



High Hopes in a Grim World: Why Emerging Adults Need the Church

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Growing up in today's world is intense. With the expansion of globalization, young people are exposed to a variety of challenges: a disparity of wealth, a loss of privacy, the demands of curating an identity on social networks, and many other pressures that can impede a flourishing life.¹ It is little wonder that emerging adults (ages eighteen to twenty-nine) take longer to transition into adulthood as financial outlays are greater and it takes more time to reach milestones that signal adulthood: a job, home ownership, marriage, children, etc.² Making matters more difficult is the pressure placed on emerging adults from those people in older

¹ Miroslav Volf, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 35–36.

² Jeffery J. Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (2000): 469–80. In 2000, Jeffrey Arnett presented a theory of emerging adulthood in which he argued that young people were taking longer to grow up than previous generations, as measured by their entry into stable adult roles as well as their own self-perception of not-fully-adult status. As a result, a new term needed to be created. In a later work, Arnett argues that the lengthening of emerging adulthood is the result of four revolutions within society: the technology revolution, the sexual revolution, the women's movement, and the youth movement. Important to this essay is the opportunity a delayed adulthood has for the church because emerging adults have extended time to explore matters of faith. Jeffery J. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2–8.

Based off of his work with young adults in campus ministry, the author suggests that they need not only the promise of God that brings hope and meaning to a very complex world, they also need Christian mentors who will listen to them and guide them through the twists and turns of an often grim world.

generations who were able to achieve such milestones in an age when the intense pressures of globalization were not as apparent.

Thankfully, even though emerging adults feel the weight of adulthood, many are learning how to navigate this world. In the words of The Who's song, "The kids are alright." In some real ways, emerging adults are all right even if it takes longer for them to grow into adulthood. In fact, Jeffery Arnett argues that emerging adults are doing quite well: "The evidence shows emerging adults overall to be highly contented with themselves and their lives, and remarkably optimistic."³ Arnett goes on to show that they have "high hopes in a grim world" as they believe they will be able to have a "good and satisfying life for themselves . . . even as the world deteriorates around them."⁴ In other words, young people are more resilient and less fragile than many make them out to be.

Though the kids are all right, one wonders what it means to have "high hopes in a grim world." It is encouraging to think of young adults as optimistic about their personal future. It is also frightening to think that their "high hopes" are based on their individual ability to flourish within their private aspirations while the rest of the world falls apart. This is too narrow a view of life and misses Scripture's grand vision of the whole of humanity flourishing. Even more, it appears to be asking the wrong question. Instead of the therapeutic question "How will I have my best life?" the better question is, "Who is the Lord of the world?"⁵ This shift not only offers a word for those facing a milieu in which the righteous suffer and the wicked thrive, but it also rightly addresses the question "Why church?" The church is the community of faith that engages this world for the sake of the neighbor instead of succumbing to or ignoring the evils of this world. In a grim world, the church proclaims Christ as its highest hope.

Unfortunately, today's church is promoting a therapeutic belief system that Christian Smith has named Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD). As defined by Smith, MTD has five principles:

- God exists, has ordered the world, and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.⁶

³ Jeffery J. Arnett, "Suffering, Selfish, Slackers? Myths and Reality about Emerging Adults," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 36, no. 1 (2007): 25.

⁴ Arnett, "Suffering, Selfish, Slackers?" 25.

⁵ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 8.

⁶ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162–63.

On the surface, MTD appears to be a good option for individuals flourishing within a global economy. While it is true that millions of people are doing well within this system, many others are not. And because God is a mere outsider to this system, today's worldview lacks the kind of transcendence needed to bring about a healthier world for all people. In fact, churches are unnecessary in such a worldview.

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For the church to break free from its therapeutic worldview, a strong word must come from outside to speak to the church and reclaim it. An example of such a word is the one spoken by John to the churches in Asia Minor (Rev 2–3). In John's revelation, Christ proclaims an apocalyptic "no" to mass consumption, toleration without love, and the idea of personal happiness at all costs, while also declaring an eschatological "yes" that breaks into a world created by God, redeemed by Christ, and continually made new by the Holy Spirit. Michael Gorman explains the importance of providing an alternative word both then and now: "With our vision corrected by the Lamb and our focus on him, we seek next to disengage our minds, hearts, and bodies from all that promises life but delivers death. We need to resist the seduction of normalcy and of civil religion, and engage the world in new ways and on new terms."⁷ The word from Christ proclaiming good news to the poor, release of the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, setting-free of prisoners, and proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor is necessary (Luke 4:18–19).

The task of the church is a matter of proclamation. The church must become a place where young people hear a message that truly matters.⁸ However, because emerging adults distrust religious organizations and are loath to enter church doors, much of today's proclamation needs to occur outside the church. This is where evangelists, in the form of mentors, are needed to accompany young adults on their journeys and offer a passionate word that pulls them into a life of discipleship.

Passion is needed because young people are drawn to it. As Kenda Creasy Dean argues, "If the church is going to make sense to adolescents, then our

⁷ Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 190.

⁸ Kara E. Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016). Powell and her team at the Fuller Youth Institute suggest six key practices to better engage young people, with the hope of keeping them engaged in the church: unlock key leadership, empathize with today's young people, take Jesus's message seriously, fuel a warm community, prioritize young people, and be the best neighbors.

ministry must be predicated on passion—the Passion of Christ, the passion of youth, and the passionate faith that is made possible when these two things come together.”⁹ Elsewhere, Dean writes, “So this is where we begin: with a passionate God, and with young people searching for passionate love, hoping against hope that their search is not in vain.”¹⁰ The gospel is a message of God’s passion for the world. The church flourishes when it witnesses to the passion of Christ and carries it to the ends of the earth.

Mentors must also demonstrate passion for emerging adults by spending time with them. The familiar adage applies in this context: Talk is cheap, but time is expensive. By spending time engaging, encouraging, challenging, and confronting emerging adults, mentors can demonstrate the love of Christ. In doing this, mentors will help the church see young adults not as fragile people who need to be fixed or as glorified saviors of the future, but rather as people Christ has redeemed and continues to sanctify.¹¹ Mentors can also help young people see the church as a place where the redemptive story of God is proclaimed and lived out.

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To use history as an example, John of Patmos in many ways was a mentor to the churches in Asia Minor. John was a credible witness because he suffered for the faith and encouraged others to join him. John’s invitation was a personal one as he knew intimately the situation of each church and was willing to confront them for their sin as well as commend them for their good deeds. Even more, John used the language of the Scriptures to strengthen the community as he called believers to follow Christ into a life of adventure. The church today could do well in emulating John.

As a thought experiment, what would happen if John of Patmos were taken out of the first-century context and set before an emerging adult for a conversation?

⁹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 22.

¹⁰ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26.

¹¹ James Fowler, “Adolescence in the Trinitarian Praxis of God” (presented at the 1996 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, Princeton, NJ, 1996), 13–14. Fowler argues that too often the church either glorifies young people or sees them as damaged and falling apart. To correct this, mentoring is needed: “Unless we have genuine sustained and personal relationships with youth, we can fall for these distorting caricatures. And unless we have a robust faith in a God whose providence extends to and actively works in and among us in this period, we could give up on them, and on ourselves. We could give up on the holy story of God’s creation, God’s loving governance, and God’s liberating and redemptive power acting in history and nature.”

Let's call this person Jordan of Portland.¹² How might this conversation go? Would John be able to speak a word to Jordan that was convincing? Though this might seem like a futile conversation, it might be one of the most essential conversations facing today's church, as the church's very existence depends on the Scriptures being used to create and sustain the faith. So let's turn our attention to John and Jordan's chat.

A WHIMSICAL CONVERSATION

A college student named Jordan approached a tattoo parlor in Portland, Oregon. A tattoo wasn't the goal, but rather a job. Jordan had recently completed an internship with a prominent advertising agency. Jordan's time as an intern was so successful that a job offer was in place following graduation. But Jordan had doubts about making a career in corporate America. As a gifted artist, this student was intrigued by the idea that tattoos create indelible art on people. With a deep breath, Jordan entered the shop where the owner, John, was a legend within the industry.

As the door closed, Jordan heard a person in the back call, "Give me a few minutes. I'm almost finished. Take a seat!" Jordan didn't mind the delay as it provided a moment to see if any friends were going to a party later that evening. Jordan was a bit wary of attending the party because the host would be one of the only familiar faces there, and the idea of spending the evening with a group of strangers did not sound fun. Thankfully, some friends had texted that they were going and would come by at eight. Jordan sent them a quick text and then waited for John.

After a few minutes, John came out of the back room. He was older than Jordan had expected. It was clear he had lived a hard life. His body was covered with tattoos, his hair was disheveled, and he was missing a couple of incisors. John stretched out his hand and Jordan shook it.

Sitting down, John said, "Let's get to it. Why do you want to be a tattoo artist?"

Nervously, Jordan blurted out, "Because I want to do something meaningful with my life."

¹² Elizabeth M. Morgan, "Contemporary Issues in Sexual Orientation and Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood," *Emerging Adulthood* 1, no. 1 (2013): 52. I have intentionally kept Jordan's gender ambiguous. Elizabeth Morgan recognizes the complexity and multidimensional nature of sexual identity development among both heterosexual and sexual-minority emerging adults. Today's church must understand the complexities and multidimensional nature of gender and sexual identity if it wants emerging adults to take the church seriously. The church may need to speak a contrary word on matters of gender and sexual identity; however, it must do so from a position of understanding and compassion.

John wanted to roll his eyes and thought, here was another entitled young person wanting to have a purpose-driven life handed to them. “Is there any other reason?” he asked.

“I recently completed an internship at a marketing firm, and I’m not sure about the ethics of the business.”

“Ethics?” asked John.

“I didn’t like selling items that weren’t needed to people who couldn’t afford them. It felt dirty.”

“Why is this a problem? If you don’t sell stuff, then you can’t live.”

“My parents say the same thing. I know I need money to live. But it seems that my whole life has been programmed to make money. I went to school to get a job to make money in order to be happy. How can you be happy when you sell shoes to people who already have thirty unused pairs in their closet?”

“I agree with you. However, my problem with consumerism isn’t just that it hurts the environment; it also exploits the poor. Take your phone, for instance. To make it go faster, the mineral coltan is used.”

“What’s wrong with coltan?” asked Jordan.

“The problem is that the world’s biggest deposits of coltan are mined along the equator in Africa. It happens in part of the Congo where children are exploited just so our phones will work faster.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I think the global economic system is like prostitution. Honestly, it might seem like no one is getting hurt, but the prostitute is doing all the work, taking all the risk, and keeping little of the money. It’s unhealthy. I think that’s how most economic systems work. The ones doing all the physical effort get little for their work. That’s why I’m committed to running a small business that takes care of both the customer and the employees.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way,” said Jordan. “But how can anyone do anything about it? I can fix something in front of me, but it seems like there is no way to stop the entire system.”

“Who said anything about stopping it?” said John. “Your job in life isn’t to fix the world. That’s God’s job. Your job is to resist the things of the world that are contrary to God.”

“It’s surprising to me to hear a guy in a tattoo shop talk about God, but that makes sense to me,” says Jordan. “Do you think God cares about how things work down here?”

“I do,” said John.

“I’m not so sure. When my grandparents take me to church, it’s so boring and doesn’t have anything to do with my life. I often wonder if God simply created everything and lets us go through life. If we do no harm, then we’ll be happy.”

John paused for a moment and then asked, “Are you happy?”

“What do you mean?” Jordan responded.

“You said that you weren’t completely happy in your internship. You also said that being a nice person leads to happiness. You appear to be a nice person. Shouldn’t you be happy?”

This question struck a nerve in Jordan. “Well, I am happy most of the time. Or at least I have lots of things that make me happy. I have quite a bit of privilege and plenty of opportunities. I treat people well.”

“I didn’t ask if you were a nice person with nice things,” pushed John. “I asked if you’re happy.”

“Well, that’s the problem. I’m not *unhappy*, but I’m also not *happy*. I’m more, ‘bleh’ than anything else. To be honest, that makes me anxious because I should be happy.”

“It’s okay not to be happy,” said John. “Honestly, I’m unhappy fairly often. I am getting to be old. There is much in this world that makes me upset. It rains too much here in Portland, and everything costs too much. But maybe you’re unhappy because you have the wrong idea about God.”

“God? What do you mean?”

“You said earlier that church is boring. But that might be because you haven’t encountered God. God is love. God made this world but also loves this world. This love drove God to send Jesus to suffer for humanity. Jesus spoke out against the leaders in Jerusalem who used their position to exploit the people. Jesus was executed on a cross because of his passion for people. But then after Jesus was raised from the dead, his followers were so moved by what Jesus did that they literally gave their entire lives to spread this message. Some were even killed for it. When you encounter that love, it causes you to love!”

“Interesting. I’m starting to like getting to know a Christian tattoo artist!” Jordan exclaimed. “I haven’t ever heard it put that way.”

Realizing they hadn’t spoken about tattoos yet, John shifted the conversation. “I guess we went down a rabbit hole of theology and social change. Let’s get back on track with our job issue. Do you want to learn about tattoos?”

Jordan perked up. “Yes, please!”

“There are three things you need to know about a tattoo: design, tools, and caring for the tattoo.”

“What do you mean by design?”

“The design includes the artwork, color, size, and placement. The design matters because it’s what someone wants to say to the world. When a person is sad, they might want art to remind them of a loved one or art to encourage them to endure the pain. Does that make sense?”

“It sure does,” answered Jordan. “Are there tattoos that you don’t like doing?”

“Absolutely,” laughed John. “I hate doing four-leaf clovers and Chinese symbols for people who don’t speak Chinese.”

“Why?”

“A tattoo is permanent and is meant to say something. Drawing shamrocks or anything else usually doesn’t have much meaning to it. That’s why I let the new tattoo artists do that kind of work.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“No, don’t misunderstand me. It’s good for new artists to practice on the mindless stuff. That’s how you get good at the craft. You can’t be good at something without first struggling through the basics.”

“That’s what I most fear in being a tattoo artist,” said Jordan. “I don’t want to be that tattoo artist who spells a name wrong or messes up the design.”

“You probably will. We all do,” explained John. “That’s how you get better. It’s part of the struggle. God works in the struggle—even in the mistakes.”

Jordan really liked hearing that and felt comfortable sharing a senior portfolio with John. John liked the art and made a job offer. “Can you start on Wednesday?”

“Absolutely! I look forward to it.”

“Me too,” said John.

As Jordan left the shop, a glance to the phone screen showed they had been talking for almost an hour. Even more, Jordan’s mind was now filled with many questions from their conversation. Jordan did not know if being a tattoo artist would be a lifelong career. But it wasn’t about a career at that moment. It was a joy to find someone to talk with and to be treated with respect. This bright-eyed student looked forward to spending more time with John and learning more from him (and maybe teaching him a thing or two as well).

REFLECTIONS

Clearly, this was a fabricated conversation, but it demonstrates how such an encounter might occur between people from different generations. Even more, it offers a few takeaways for church leaders to consider.

Ecology matters. In this meeting, Jordan, a product of the MTD worldview, is anxious. Jordan clearly wants a purposeful life but is struggling between making money and the ecological damage that results from mass consumption. Christian Smith has noted that concerns for emerging adults who criticize mass consumption “do not focus on inequality, the exploitation of overseas labor, or misplaced life values and priorities.” Rather, “they nearly all address problems around the environmental impact of mass consumerism and waste.”¹³ Historically, much of the justice work that has occurred within the church has had to do with human

¹³ Smith, *Soul Searching*, 86.

exploitation. The church should not shy away from concerns of exploitation; however, it would be wise to embed ecological stewardship into its messages.

Mentors matter. In this conversation, John challenged some of Jordan's views of work, religion, and life while also witnessing to Jesus in a winsome and inviting manner. Roger Nishioka and Melva Lowry, in their essay "Building Intentional, Demanding, Mutual Relationships for the Mentoring of Youth," argue that "the church needs to do more than try to understand the world of adolescents[;] it must engage them beyond the norms of their everyday life." The purpose of this engagement is to facilitate the kind of "steadfast, ecstatic, intimate, communal, transcendent experiences the Holy Spirit uses to awaken young people's awe, invite their wonder, and inspire their reach toward God and others through acts of costly love that both anchor the formation of faith and ground the transformation of the emerging ego."¹⁴ The mentoring relationship is crucial for the formation of young people.

The church will have to find new ways to engage emerging adults if it wants to remain relevant in this ever-changing world. If the church has the courage to do this, faith can flourish and emerging adults will discover that Christ is their highest hope in a grim world.

Evangelism matters. Finally, it is important to note that this encounter occurs outside the church. According to research from the ELCA Office of Planning, average weekly church attendance within the ELCA will decline from 899,000 (2017) to 15,811 (2041).¹⁵ Of course, this is only a projection; however, it highlights the need for church members to leave the safe confines of their buildings and learn to witness on the streets of everyday life. As stated above, this can and should take the form of mentoring. It also means the church should look at a variety of mediums, especially digital and social media, to engage emerging adults. One possible idea would be to consider a multi-site church made up of a physical congregation and a digital community. The church will have to find new ways to engage emerging adults if it wants to remain relevant in this ever-changing world. If the church has the courage to do this, faith can flourish and emerging adults will discover that Christ is their highest hope in a grim world. ⊕

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¹⁴ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 24.

¹⁵ Dwight Zscheile. "Will the ELCA be Gone in 30 Years?" (September 5, 2019), <https://tinyurl.com/rc9p6r4>.