Generation Z and Spiritual Maturity

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Abstract

Those wanting to form members of Generation Z into mature disciples must overcome the challenges presented by their shared generational traits. This article summarizes the biblical teaching on spiritual maturity, documents a division within Generation Z between "engaged" and "churched" Christians, synthesizes current research on Generation Z to identify traits that could hinder discipleship efforts, and uses the biblical traits of spiritual maturity to offer guidance in addressing those challenges.

Introduction

A growing body of research suggests that members of Generation Z (also called iGen) differ in some important ways from the Millennials who preceded them (Barna Group, 2018; Elmore & McPeak, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Twenge, 2017). Generational differences challenge ministry leaders in ways that are similar to cultural differences, in that we are attempting to help individuals grow in faith who may have significantly different life experiences, beliefs, values, and habits than our own. The call to follow Jesus and to grow together to spiritual maturity is timeless, but disciples also live in particular cultural and historical circumstances that in some ways foster and in other ways inhibit their growth.

We will be more effective in forming members of Generation Z into communities of mature disciples of Jesus if we adapt our methods to maximize the opportunities and overcome the challenges they face by virtue of their shared generational traits.

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The biblical teaching on spiritual maturity provides criteria for identifying the discipleship needs of Generation Z and guidance regarding how to help them navigate the spiritual challenges they face. The first part of this article provides a summary of the biblical teaching on spiritual maturity, sticking closely to the texts that use the term *teleios* and its variants in such a way that modern biblical scholars correctly translate these terms as "mature." Next, I document a key division within Generation Z between "engaged" and "churched" Christian teenagers, and show how the gaps between these groups set the agenda for making mature disciples among the members of this generation. The third part of this article synthesizes current research on Generation Z to identify a list of generational traits that are likely to impact our efforts to move more members of Generation Z from "churched" to "engaged" in their Christian faith. Finally, I return to the biblical traits of spiritual maturity and highlight how each can guide us in addressing the challenges to discipleship among members of Generation Z.

Spiritual Maturity in the New Testament

What is spiritual maturity? The approach taken here will be to stick closely to what we can learn about spiritual maturity from the New Testament passages that explicitly talk about it. The New Testament uses the word "mature" to describe a spiritual state that should be attained by most disciples of Jesus after a reasonable period of growth. All the passages in which the Greek word *teleios* and its various forms should be translated "mature" (1 Cor. 2:14–3:4, 14:20; Eph. 4:1–5:2; Phil. 3:1-16; Col. 1:28; Heb. 5:11–6:2) either explicitly teach or assume this perspective (Bergler, 2014). So, for example, the writer of Hebrews says:

> About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature [*teleios*], for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us go on toward perfection [*teleiotes*] . . . not laying again the foundation . . . (Heb. 5:11–6:1, NRSV).

The author takes for granted that his readers should have already moved from spiritual infancy to spiritual adulthood, to maturity. In fact, this exhortation makes no sense if "mature" (*teleios*) means an unattainable perfection. Similarly, Paul assumes that some of his readers who are joining him in striving to know Christ more and more are nevertheless already "mature" (Phil. 3:15) and rebukes the believers in Corinth for still being spiritual infants (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

In addition, there is considerable unity among these passages regarding the traits and competencies displayed by those who are spiritually mature. While space does not permit here to provide a detailed exegesis of each of these texts, this summary

will draw on such work that has been done elsewhere (Bergler, 2014). Mature discipleship begins with a full conversion, a new birth, resulting in a state of spiritual infancy. These spiritual newborns are eager for the "spiritual milk" of God's word (1 Pet. 1:22–2:3, NRSV), a metaphor that signifies the basic teachings or "first principles" (Heb. 5:12, NRSV) of the faith. But spiritual infants and children must grow into spiritual adults, otherwise they will be "tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles" (Eph. 4:14, NRSV). And they will be unable to discern even basic "spiritual" things such as knowing that they should treat each other lovingly and seek unity rather than divide into prideful factions (1 Cor. 2:14–3:4, NRSV). Spiritual infancy is a wonderful miracle resulting from new birth in the Spirit, but part of the wonder of this new life is that it connects the believer to God who will provide growth to maturity. Whether we are speaking of natural or spiritual infants, "failure to thrive" is a serious diagnosis that should prompt concerted action.

In the ideal process outlined in these passages, spiritual infants grow up by the power of God and through the nurture of the church to become spiritually mature disciples of Jesus who display the following competencies. First, mature disciples have a secure knowledge of the basic teachings of the faith. We have already seen this emphasis in Heb. 5:11–6:2 and Ephesians 4, but the same teaching appears in every passage that uses the metaphor of human development to describe spiritual growth. Indicators that a disciple has achieved this trait of maturity are that he or she 1) is able to teach others the basic truths of the faith (Heb. 5:12; Eph. 4:15), 2) is not easily shaken by false teachings (Eph. 4:14), and 3) is starting to show an interest in deeper theology (Heb. 5:12-14).

Second, mature disciples display spiritual discernment. That is, they are learning by experience how to apply the basic teachings of the faith to everyday situations. Again, all of the major passages that use the word "mature" emphasize this capacity. So, for example, the author of Hebrews emphasizes that the mature "have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil." And Paul makes much of the difference between "spiritual" (mature) believers and "unspiritual" (infant) ones with regard to their ability to understand and live God's word (1 Cor. 2:6–3:4, NRSV). The passages on maturity instruct us that discernment can be seen in believers when they 1) understand the Gospel well enough to avoid both works' righteousness and complacency (Phil. 3:2-11, 15), 2) recognize and accept what Christian love requires in everyday situations (1 Cor. 3:1-4), and 3) are developing their ability to digest the "solid food" of deeper theology (1 Cor. 2:6-8; Heb. 5:14, 6:1, NRSV).

Third, mature believers are in the process of putting off sinful patterns of behavior and putting on godly patterns of behavior. The believers in Corinth were sinning against each other in their factionalism and in their indifference toward the sexual sin in their midst. The reason Paul could be so confident that they were still spiritual "infants" is that they neither recognized their sins nor were they trying to eliminate

them. Instead, they boasted (1 Cor. 3:1-4, 21; 5:1-2). Thus, indicators of this trait of maturity are being 1) receptive to moral teaching and correction and 2) active in stopping obvious sins and replacing them with their positive opposites. Both indicators are clear in Paul's exhortations about maturity in 1 Corinthians and in Ephesians. After exhorting his readers to work together to help each other toward maturity (Eph. 4:11-16), Paul goes on to remind them that they are a new creation in Christ and must put off the old nature and put on the new (Eph. 4:20-24). He then gives a specific, and in some ways even rudimentary, list of examples. Mature believers stop lying to each other, and start speaking the truth. They stop stealing, and instead work, earn money, and give some of it to those in need. They stop speaking evil, destructive words, but instead speak words that build up their brothers and sisters. They replace "bitterness," "wrath," "anger," "clamor," "slander," and "malice" with "tenderhearted" forgiveness modeled on the love Christ showed through the cross (Eph. 4:25–5:2, NRSV).

Fourth, mature believers serve interdependently in the body of Christ. Paul introduces his exposition of spiritual maturity in Ephesians chapter 4 by stressing the importance of maintaining unity in the church (Eph. 4:1-10). He then makes it clear that this loving unity in the church is essential because it is the means by which the body of Christ as a corporate entity (Eph. 4:13, 16) and each of its members (Eph. 4:14) grow to maturity. The "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers" equip the other members of the church to do their part. Then, as "each part is working properly," the body grows toward spiritual maturity in Christ (Eph. 4:16, NRSV). Indicators that a believer is mature in this way include 1) actively seeking to maintain unity with the church by being patient, humble, and forebearing (Eph. 4:1-3), and 2) serving in ways that help others in the body of Christ grow toward maturity (Eph. 4:11-16).

Finally, mature believers display a Christ-centered spirituality that accepts both suffering and consolation as they seek to know Christ more deeply (Phil. 3:2-16) and serve the Gospel (2 Cor. 4:7-15). Believers who have this mature approach to deepening their relationship with Jesus will be seen to 1) make sacrifices and re-arrange their priorities in order to pursue Christ (Phil. 3:7-8), and 2) accept challenges and even suffering as opportunities to know Christ more deeply. Because they understand how faith helps believers to persevere (Heb. 11) and how suffering can connect them to Jesus in his death and resurrection (Phil. 3:10; 2 Cor. 4:7, 10-12) they will be less likely than immature believers to pull back or fall away in the face of emotional struggles, persecution, suffering, or discipline from the Lord. Indeed, Hebrews chapters 5 through 12 can be interpreted as an extended exhortation to stand firm in the face of difficulty because that is what mature disciples of Jesus do (Heb. 5:11–12:13; Cockerill, 2012). These traits and indicators of biblical spiritual maturity can guide us in interpreting the evidence about Generation Z and in prioritizing and shaping our efforts to lead them to become maturing disciples of Jesus.

The Discipleship Agenda: The Squishy Center is Shrinking

When it comes to religious beliefs and practices among Generation Z, the minority who are committed Christians are doing reasonably well, a less committed middle group that identifies as Christian is not faring as well, and the minority who profess no religious affiliation is growing. Discipleship efforts among Generation Z must focus on evangelism of the "nones," but also on moving young people in the "squishy center" (White, 2017, p. 28) of American Christianity toward committed, maturing discipleship. Roughly one-third of the members of Generation Z claim no religious affiliation, and that percentage is larger than it was among Millennials (Twenge, 2017). It is important to note that committed Christian teenagers are probably not the primary source of young adult religious "nones," although some do come from their ranks. Instead, 18–24 year-olds who claim no religious affiliation more commonly come from one of the following sources: 1) households with no religious faith or households in which multiple religions are represented; 2) less committed Catholics; 3) less committed Protestants. Thus the "squishy center" of American Christianity (categories 2 and 3) is shrinking and these less committed Christians may be less likely than their counterparts in the past to move toward maturing Christian faith (Bergler, 2017; Hill, 2015; White, 2017).

In addition, some evidence suggests that when members of Generation Z lapse in their faith, they do so more thoroughly than their Millennial predecessors did. The National Study of Youth and Religion found through its longitudinal study of Millennials that in the transition to emerging adulthood, Christian teenagers tended to decline much more in their public religious practice (e.g. attending church) than in their private religious practices (e.g. prayer) or in their religious beliefs (e.g. God exists) (Smith & Snell, 2009; Bergler, 2017). In contrast, the percentages of Generation Z 18–24 year-olds who believe in the afterlife, ever pray, believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, or believe in God at all, have gone down by 10–15% relative to Millennials when surveyed at the same age. By 2016, one in three Generation Z emerging adults did not believe in God, one in four did not ever pray, and one in four thought the Bible was "an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by men." So while a majority of Generation Z young adults still claim Christian beliefs and practices, those majorities are smaller than they were in previous generations (Twenge, 2017, pp. 126–129).

In their study of Generation Z teenagers, the Barna Group found important differences between what they called "engaged Christians" (9% of their sample) and "churched Christians" (33%). Members of both groups identified as Christian and had attended church in the past six months. But "engaged Christians" also strongly agreed with the following statements:

> The Bible is the inspired word of God and contains truth about the world.
>
> I have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in my life today.

Table 1. Confident orthodoxy among Generation Z teenagers (Barna Group, 2018, pp. 78–79).

	Engaged Christians		Churched Christians	
	Agree	Very convinced	Agree	Very convinced
Jesus was a real person who was crucified in Rome and actually physically raised from the dead	94%	95%	85%	63%
Jesus is the divine son of God	99%	99%	98%	63%
Faith in Jesus is the only way to God	96%	93%	76%	63%
Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches	99%	87%	61%	31%

> I engage with my church in more ways than just attending services.
>
> I believe that Jesus Christ was crucified and raised from the dead to conquer sin and death. (Barna Group, 2018, p. 112)

Engaged and churched Christian teenagers differed in how important their faith was in their lives, in their religious beliefs and how confidently they held them, in their moral opinions, and in their views of the church.

With regard to the importance of faith, engaged Christians agreed that their religious faith was "very important to my sense of self" (89% vs. 28% of all Generation Z) and that "religious faith is the most important factor when I think about my future" (53% vs. 15% of churched Christians) (Barna Group, 2018, p. 52). A higher percentage of engaged Christians hold orthodox Christian beliefs and they have greater confidence in those beliefs than their "churched" counterparts (Table 1). Similarly, more engaged Christian teenagers believe that lying, sex before marriage, and homosexual behavior are wrong (Table 2). And engaged Christian teenagers have more favorable views of the church and are less likely to agree with negative statements about the church (Table 3).

These differences between "engaged" and "churched" Christian teenagers help define the contemporary task of making mature disciples among the members of Generation Z. Engaged Christian teens provide an opportunity because they can presumably be mobilized to evangelize and disciple their peers. And they remind us that the things that we are already doing as churches, families, and youth ministries are working for many teenagers. It is worth noting that when the National Study of Youth and Religion analyzed their sample of Millennial teenagers, they found that 8% of all 13–18 year-olds qualified as "devoted," which was their category that roughly parallels Barna's "engaged" group (9%) (Smith & Denton, 2005). Since the proportion of American teenagers that could be described as "engaged" or "devoted" Christians has held steady over the past 15 years, it is likely that what churches have

Table 2. Moral opinions among Generation Z teenagers (Barna Group, 2018, p. 57).

	Engaged Christians	Churched Christians
Lying is morally wrong	77%	38%
Even if it were legal, Christians should not use marijuana recreationally	63%	26%
Abortion is wrong	80%	37%
Marriage should be a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman	91%	44%
Sex before marriage is morally wrong	76%	25%
Homosexual behavior is morally wrong	77%	24%

Table 3. Opinions of the church among Generation Z teenagers (Barna Group, 2018, p. 61).

	Engaged Christians	Churched Christians
The church is a place to find answers to live a meaningful life	95%	77%
I feel like I can be myself at church	94%	71%
The church is relevant for my life	90%	79%
The people at church are tolerant of those with different beliefs	64%	63%
The church seems to reject much of what science tells us about the world	37%	53%
The church is overprotective of teenagers	28%	41%
The people at church are hypocritical	21%	42%
The church is not a safe place to express doubts	12%	32%

been doing in faith formation for teenagers is working at about the same rate as in the recent past. Just from the simple survey data that Barna provides, we can conclude that the "engaged" teenagers in their sample are doing well at knowing the basic truths of the faith and applying them to moral questions of the day. And their confidence in their beliefs suggests that they may be ready to stand firm in their faith.

Meanwhile, churched teenagers present us with many challenges. It is likely that what we are currently doing is not working very well for some significant portion of these teenagers. In some cases, they may not be fully converted to Christ, which would explain why they are not maturing. But it is likely that some teenagers in the "squishy center" have received the gift of salvation but have not made much progress toward maturity. These teenagers need significant help to know and accept the basic truths of the faith, to have Christian moral discernment, and to be connected and serving in the church. Indeed, they may have not yet made much progress at all toward the biblical traits of spiritual maturity described above. If our discipleship task is to move more "churched Christians" to the "engaged Christian" category, how are we to do that? In order to answer that question, it can help to examine five

characteristics of Generation Z that should shape how we make disciples among this generation. Perhaps one of the reasons that more "churched" teenagers are not "engaged" is that some of these generational traits are hindering their progress in the faith.

Characteristics of Generation Z

I've Never Had a Job or a Driver's License, but I'm Planning to Start My Own Business: Pace and Paths to Adulthood

The Millennials took longer to reach the markers of adulthood: leaving school, starting a career, getting married, and having children. They also de-coupled these transitions so that fewer of them experienced an abrupt and focused transition to adulthood (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005; Settersten & Ray, 2010). While Millennials slowed and diversified their experiences of the rites of passage to adulthood, members of Generation Z seem to be taking their time with the rites of passage formerly associated with middle-adolescence. Generation Z teenagers are less likely than their millennial predecessors to go out without their parents, ever go on dates, get a driver's license, ever drive a car, have a job, or participate in risky rites of passage such as having sex, trying alcohol, or binge drinking. For example, one in four Generation Z students do not have a driver's license by the time they graduate from high school. In 2015, 12th graders went out without their parents less than 8th graders did in 2009 (Twenge, 2017).

While the overall trend among Generation Z teenagers is toward what Twenge calls a "slow life strategy" (Twenge, 2017, p. 24), there are exceptions. One in four Generation Z teenagers are learning how to start their own businesses and one in ten have already started a business (Weise, 2019). Corey Seemiller was shocked when a Generation Z college student asked her "Can I count the hours I spend each week running my non-profit organization toward the 10 hours of community service required for this course?" (Seemiller, 2017). As specialists in undergraduate leadership development, Seemiller and Grace find evidence in their research that the members of Generation Z are pragmatic, entrepreneurial problem-solvers who would prefer to start non-profit enterprises to benefit their communities rather than be "voluntold" to rake leaves (Seemiller & Grace, 2017).

Since the cultural patterns of "growing up" are slowing and diversifying, we cannot assume that members of Generation Z of a certain age have all reached the same social, emotional, and life skill milestones. Individuals may seem "advanced" in some ways and "behind" in others relative to our expectations. And members of Generation Z may also be ambivalent about growing up. A majority of engaged Christian teenagers wants to become spiritually mature, but only 16% of Generation Z overall has that life goal. Similarly, 40% of engaged Christians are very excited about becoming adults, while 52% of all of Generation Z are only "somewhat

excited" about becoming adults and 28% are not looking forward to it (Barna Group, 2018, p. 52).

I'd Rather Lose a Finger than Give up My Phone: Mobile Technology and Social Media

Although the members of Generation Z would not really give up a finger to keep their phones (Jones, 2018), numerous commentators on Generation Z see it as highly significant that they are the first generation to have never known a world without smart phones and social media (Elmore & McPeak, 2017; Twenge, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2019). New media consume a lot of time for members of Generation Z. According to Barna, 57% of teenagers use screen media four hours or more per day (Barna Group, 2018, p. 13). Twenge found that high school seniors between 2013–2015 spent an average of 2.5 hours texting, 2 hours on the internet, 1.5 hours playing videogames and 0.5 hours video chatting every day. And all of those numbers except texting were up, in some cases double, since 2008. In 2008, less than 55% of high school seniors used social media daily; by 2015, more than 80% did (87% for females) (Twenge, 2017). Those hoping to grab the attention of Generation Z students have just eight seconds to do so, down from 12 seconds for Millennials (Weise, 2019, p. 27). Teens spend on average three hours per day scrolling on their phones, and the average 14–24 year-old checks social media 100 times per day (Weise, 2019, pp. 44, 58). College students switch between tasks on their laptops on average every 19 seconds (Twenge, 2017, p. 64). Smart phones and other screens are significant, life-shaping companions for members of Generation Z.

In addition to consuming time and attention, screen time and social media may have negative effects on relationships, mental health, and personal values. Twenge (2017) shows that a number of teenage behavior and mental health indicators made rapid changes around 2011–2012, just the time when the majority of teenagers first owned smart phones. Twenge tracks trends in teenagers' use of time and finds that screen time is stealing from face-to-face relational activities and sleep. Decreases in those two factors are known to increase risk for loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Twenge, 2017). Generation Z 10th graders who visit social networking sites every day are more likely to agree "I feel lonely" or "I often feel left out of things" (Twenge, 2017, p. 80). In contrast, teenagers who spend their time on in-person social interaction, sports, religious services, work, or even print media are less likely to feel lonely (Twenge, 2017). Eighth graders who spend ten or more hours per week on social media are 56% more likely to be unhappy and 27% more likely to be depressed (Twenge, 2017, p. 78). Several authors note that social media promotes negative comparisons with others, creates fear of missing out, and imposes a sometimes overwhelming burden to project a perfect image to others and to stay in constant connection with friends (Barna Group, 2018; Elmore & McPeak, 2017; Freitas, 2017; Twenge, 2017).

In addition, reduced face-to-face time hinders the development of relational skills such as listening, empathy, and conflict resolution (Elmore & McPeak, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Twenge, 2017). Many members of Generation Z are aware of this deficit and would like to correct it (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Perhaps that is one reason they prefer face-to-face communication for important interactions and for the teacher-guided portions of their learning (Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Weise, 2019).

Finally, some evidence suggests that social media use impacts values. Twelfth graders who spend ten or more hours per week on social media are more likely to hold individualistic values such as supporting gender and racial equality, "feeling entitled to wealth without putting in effort," and "valuing materialism." Despite their abstract belief in equality, these same teenagers are less likely to value community involvement than their peers (Twenge, 2017, p. 176).

I Have Trouble Coping: Mental Health

As a group, Generation Z struggles with mental health issues even more than their Millennial predecessors did. Happiness and life satisfaction are down. The percentage of 12th graders who are satisfied with their lives as a whole and with themselves dropped dramatically between 2012 and 2014, reaching an all-time low since 1976 (Twenge, 2017, p. 96). Even more troubling, the percentages of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders who agreed "I feel like I can't do anything right," "My life is not useful," or "I do not enjoy life" began rising around 2012 (Twenge, 2017, p. 101). Between 2011 and 2015 loneliness went up 31% among 8th and 10th graders and 22% among 12th graders (Twenge, 2017, p. 97). Students entering college in 2016 were more likely than their counterparts in 2009 to rate their own emotional health below average (up 18%), to report feeling overwhelmed (up 51%), to expect to seek counseling (up 64%), or to report feeling depressed (up 95%) (Twenge, 2017, p. 103). Finally, depressive symptoms and suicide risk factors have also risen relative to previous generations. Teenage girls have seen an especially large rise in depressive symptoms and major depressive episodes in the years since 2012 (Twenge, 2017, p. 109). Basic mental health is a significant challenge for the members of Generation Z that will require concerted attention from churches, schools, and families.

Let's Keep Everybody Safe: Safety and Safetyism

Generation Z values safety. They are physically safer than past generations because they are less likely than their predecessors to have sex, try alcohol, binge drink, get into a fight with a peer, or get into a car with someone who has been drinking. In contrast, they are just as likely as Millennials to use marijuana because they believe it is safer than alcohol (Twenge, 2017). They try to be more cautious about what they post online, with some managing multiple social media accounts to try to control

who can see which personal information (Seemiller & Grace, 2019; Weise, 2019). The percentages of teens who agree that "I like to test myself every now and then by doing something a little risky" or "I get a real kick out of doing things that are a little dangerous" have halved since the early 1990s (Twenge, 2017, pp. 152–153).

This cultural value on safety also shapes their approach to emotional and intellectual risks. Generation Z has grown up in the era of microaggressions, trigger warnings, and safe spaces. The use of phrases like "stay safe" and "be safe" has been on the rise since the 1990s (Twenge, 2017). Emotional trauma, PTSD, anxiety, and depression have been de-stigmatized, and talking about these mental health challenges and even self-diagnosing them has become part of American culture (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). As a result of these and many other factors, the members of Generation Z take it for granted that words like "safety," "risk," "danger," and "trauma" apply to emotions as well as bodies. They tend to avoid conflict and ask authority figures to solve problems for them. Twenge believes her research points to a "distinctively iGen idea," that "the world is an inherently dangerous place because every social interaction carries the risk of being hurt" (2017, p. 157).

Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) argue that a cultural belief has arisen that young people are emotionally fragile and must be protected from upsetting experiences and ideas. They call the resulting overly protective life strategies "safetyism," which they define as "obsession with eliminating threats (both real and imagined) to the point at which people become unwilling to make reasonable trade-offs demanded by other practical and moral concerns. Safetyism deprives young people of the experiences that their antifragile minds need, thereby making them more fragile, anxious, and prone to seeing themselves as victims" (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, p. 32). Their term "antifragile" comes from their cognitive behavioral therapy framework and indicates that human beings need appropriate emotional and intellectual challenges to develop properly. Thus they see safetyism as a threat to the moral, intellectual, and emotional development of Generation Z.

I'm Worried about Money, but I Still Want to Make a Difference: Money, Career, Ambition

Generation Z values financial security and is more realistic about the world of work. At the same time, they still want to make a difference in the lives of others. Having grown up in the era of the Great Recession of 2008, they are very concerned about how they will pay for college and how they can get a well-paying job (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). They are more willing to choose a college major or take a job that promises financial rewards, and are less concerned about the intrinsic rewards of work. They are more willing to work overtime and have more modest expectations for work-life balance and career advancement than their Millennial predecessors (Twenge, 2017). Sometimes their concern for financial security turns into an unbalanced emphasis on material rewards. Among new college students in 2016, 82% wanted to become "very well off financially" (Twenge, 2017, p. 168) and one in four

members of Generation Z say they will be content only if they own more than their parents (Twenge, 2017, pp. 195–196). Meanwhile, only 47% of Generation Z students entering college wanted to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life" while in college. As Twenge put it, "money is in, meaning is out" (2017, p. 167).

Even though financial worries have them scrambling for less expensive educational options and more lucrative jobs, members of Generation Z still want to make a difference. Among participants in the "Generation Z Goes to College" study, 75% were motivated by knowing that what they were doing was making a positive difference in the lives of others, and two-thirds wanted their careers to have a positive impact on the world (Seemiller & Grace, 2016, p. 103; Seemiller & Grace, 2017, pp. 10–11). They are more likely than Millennials to agree that it is important to "help others in difficulty" and "make a contribution to society," but somewhat less likely than Millennials to score high on "empathy with others" and "willingness to donate to charity" (Twenge, 2017, pp. 173–174). So they may struggle to put their good intentions and high ideals for "making a difference" into practice.

Leading Members of Generation Z toward Spiritual Maturity

Gospel Call to Full Conversion

Generation Z needs to hear the Gospel call to conversion and discipleship in ways that challenge their cultural presuppositions. The members of Generation Z will likely resonate with the biblical emphasis on God as our refuge and source of safety, but they may balk at the cost of discipleship and the risks it involves. It is easy to imagine "churched" Christian teenagers who are worried about emotional and financial safety walking away sadly, like the rich young ruler, when Jesus calls them (Matt. 19:16-22; Mk 10:17-22; Lk. 18:18-23). Members of Generation Z need to know that the Gospel call to "sell all and come follow me" comes from Jesus' love (Mk 10:21) and that only those who "lose their life" by giving it to Jesus will find true life (Lk. 9:24-25). They may respond well to the truth that they are not fragile, but rather "antifragile." We need to help them interpret their experiences of the appropriate emotional challenges that come with following Jesus as ways to grow into their best selves and experience true life.

On the plus side, the fact that many members of Generation Z want to make a difference in the world and want to protect others from harm could lead them to embrace the call to serve Christ and his kingdom. Some of them are likely to get inspired to make a difference for Christ, but stop short of re-ordering their lives to take action. We must teach that only those who build service and ministry into their lives actually make a difference in the world. And we will need to guide them in how to do that. A good start would be helping them reduce screen time in order to invest more time in their relationship with God and service of others.

A Vision for Maturity

Either as part of explaining the Gospel call or soon after, we must convince the members of Generation Z that spiritual maturity is both attainable and desirable. We should seek to establish a culture in our churches and youth ministries that assumes, as did Paul and the author of the book of Hebrews, that all followers of Jesus should become spiritually mature after a reasonable period of growth. We must make clear to all concerned that helping each disciple grow to maturity is one of the purposes of our ministries, just as Paul did (Eph. 4:11-16; Col. 1:28). In particular, the biblical traits of spiritual maturity and their indicators described above, or some similar biblical summary of spiritual maturity, should form our ministry efforts. Teachers and other leaders should know what spiritual maturity looks like and should be constantly checking their efforts against those desired outcomes. The Exemplary Youth Ministry Study found that churches with a clear, specific, agreed-upon portrait of the disciples they were trying to produce did better at forming both youth and adults into maturing Christians (Martinson, Black & Roberto, 2010; Bergler 2014). We may need to de-couple the idea of spiritual maturity from chronological adulthood, as there is nothing in Scripture to indicate that one must be a certain age to be spiritually mature, and full adult status is a distant dream (or even something to be dreaded) for many young members of Generation Z.

Being Formed in the Basic Truths of the Faith and in Discernment

To go on toward maturity, members of Generation Z need help in learning the basics of the faith and in discerning how those basic truths should shape their daily lives. Since only "engaged" Christian teenagers seem to have a sound and secure grasp of the faith or of Christian morality, we will need to identify a core body of beliefs that we want all church members to master and set to work creatively teaching that content and reinforcing it. Rather than exercising our creativity to have a different lesson at every meeting or a constantly changing menu of teaching, we should put our creativity to work by teaching the same core material in new and engaging ways. Since mature believers are supposed to be able to teach the basic truths to others (Hebrews 5), we should create systems of learning in which young people teach their peers or those who are younger. Since "churched" members of Generation Z are not as certain of their beliefs as their "engaged" counterparts, teachers should spend time on apologetics and on learning activities that involve the affective and volitional domains so that these young people will take greater ownership of their beliefs. Moral instruction, including clear and convincing explanations of why biblical moral teachings are to be accepted, will also be needed.

We must structure our learning environments to foster formation in Christlikeness, not just cover content. A person is "formed" in something when they can actually do it. As Dallas Willard observed, church leaders sometimes unintentionally

operate as if we do not expect people to change as a result of our Christian education efforts. In contrast, he believed, for example, that congregations could provide Christian education experiences that would help disciples really do the things that Jesus did, such as loving their enemies (Willard, 2002). All ministry leaders value transformative teaching, and most of us have been working hard to achieve it for our entire careers. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that we still have a long way to go to help "churched" Generation Z teenagers internalize the faith. So, for example, the often used format of large group teaching with small group discussions needs to be closely monitored and modified for greater effectiveness. In what specific ways do we expect young people to change as a result of this lesson and this curriculum? What is actually happening in the small groups? Do the small-group leaders know how to facilitate life change, not just lead a discussion? What other forms of experiential learning are we using so that students can internalize the truths that are being presented and discussed? Again, these are not new questions, but we need to closely examine what we are doing and assess its effectiveness. As a minimum, it is likely that we will need to cover less content, teach it more thoroughly, assess more often, and not move on until people internalize the teaching and actually change.

Interdependently Serving in the Church

Their aversion to emotional risk might cause some members of Generation Z to fear investing in relationships in the church because they might get hurt. They need to be taught the purpose and value of the church, including the fact that it is through our relationships in the church, including our difficulties in those relationships, that we grow into Christlikeness (Phil. 2:1-11; Ketcham, 2018). Practical biblical teaching on how to correct others, how to ask for and grant forgiveness, and how to work for peace and reconciliation in relationships will help Generation Z get over their relational fears by experiencing that relationships in the body of Christ can be restored. And since they are both practically minded and aware of their "soft skills" deficits, they will respond well to teachings and workshops that help them develop godly relational skills. We must teach them that maturity includes investing in the spiritual growth of others, and they need us to coach them and place them in roles where they can be building up others in the faith. Those who are only spectators cannot be spiritually mature.

Putting off and Putting on

Since many among Generation Z highly value financial security and a substantial minority even seem blatantly materialistic, we will need to call them to put off greed and put on generosity, to put off worry about money and put on devotion to the kingdom of God. Biblical teaching about money should not wait until they think they have some. Their hunger for emotional security may cause some of them to avoid the emotional risks inherent in loving others. They must deeply explore the self-giving

love of Jesus and learn that their love for God and neighbor must be demonstrated in risky actions like those of the Good Samaritan (Luke). They may struggle to "put off" their fear and isolation and give themselves sacrificially to others (Eph. 5:1-2). They need to be taught to work for reconciliation in relationships through direct conversations, rather than always going to authority figures to solve their relational problems. Those with problematic cell phone use or heavy use of social media will need to learn to put off these habits that get in the way of loving God and loving others. We should consider using tools such as media fasts, apps that track phone and social media use, and coaching students to develop a "rule of life" that includes how they will use media as a disciple of Jesus. In particular, since Twenge's research (2017) strongly suggests that those who use social media ten or more hours per week are at greater risk for many kinds of negative life outcomes, we should teach disciples of Jesus to use it significantly less than that.

Suffering and Comfort

Those members of Generation Z who feel lonely, depressed, and overwhelmed will need special care and help in order to respond to the Gospel call to mature discipleship. They may find it difficult at first to function in ways that allow them to learn the basics of the faith, grow in discernment, put off their sins, or serve in the body of Christ. Yet these significant struggles can also be opportunities for them to encounter Jesus as the one who says "Come to me, all you who labor and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). These members of Generation Z will easily identify with the broken and marginalized people who Jesus welcomed, touched, and healed, such as the woman with the bleeding disease (Lk. 8:43-48). We can assure members of Generation Z who are hurting that the Gospel promises us a deep connection with Jesus in his death and resurrection that results in a different experience of suffering (Phil. 3). We need to develop communities of care similar to the love that flowed between Paul and the churches he founded, allowing mutual comfort to flow between believers (2 Cor. 1:3-7). Youth ministers, adult volunteers, and parents need to become spiritual mothers and fathers to the members of Generation Z, just as Paul was toward the disciples he made (1 Thess. 2:1-12). Practically speaking, we should encourage those who show signs of mental health problems to limit their use of screens and social media. Youth ministers and other Christian education workers need training in pastoral counseling, and every church serving Generation Z needs to have a good working relationship with affordable mental health services providers.

Conclusion

What story will the members of Generation Z inhabit? Will they seek to control their lives and their world, to create a false sense of security and safety in a world that in the end will not allow them to do so? Will they embrace the adventure of following

Christ and live God's story of the redemption of the world? We cannot determine their choices, but we can help them catch a vision for spiritual maturity and pursue it in community with other disciples of Jesus. As we develop ministries to form the members of Generation Z as disciples, knowing their generational traits and comparing those traits to the biblical traits of spiritual maturity is an important first step that could help us move more "churched" young people toward being "engaged," maturing followers of Jesus.

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