

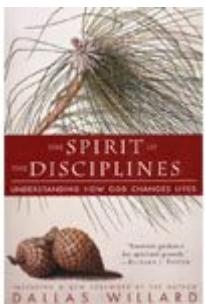
# Spiritual Disciplines and the Modern World

*The spiritual disciplines help us cooperate with God in our transformation into the likeness of Christ. Don Closson discusses disciplines of abstinence and of engagement.*



*This article is also available in [Spanish](#).*

## Spirituality and the Body



As a seminary student I was given the assignment to read a book on Christian spirituality called the *Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard.<sup>{1}</sup> I obediently read the book and either wrote a paper on it or took a test that covered the material (I can't recall which), but the book didn't have a major impact on my life at that time. Recently, over a decade later, I have gone back to the book and found it to be a jewel that I should have spent more time with. In the book, Willard speaks to one of the most important issues facing individual Christians and churches in our time: "How does one live the Spirit-filled life promised in the New Testament?" How does the believer experience the promise that Jesus made in Matthew 11:29-30: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"?



Willard argues that modernity has given us a culture that offers a flood of self-fulfillment programs in the form of political, scientific, and even psychological revolutions. All promise to promote personal peace and affluence, and yet we suffer from an “epidemic of depression, suicide, personal emptiness, and escapism through drugs and alcohol, cultic obsession, consumerism, and sex and violence . . . .”<sup>{2}</sup> Most Christians would agree that the Christian faith offers a model for human transformation that far exceeds the promises of modern scientific programs, but when it comes to delineating the methods of such a transformation there is often confusion or silence.

Christians frequently seek spiritual maturity in all the wrong places. Some submit themselves to abusive churches that equate busyness and unquestioning subservience with Christ-likeness. Others look for spirituality through syncretism, borrowing the spiritualism of Eastern religions or Gnosticism and covering it with a Christian veneer.

According to Willard, Christians often hope to find Christ’s power for living in ways that seem appropriate but miss the mark; for example, through a “sense of forgiveness and love for God” or through the acquisition of propositional truth. Some “seek it through special experiences or the infusion of the Spirit,” or by way of “the presence of Christ in the inner life.” Others argue that it is only through the “power of ritual and liturgy or the preaching of the Word,” or “through the communion of the saints.” All of these have value in the Christian life but do not “reliably produce large numbers of people who really are like Christ.”<sup>{3}</sup>

We evangelicals have a natural tendency to avoid anything that hints of meritorious works, works that might somehow justify us before a holy God. As a result, we reduce faith to an entirely mental affair, cutting off the body from the process of living the Christian life.

In this article we will consider a New Testament theology of human transformation in order to better understand what it means to become a living sacrifice to God.

## A Model for Transformation

Faith in Jesus Christ brings instant forgiveness along with the promise of eventual glorification and spending eternity with God. However, in between the believer experiences something called sanctification, the process of being set apart for good works. Something that is sanctified is holy, so it makes sense that the process of sanctification is to make us more like Christ.

Even though the Bible talks much of spiritual power and becoming like Christ, many believers find this process of sanctification to be a mystery. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a slow removal from our language of acceptable ways to talk about the spiritual realm. Being rooted in this age of science and materialism, the language of spiritual growth sounds alien and a bit threatening to our ears, but if we want to experience the life that Jesus promised, a life of spiritual strength, we need to understand how to appropriate God's Spirit into our lives.

According to Willard, "A 'spiritual life' consists in that range of activities in which people cooperatively interact with God—and with the spiritual order deriving from God's personality and action. And what is the result? A new overall quality of human existence with corresponding new powers."[\[4\]](#) To be spiritual is to be dominated by the Spirit of God. Willard adds that spirituality is another reality, not just a "commitment" or "life-style." It may result in personal and social change, but the ultimate goal is to become like Christ and to further His Kingdom, not just to be a better person or to make America a better place to live.

The Bible teaches that to become a spiritual person one must employ the *disciplines* of spirituality. “The disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order.”<sup>{5}</sup> Paul wrote in Romans 6:13 that the goal of being spiritual is to offer our body to God as instruments of righteousness in order to be of use for His Kingdom. Moving towards this state of usefulness to God and His Kingdom depends on the actions of individual believers.

Many of us have been taught that this action consists primarily in attending church or giving towards its programs. As important as these are, they fail to address the need for a radical inner change that must take place in our hearts to be of significant use to God. The teaching of Scripture and specifically the life of Christ tells us that the deep changes that must occur in our lives will only be accomplished via the disciplines of abstinence such as fasting, solitude, silence, and chastity, and the disciplines of engagement such as study, worship, service, prayer, and confession. These disciplines, along with others, will result in being conformed to the person of Christ, the desire of everyone born of His Spirit.

## **Salvation and Life**

When I first read in the Bible that Jesus offered a more abundant life to those who followed Him, I thought that He was primarily describing a life filled with more happiness and purpose. It does include these things, but I now believe that it includes much more. Salvation in Christ promises to radically change the nature of life itself. It is not just a promise that sometime in the far distant future we will experience a resurrected body and see a new heaven and new earth. Salvation in Christ promises a life characterized by the highest ideals of thought and actions as epitomized by the life of Christ Himself.

Although there is no program or classroom course that can guarantee to give us this new life in Christ, it can be argued that in order to live a life like Jesus we need to do the things that Jesus did. If Jesus had to “learn obedience through the things which he suffered” (Hebrew 5:8 KJV), are we to expect to act Christ-like without the benefit of engaging in the disciplines that Jesus did?

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Willard argues that there is a direct connection between practicing the spiritual disciplines and experiencing the salvation that is promised in Christ. Jesus prayed, fasted, and practiced solitude “not because He was sinful and in need of redemption, as we are, but because he had a body just as we do.”<sup>{6}</sup> The center of every human being’s existence is his or her body. We are neither to be neo-Platonic nor Gnostic in our approach to the spiritual life. Both of these traditions play down the importance of the physical universe, arguing that it is either evil or simply inferior to the spiritual domain. But as Willard argues, “to withhold our bodies from religion is to exclude religion from our lives.”

Although our spiritual dimension may be invisible, it is not separate from our bodily existence. *Spirituality*, according to Willard, is “a relationship of our embodied selves to God that has the natural and irrepressible effect of making us alive to the Kingdom of God—here and now in the material world.”<sup>{7}</sup> By separating our Christian life from our bodies we create an unnecessary sacred/secular gulf for Christians that often alienates us from the world and people around us.

The Christian faith offers more than just the forgiveness of sins; it promises to transform individuals to live in such a way that responding to events as Jesus did becomes second nature. What are these spiritual disciplines, and how do they transform the very quality of life we experience as followers of Jesus Christ?

# The Disciplines of Abstinence

Although many of us have heard horror stories of how spiritual disciplines have been abused and misused in the past, Willard believes that “A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom.”<sup>{8}</sup> He reminds us that we discipline ourselves throughout life in order to accomplish a wide variety of tasks or functions. We utilize discipline when we study an academic or professional field; athletes must be disciplined in order to run a marathon or bench press 300 lbs. Why, then, are we surprised to learn that we must discipline ourselves to be useful to God?

Willard divides the disciplines into two categories: disciplines of abstinence, and disciplines of engagement. Depending on our lifestyle and past personal experiences, we will each find different disciplines helpful in accomplishing the goal of living as a new creature in Christ. Solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice are disciplines of abstinence. Given our highly materialistic culture, these might be the most difficult and most beneficial to many of us. We are more familiar with the disciplines of engagement, including study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, and fellowship. However, two others mentioned by Willard might be less familiar: confession and submission.

Abstinence requires that we give up something that is perfectly normal—something that is not wrong in and of itself, such as food or sex—because it has gotten in the way of our walking with God, or because by leaving these things aside we might be able to focus more closely on God for a period of time. As one writer tells us, “Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us . . .”<sup>{9}</sup> Busyness and superficial

activities hide us from the fact that we have little or no inward experience with God. Solitude frees us from social conformity, from being conformed to the patterns of this world that Paul warns us about in Romans 12.

Solitude goes hand in hand with silence. The power of the tongue and the damage it can do is taken very seriously in the Bible. There is a quiet inner strength and confidence that exudes from people who are great listeners, who are able to be silent and to be slow to speak.

## The Disciplines of Engagement

Thus, the disciplines of abstinence help us diminish improper entanglements with the world. What about the disciplines of engagement?

Although study is not often thought of as a spiritual discipline, it is the key to a balanced Christian walk. Calvin Miller writes, "Mystics without study are only spiritual romantics who want relationship without effort."[{10}](#) Study involves reading, memorizing, and meditation on God's Word. It takes effort and time, and there are no shortcuts. It includes learning from great Christian minds that have gone before us and those who, by their walk and example, can teach much about the power available to believers who seek to experience the light burden that abiding in Jesus offers.

Few Christians deny the need for worship in their weekly routines, even though what constitutes worship has caused considerable controversy. Worship ascribes great worth to God. It is seeing God as He truly is. Willard argues that we should focus our worship through Jesus Christ to the Father. He writes, "When we worship, we fill our minds and hearts with wonder at him—the detailed actions and words of his earthly life, his trial and death on the cross, his resurrection reality, and his work as ascended intercessor."[{11}](#)

The discipline of celebration is unfamiliar to most of us, yet Willard argues that it is one of the most important forms of engagement with God. He writes that “We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God’s greatness, beauty, and goodness. We concentrate on our life and world as God’s work and as God’s gift to us.”<sup>{12}</sup> Although much of the scriptural argument for holy celebration is found in the festivals of the Old Testament and the book of Ecclesiastes, Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because he chose to dine and celebrate with sinners.

Christian fellowship and confession go hand in hand. It is within the context of fellowship that Christians build up and encourage one-another with the gifts that God has given to us. It is also in this context that we practice confession with trusted believers who know both our strengths and weaknesses. This level of transparency and openness is essential for the church to become the healing place of deep intimacy that people are so hungry for.

Walking with Jesus doesn’t mean just knowing things about Him; it means living as He lived. This includes practicing the spiritual disciplines that Jesus practiced. As we do, we will be changed through the Spirit to be more like Him and experience the rest that He has offered to us.

## Notes

1. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
2. Ibid., viii.
3. Ibid., x.
4. Ibid., 67.
5. Ibid., 68.
6. Ibid., 29.
7. Ibid., 31.
8. Ibid., 156.

9. Ibid., 161.
10. Ibid., 176.
11. Ibid., 178.
12. Ibid., 179.

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## **Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America**

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

This article examines the trajectory of Christianity in America by looking at what researchers are learning about “the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults.” This last phrase is the subtitle of a recent book by Christian Smith and Patricia Snell which summarizes the results of a groundbreaking study based on the results of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NYSR).<sup>[\[1\]](#)</sup> 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."<sup>{2}</sup> 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.”<sup>{3}</sup> 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.”<sup>{4}</sup>*

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."<sup>{9}</sup> 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 Pearcey](#) 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

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.”<sup>{20}</sup> For most measures, the differences are not large, but they are certainly counter to the results from the 70s and 80s.

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

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

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

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

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

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

# Emerging Adults: Exposing Some Myths

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

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

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

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

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

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

***Myth 2: Emerging adults are hostile toward the church.***

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

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

allegedly promising way."[{25}](#)

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

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

### ***Myth 3: Religious practice does not impact personal behavior.***

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

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

*things would make them happier*

- twice as likely to abstain from pornography*
- more than twice as likely to have abstained from sexual intercourse outside of marriage*

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

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

## Notes

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

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

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**See Also:**

[Emerging Adults Part 2: Distinctly Different Faiths](#)

[Emerging Adults A Closer Look](#)

[The Importance of Parents in the Faith of Emerging Adults](#)

[Cultural Captives – a book on the faith of emerging adults](#)