



Getting to know the next generation



David Kinnaman

David Kinnaman is president of Barna Group and of Barna Global. Portions of this essay are based on his forthcoming book *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (releasing September 2019 from Baker Books) and on *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith* (Baker, 2011).

In my work as a social researcher, I have interviewed tens of thousands of tweens, teenagers and young adults in the USA, the UK and around the world. Using a variety of quantitative and qualitative research methods, my company, Barna Group, examines the spiritual journeys of young people. With each new set of findings, I become more convinced that the next generation is living in a new technological, social and spiritual reality.

Transmission of faith from one generation to the next relies on the messy and sometimes flawed process of young people finding meaning for themselves in the traditions of their parents, through relationships and revelation. But what happens when the process of relationships and the sources of revelation change? What happens to the transference of faith when the world we know slips out from under our collective feet? We have to find new processes that make sense in our new reality. Regardless of our age, we must commit ourselves to understanding our culture today in order to be effective translators of faith to the next generation. We must come to grips with the challenges and with the opportunities for the gospel to advance.

With that goal in mind, let us get to know the next generation together.

Cultural character

We often consider our region or city or neighbourhood to be something like a backdrop, the setting against which our – and the other, *minor characters* – lives play out. However, what if we envisioned culture as a *character* in the story

of a person's faith formation? In a play or musical, the set is usually secondary to what the actors say and do, and we have a tendency to think the same about the 'set' of our lives. Those who make claims like, 'There's nothing new about the church dropout problem', or 'Young adults will return to church when they get married or have kids' perceive culture as a mere backdrop that makes no impact on the thoughts, feelings, relationships and choices of the characters.

Yet the society we inhabit – the prevailing attitudes, the collective values, the assumptions about human purpose and flourishing, even the tools we use – is more like a character in, than the setting of our lives. There is a big difference, for example, between growing up in certain regions and growing up in others in terms of how that socialises us towards or against faith.

Identification with Christianity is decreasing with each successive generation. In a study with Tearfund, Barna found that the percentage of UK 'Nones' – the religiously unaffiliated – is on the rise: Nones are 16% of the Elder generation, 26% of Boomers, 35% of Generation X and 40% of Millennials.

As Millennials and Generation Z come of age, religion overall is playing a smaller cultural role than in generations past. According to the 2015 British Social Attitudes Survey, reported on by British Religion in Numbers (BRIN), 37% of young Millennials and 31% of older Millennials say they did *not* have a religious upbringing. On top of that, only a minority of those who affiliate with

Christianity connect with a congregation on a regular basis: just 18% of Anglicans, 40% of Catholics, and 34% of other Christians attended church once a month or more.

Irrelevance is a key word for this generation when it comes to faith, truth and church. Not only does Christianity stand in direct contrast with many of the beliefs and attitudes of Millennials and Generation Z – on the existence of objective morality and spiritual truth, for example – but the practise of the faith, especially as part of a Christian faith community, seems to many young people simply not to be relevant. It does not seem to have a bearing on their real day-to-day lives.

We live in a time and a culture characterised by scepticism about Christianity and the Bible. Hyperrationalism and pop-culture atheism undercut belief. A majority of non-Christian youth and young adults are indifferent to the appeal of following Jesus. They reject organised religion altogether, especially claims of an exclusive faith like Christianity. Many view the Bible as a book of oppression that is harmful to the minds of its devoted readers. In some culturally influential places, young Christians encounter condescension or downright hostility from their peers, their instructors and social elites.

The most common Millennial response to religion in general and Christianity in particular is neutral or none at all. In a study sponsored by Bible Society and CODEC, Barna found that fewer than half of UK Millennials (41%) have a net positive view of Christianity and of the Bible, yet only one in seven has a negative view (15%).

Unsurprisingly, Christians are most likely to look favourably upon Christianity, at 70%. The group least likely to see Christianity favourably are the Nones, 20% of whom have a positive view and 23% of whom have a negative view of Christianity; the majority are somewhere between the two, saying either they do not know what their feelings are towards Christianity (7%) or that they have a neutral view (50%).

Institutional alienation

The next generation is sceptical about the institutions that have shaped our society and, while they retain a guarded optimism about the future, they see themselves creating that future mostly disengaged from (or at least reinventing) the institutions that have thus far defined our culture. Few institutions are immune to the impact of the next generation – from media to music, from the workplace to education, from politics to the Church. The generational churn at play within the religious establishment is, in many ways, part and parcel of the alienation affecting every segment of society.

Complementing, or perhaps exacerbating, their sceptical streak are shifting cultural expectations about sexuality and gender identity. Not only are younger generations collectively supportive of

those who identify as LGBT, but they are also more likely than older adults to personally express some level of sexual fluidity or non-binary identity. As far as Generation Z is concerned, when it comes to gender expression and sexual orientation, there is no norm – and that can be deeply unsettling. If even your own body cannot reliably represent you to the world, is *anything* trustworthy?

Today's young adults and teens are not growing up in a vacuum. Like all generations, they are being raised in a culture deeply influenced by its predecessors; in this case, the most significant shaping generation is the Boomer cohort. The choices Baby Boomers made with regard to family, church, politics, business, and other institutions have had a domino effect into the emerging generations. Whatever the intent of Boomers' changing relationship with institutions, Millennials and Generation Z are putting their own uniquely pragmatic stamp on their connection with family, adulthood and institutions.

Each generation since the Boomers has taken a longer, more circuitous, path to adulthood. For many reasons, some of their choosing and others not, many of today's young adults are postponing the complete transition to adulthood. This transition is characterized by five key developmental tasks: leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married and having a child. In 1960, 77% of US women and 65% of men had completed all of these tasks – had become adults – by age 30. In the most recent estimate, just 46% of women and 31% of men had completed the transition by the time they reached 30 years of age. In the UK, the percentages are even lower.

Think about that: 'Settled by 30' used to be the normative, typical pattern of young adults in the 1960s. Now that path represents a *minority* among today's young adults.

As much as anything, this cultural change bares the gap between church and the lives of today's new generation. Most churches and parishes are simply not prepared to minister to or disciple those taking a non-traditional path to adulthood; they are most capable of guiding and helping the traditional marriage- and career-stabilised young adult.

There is both good news and bad news for the Church with regard to young adults' and teens' alienation from what used to be normative in our society. The bad news is that, where congregations and parishes are structured to meet the needs of the 'old normal', it will be difficult for young people to find a meaningful place. The good news, however, is that the Church is uniquely called to be the community of God – and true, authentic community banishes isolation, loneliness and alienation, and replaces them with love.

What will have to change about how we 'do church' in order to 'be the church' in the new cultural norm?

Access and anxiety

Those in the emerging generation are often referred to as 'digital natives', especially compared to their predecessors – we who, for the most part, are latecomers to the technological revolution. Older adults use digital tools, but even those of us attached at the palm to our smart phones are much less comfortable, much less conversant – as if we are learning and then speaking a second language. Millennials and Generation Z, on the other hand, are native to the globally connected digital world. They have been raised with these technologies in full supply and that reality is facilitating new patterns of learning, relating and influencing the world, as well as changing the way they think about church and Christianity. Technological access allows them to experience and examine content originating from non-biblical worldviews, giving them ample reasons to question the nature of truth. It generates extraordinary distractions and invites them to be less linear and logical in their thought processes. It empowers them to think as creators, not just as consumers of media. It also makes them both more connected and more isolated than generations before them.

Screens are profoundly changing the human experience.

The reaction of many young people to cultural acceleration and increasing complexity is a low-level anxiety that never really goes away, and that occasionally ratchets up to high-level anxiety. Three out of five young adults tell us they are 'stressed out'; seven out of ten say they are 'concerned about the future'. In Barna's comprehensive study of Generation Z, the generation coming up after Millennials, anxiety is a recurring theme, especially related to things like education, career, money and relationships.

Personal devices feed the part of our brains that loves instant gratification. They give us a jolt of digital dopamine dozens, if not hundreds, of times a day. We love our memes. Have a funny thought to share with a friend? Hoping you have received a new Instagram or Facebook likes since the last time you checked? Worried about your grades? Wonder how your stocks are holding up? Your device invites you to live in the hyper-present. Whatever your brain is thinking *right now* can appear on the screen glued to your hand.

No one can begin to fully understand or accurately predict how our world's digitisation will shape our collective lives, much less how it will affect the next generation. Some have compared the proliferation of these new technologies to the invention of the printing press, which democratised access to ideas and, in many ways, enabled the rise of science, capitalism, modern political theory and so much more. One of the catalysts of the Reformation, Martin Luther, even described the printing press as

'God's highest and extremist act of grace, whereby the business of the gospel is driven forward.'

Hundreds of years from now, when believers look back on the early twenty-first century, will today's unprecedented technologies of access – the digitisation of virtually all human knowledge, media and relationships – be seen as an act of God's grace, driving the gospel forward? What kind of evangelists will these young digital natives be?

In a recent study to examine the what, when and how of faith-sharing in the age of screens, six out of ten Millennials told us that 'technology and digital interactions make me more careful about how and when I share my faith', and that 'people are more likely now than in the past to see me as offensive if I share my faith'. Two out of three said that people nowadays are so busy with their screens that they 'are more likely to avoid real spiritual conversations'. Of course, screens *can* make sharing faith easier – but those who use them in that way are an exception to the rule.

Discipling the next generation

More than a decade's worth of research with nearly one hundred thousand teens, young adults, parents and church leaders reveals how young faith *can* mature and thrive in cultural exile. Even now there are seeds of hope germinating in the cracks, breaking through in places such as the UK, Ireland, Australia and the USA. What we find confirms what Christianity's long history records: the roots of faithfulness often sink deeper in anxious, unsettled times. Faith can grow even – and sometimes especially – in the darkest of places.

Remember Jesus's parable of the sower, in which a farmer scatters seeds on various kinds of ground? It illustrates the spiritual receptivity or resistance of the human heart, reflecting a range of possible responses to the good news of God's Kingdom. Through many centuries, this story has been used as a sort of growing guide to help Christians diagnose the condition of the soil they are working with and then provide suitable light, proper pruning and beneficial care.

As in that ancient story, today the soil of many hearts is rocky, dry and dusty, or filled with thistles and weeds, stifling what really matters. The age-old questions of being human remain unasked, shriveling like neglected seedlings. Deep spiritual longings, which ought to be lovingly tended and skillfully cultivated, are choked to death by binge television, immersive gaming and social media scrolling. If we are not vigilant and intentional, technology glitzes and blitzes our days so completely that we never get around to pursuing the deeper things of life.

We believe this generation wants and needs more. We believe the abundant way of Jesus, the family of God called the Church, and the ancient call of Christian mission can answer the stifled longings of this anxious age.