerging generation is slow to make decisions. This generation is apt to explore all of the possibilities before making a commitment. This is understandable. If there is anything we have learned over the years in the social sciences, it is this: as choice increases, commitment decreases. The more choices I have, the less committed I will probably be to any one of those choices. In fact, I might even become more confused with those choices.

Some have argued that this difficulty in making decisions does two things. First, it causes members of this generation to doubt their own judgments. They live in the world of uncertainty. Second, it forces them to rely on authority figures to tell them what to do.{5}

These characteristics of the emerging generation pose a challenge to the church but one that can be met by those who disciple and mentor them. Biblical teaching and interaction with members of this generation about their self-image and self-esteem is a key component. We should also be willing to address the complexity of the world with thoughtful biblical answers.

Social Characteristics

The emerging generation would like to change the world. Six out of ten (60%) say they feel personally responsible for making a difference in the world.{6} This is encouraging since there are other surveys that also show this generation to be isolated and self-focused. The church and Christian leaders may be able to focus on this desire to change the world in calling for them to become leaders and make a difference in their communities.

This generation is also driven by pragmatism. They want what works. The positive aspect of this is that they are focused on results and getting something done. But the negative part of this is that pragmatism easily can lead to an "end justifies the means" mentality that can rationalize immoral and unethical actions.

The emerging generation also lives in a world of complexity. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons talk about this in their book, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity*.{7} They say those in this generation "relish mystery, uncertainty, ambiguity. They are not bothered by contradictions." When faced with a paradox or questions, they don't feel the need to rush to find answers.

Bill Perry, founder of the Recon generational college ministry, explains: "The established generation is more interested in the bottom line (truth, biblical worldview,

right answers, etc.) and in getting there as quickly as possible. Not so with the emerging generation. For them, it's as much the journey as the destination."

A fourth characteristic of this generation is most disturbing. They have a negative view of the church. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons describe this in some detail in their book *unChristian*. This generation sees themselves as "outsiders." They view the church as anti-homosexual, judgmental, political, and hypocritical. They see born-again Christians in a negative light.

We should not be surprised. Imagine if you grew up in a world where your perceptions of Christianity were informed by The Simpsons, Comedy Central, and Saturday Night Live. Imagine if whenever you went to the movies, any character who was a Christian was always portrayed in a negative light. New stories talk about scandals in government, scandals in business, and scandals in the church. It would be very hard to not be cynical about major institutions in society, including the church.

This is certainly a call for us to live a righteous and authentic life. If we do so, I believe we can have a positive impact on this emerging generation.

Social Connections

The emerging generation is extremely well connected. This is easily illustrated by their use of networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. They also value teamwork, even to the point of showing groupthink. They have lots of connections, but one wonders how many of these connections would actually be what most of us would consider to be "friends." Yes, they are called friends on these networking sites, but they may actually be fairly superficial.

This leads to another characteristic of this generation. Most

in this generation are lonely. Sean McDowell, in his book *Apologetics for a New Generation*, calls them the "loneliest generation" because their relationships are mostly on the surface and don't meet the deepest need of their heart.{8} Shane Hipps has a different term. He calls them "digital natives." Those in the millennial generation are so accustomed to mediated interaction that they find face-to-face interaction increasingly intolerable and undesirable. This is especially true when discussing a conflict.{9}

The emerging generation multitasks. They are the consummate multitaskers. Nearly one-third of 8- to 18-year olds say they multitask "most of the time" by doing homework, watching TV, sending text messages, surfing the Web, or listening to music. And they do all of this simultaneously.

First, this is dangerous. Researchers have found that talking or texting is much more dangerous than many of us might even imagine. The Center for Auto Safety has released hundreds of pages of research documenting the dangerous impact of cell phone use on America's highways.{10} Talking or texting while driving is more dangerous than driving drunk.

Second, it is also relationally damaging. This generation thinks nothing of texting others while in the presence of other people. As we have just mentioned, they would rather send a text or e-mail than talk to a person face-to-face.

The emerging generation is overwhelmingly stressed out. One fourth of millennials feel unfulfilled in life, and nearly half say they are stressed out. This is twice the level of baby boomers. What is even more disturbing is that most parents are unaware of how stressed out their children are and how that is negatively impacting them. One very tragic result of this stress is the suicide rate. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds.

Biblical Perspective

We noted that this is a generation that is narcissistic (2 Timothy 3:1-2) and overly self-confident. This is where the Bible and the church can provide perspective to a generation with great expectations and unwarranted confidence. Messages and Sunday school lessons along with discipleship programs aimed at issues like ego (Philippians 2:1-10), pride (Proverbs 16:18-19), and envy (Galatians 5:21) would be important to address some of these characteristics of the emerging generation.

This is a generation that finds it difficult to make decisions. Here is an opportunity to come alongside members of the emerging generation and provide them with biblical tools (2 Timothy 2:15) for wise and moral decision-making. Messages (sermons, lessons) on the importance of commitment and how following biblical principles concerning life decisions can develop confidence and responsibility would also be important.

Many in the emerging generation want to change the world. This is an opportunity for pastors, teachers, and mentors to challenge this generation to make an impact for Jesus Christ in our world. We should challenge them with the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20).

The emerging generation has a negative view of the church. When the institutional church has been wrong, we should be willingly to admit it. But we should also be alert to the fact that sometimes the criticisms we hear are unjustified. Skeptics might know someone who professes to be a Christian who they believe is a hypocrite. The person may not really be a Bible-believing Christian. Or he may not be representative of others in the same church.

We should also be willing to challenge the stereotype skeptics have of Christianity. If all they know of Christianity is what they see on television or read in the newspapers, they may not

have an accurate view of Christianity.

This generation is also lonely and stressed out. They need to know how to develop deep, lasting relationships (Proverbs 18:24). They live in a world where relationships are disposable. It is a world where a "friend" on Facebook can "delete" them by hitting a key on their computer keyboard. They also need to learn how to develop friendships without becoming codependent.

They also need to know that a relationship with Christ provides a peace "which surpasses all comprehension" (Philippians 4:7). They may also need instruction on practical life issues and learn to develop healthy habits that develop their physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

Pastors, church leaders, and individual Christians have an opportunity to make a positive impact on this emerging generation. Hopefully this has given you a better understanding of this generation and provided practical ideas for ministry.

Notes

1. Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Young adults less devoted to faith," *USA Today*, 27 April 2010, 1A.
2. www.kff.org/youthhivstds/upload/U-S-Teen-Sexual-Activity-Fact-Sheet.pdf.
3. Jeff Myers and Paige Gutacker, A Special Report: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Millennial Generation, www.passingthebaton.org.
4. Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (NY: Free Press, 2009).
5. Ron Alsop, *The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation is Shaking Up the Workplace* (San Franciso, CA: Josey-Bass, 2008), pp. 12, 115.

6. Survey by Cone Inc., a communications agency, and Amp Insights, a marketing agency, 2006.
7. David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons talk about this in their book, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).
8. Sean McDowell, *Apologetics for a New Generation* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishing, 2009).
9. Shane Hipps, Lecture entitled "The Spirituality of the Cell Phone," Q conference, Austin, TX, 28 April 2009.
10. Center for Auto Safety, www.autosafety.org.

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New Media and Society

Kerby Anderson provides an overview of the ups and downs of the new media such as Facebook and Twitter, and their impact on us.

How is the new media affecting the way we think and the way we interact with others in society? I want to look at the impact the Internet, social networks, and portable media devices are having on our world.

Rachel Marsden doesn't think it is positive. Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* she says:

> Spare me the stories of your "genius" tech-savvy child who can name every country on Google Earth, or how, because of your iPhone, BlackBerry and three cell phones, you juggle 20 tasks at once and never miss any business—even at 4 a.m., because you sleep with your portable devices. Does anyone care that technology is destroying social graces and turning people into rude jerks?{1}

She isn't the first to notice that the new technology and new mobile devices are changing the way we interact with others. And, as we will discuss later, they apparently are also changing the way we think, affecting everything from creativity to concentration.

Rachel Marsden wonders, "When did it become acceptable for technological interaction to supersede in-person communication?" I have news for her. It happened long before cell phones were invented. When I was a graduate student at Yale University, I noticed something odd about my academic advisor. Whenever the phone would ring, he felt he had to answer it. He could be advising me or we could be deep in the midst of a discussion of a research project. But if the phone rang, he stopped the conversation and answered the phone, staying on the phone until that conversation was over. I began to think that the only way I could ever have a sustained conversation with him would be to call him on the phone.

Of course, mobile devices make it even easier to ignore face-to-face interaction. Now the world revolves around the person who has instant access to others using these devices. Rebecca Hagelin says that narcissism has crept into our world. In 2006, *Time* magazine voted "You" as the "Person of the Year." So much of media and advertising today is about indulging your fantasies.

Rebecca Hagelin is concerned about the impact this is having on our children. "Young people spend hours every day updating their Facebook pages, post and e-mail countless pictures of themselves, and plug their ears with music to create a self-indulgent existence shut-off from everyone around them."{2}

While some of the impact is positive, much more should concern us and cause us to change our behavior.

The Internet and the Way You Think

Can the Internet change how you think? That was a question columnist Suzanne Fields asked recently.{3} If you go to Edge.org, you will notice that the question they pose for this year is slightly different. It is, "How is the Internet changing the way you think?" They pose this provocative question because of the impact of computer chips, digitized information, and virtual reality on the way we think and how we receive information in this "collective high-tech electronic ecosystem for the delivery of information."

I have also been wondering about the impact of the Internet and the new media on our thinking. Unlike Suzanne Fields, I wasn't wondering *if* the Internet was changing our thinking but *how* it is already changing the way we think. There were two reasons why I have been thinking about this.

First, look at the younger generation being raised on the Internet. If you haven't noticed, they think and communicate differently from previous generations. I have done radio programs and read articles about the millennial generation. They do think differently, and a large part of that is due to the Internet.

A second reason for my interest in this topic is an *Atlantic* article by Nicholas Carr entitled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" He says, "Over the past few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory."{4}

It's not that he believes his mind is going, but he notices that he isn't thinking the way he used to think and he isn't concentrating like he used to concentrate. "Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose.

That’s rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages.”

He believes this comes from using the Internet and searching the web with Google. And he gives not only his story, but he also gives many anecdotes and as well as some research to back up his perspective.

For example, a developmental psychologist at Tufts University explains, “We are not only what we read. We are how we read.” The style of reading on the Internet puts “efficiency” and “immediacy” above other factors. Put simply, it has changed the way we read and acquire information.

Now you might say that would only be true for the younger generation. Older people are set in their ways. The Internet could not possibly change the way the brains of older people download information. Not true. The 100 billion neurons inside our skulls can break connections and form others. A neuroscientist at George Mason University says, “The brain has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it functions.”{5}

The Internet does appear to be altering the way we read and think, but more research is needed to confirm if this true. If so, parents and educators need to take note of what is happening in our cyberworld.

BlackBerries, Twitter, and Concentration

Have portable media devices altered our ability to concentrate? That certainly seems to be the case. Nearly all of us have noticed that people with a BlackBerry sometimes seem distracted. And after they answer an e-mail, they seem to spend a few minutes trying to recollect their thoughts before they had the interruption.

An article in *Newsweek* magazine documents what many of us have

always suspected: there are two major drawbacks to these devices.{6} The first is distraction overload. A study at the University of Illinois found that if an interruption takes place at a natural breakpoint, then the mental disruption is less. If it came at a less opportune time, the user experienced the "where was I?" brain lock.

A second problem is what is called "continuous partial attention." People who use mobile devices (like a BlackBerry or an iPhone) often use their devices while they should be paying attention to something else. Psychologists tell us that we really aren't multitasking, but rather engage in rapid-fire switching of attention among tasks. It is inevitable they are going to miss key information if part of their focus is on their BlackBerry.

But another hidden drawback associated is less creativity. Turning on a mobile device or a cell phone when you are "doing nothing" replaces what we used to do in the days before these devices were invented. Back then, we called it "daydreaming." That is when the brain often connects unrelated facts and thoughts. You have probably had some of your most creative ideas while shaving, putting on makeup, or driving. That is when your brain can be creative. Checking e-mail reduces daydreaming.

We also can see how new technology affects the way we process information and react to it emotionally. The headline of one article asked this question: Can Twitter make you amoral?{7} Research was done at the Brain and Creativity Institute of the University of Southern California to see the impact of social networks like Twitter.

What the researchers found was that human beings can sort information very quickly. And they can respond in fractions of seconds to signs of physical pain in others. But other emotions (like admiration and compassion) take much longer to register. In fact, they found that lasting compassion in a

relationship to psychological suffering requires a level of persistent, emotional attention.

So how does that relate to a technology like Twitter? The researchers found that there was a significant emotional cost of heavy reliance on a rapid stream of news snippets obtained through television, online feeds, or social networks such as Twitter. One researcher put it this way: “If things are happening too fast, you may not even fully experience emotions about other people’s psychological states and that would have implications for your morality.”

The point of these studies is that media does have an impact. A wise and discerning Christian will consider the impact and limit its negative effects.

Social Networks

Social networks such as Facebook and MySpace create an interconnected web of friends and family. People who study these networks are beginning to understand the impact they are having on us.

At a social networking site, you find someone and ask to be his or her friend. Once you are accepted, you become a member of their network, and they become a member of your network. This opens to door to finding and making additional friends. The ability to extend your circle of friends is one of the many benefits of social networking.

One concern about social networking is that it, like most of the new media, increases distraction and fragmentation of thought. The quotes, stories, jokes, and video clips come at an increased rate. A concentrated conversation with one person is difficult. Look over the shoulder of someone in a social networking site who has lots of friends. Content quickly scrolls downward, and it feels like you are at a party where lots of people are all talking at once.

Also these networks tend to shorten our time of concentration. Steven Kotler makes this case in his *Psychology Today* blog, "How Twitter Makes You Stupid."{8} He once asked the author of the best-selling book why he called it the "8 Minute Meditation." The author told him that eight minutes was the length of time of an average segment of television. He reasoned that "most of us already know exactly how to pay attention for eight minutes."

Steven Kotler argues that Twitter is reducing the time of concentration to a few dozen words. He thinks that constantly using Twitter will tune "the brain to reading and comprehending information 140 characters at a time." He predicts "that if you take a Twitter-addicted teen and give them a reading comprehension test, their comprehension levels will plunge once they pass the 140 [character] mark." I am sure someone is already testing that hypothesis. Soon we should know the results.

Social networks do help us keep track of people who do not live near us, and that's a plus. But we are kidding ourselves if we believe that social networks are the same thing as true community. Shane Hipps, writing in *Flickering Pixels*, says this about virtual communities: "It's virtual—but it ain't community."

Social networks also have a great deal of power to influence us. Sociologists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler document this in their new book, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives.* They believe that happiness is contagious and so is obesity and quitting smoking. We are not only influenced by our friends, but are even influenced by our friend's friends. They say the world is governed by what they call "three degrees of separation."

Addiction is another concern. Years ago, counselors discovered Internet addiction. Now they are starting to talk about Facebook addiction. Lots of youth and adults spend too much

time in front of a computer. Social networks are wonderful tools, but wisdom and discernment are necessary in order to use them correctly.

Media Addiction

The Barna Group does lots of surveys, and that has led George Barna to conclude that "media exposure has become America's most widespread and serious addiction."{9} I have always been hesitant to label our high levels of media exposure an addiction. We seem to have an addiction label for every behavior. But George Barna makes a convincing case.

Addiction changes our brains by altering the chemical balance and flow within the brain and by even altering the structure of the brain. According to the American Psychiatry Association, we can legitimately call something an addiction when certain symptoms manifest themselves.

For example addictions change our brain structure, altering emotions, motivations, and memory capacity. Addictions cause withdrawal symptoms when exposure to the addictive item is eliminated. Addictions cause the people to abandon or reduce their involvement in normal and healthy activities.

Certainly media can be positive in terms of education and relaxation. But most media content, Barna argues, "winds up serving the lowest common denominator because that's where the largest audience" is to be found.

There is a generational trend. The builder generation did not grow up with media and never became accustomed to it. The boomer generation embraced media, and the following generations expanded it use in ways unthinkable a few decades ago.

If we were truly serious about controlling the media input in our lives and our children's lives, we would see examples of

parents putting boundaries on media exposure. We see nothing of the sort. Expenditures on personal media, in-home media, and mobile media continue to increase.

It is not that parents don't understand the dangers. Barna reports that three-quarters of parents say that exposure of their children to inappropriate media content are one of their top concerns. But they continue to buy their kids the media tools and continue to allow them to be exposed to inappropriate content.

By the time a young person reaches age 21, he or she will have been exposed to more than 250,000 acts of violence through TV, movies, and video games. He or she will have listened to thousands of hours of music with questionable lyrical content. Most parents know that much of what their children see or hear isn't wholesome

This may be one of the biggest challenges for society in general and even the church in particular. Most parents recognize the danger of the media storm in which they and their children live. But that are unwilling to take the necessary steps to set boundaries or end their media addiction.

Some Concluding Biblical Principles

In a previous article on Media and Discernment, I talked about the need for Christians to evaluate the impact of media in their lives. We need to develop discernment and pass those biblical principles to our children and grandchildren.

The new media represents an even greater threat and can easily conform us to the world (Rom. 12:2). Media is a powerful tool to conform us to a secular worldview and thus take us captive (Col. 2:8) to the false philosophies of the world.

Christians should strive to apply the following two passages to their lives as they seek discernment concerning the media.

The first is Philippians 4:8. “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

The second is Colossians 3:2–5. “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”

Notes

1. Rachel Marsden, “Technology and the New Me Generation,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 December 2009.
2. Rebecca Hagelin, “Narcissism and Your Family,” 15 February 2010, www.townhall.com/hagelin.
3. Suzanne Fields, “Can the Internet Change How You Think?” 15 January 2010, www.townhall.com/fields.
4. Nicholas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” *Atlantic*, July/August 2008.
5. Ibid.
6. Sharon Begley, “Will the BlackBerry Sink the Presidency?” *Newsweek*, 16 February 2009.
7. “Can Twitter Make You Amoral? Rapid-fire Media May Confuse Your Moral Compass,” 14 April 2010, www.in.com.
8. Steven Kotler, “How Twitter Makes You Stupid,” Psychology Today, 15 May, 2009, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-playing-field/200905/how-twitter-makes-you-stupid.
9. George Barna, “Media Addiction,” 25 January 2010, www.barna.org.

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