

How Will We Reach the 'Nones'?

Emma grew up in a small town her whole life. She dated and had a steady boyfriend for two years, until he succumbed to the ribbing of his football teammates and tried drugs for the first time. After learning of his newfound habit, Emma's parents forbid her to see him. But after spending most of her time with him and his friends for the previous two years, she never really found a place to belong again. The local churches' youth groups were nonexistent; her sister had her own friends, and failed attempts to make the school's sports teams left her feeling rejected. At home, she often saw and heard her parents fighting about money and didn't get the attention she wanted from a distracted mom consumed with trying to keep her marriage together.

This May she graduated from high school. One glance at her Twitter account reveals who Emma is today. Years of feeling isolated, unaccepted, directionless and angry now play out in 140-character posts:

"I hate my parents. They're always wondering what I'm doing wrong w my life."

"Everyone I love leaves me or doesn't care abt me."

"Ugh. My mom is making me go 2 church. It's so boring. Someone come save me. Now. Help me!"

Unfortunately, Emma isn't the exception. You've probably heard repeatedly that the church is losing (or has lost) this generation. It may sound like a worn-out phrase to those not connected with the youth of today, but anyone who works with teens in some capacity knows this is the sad reality.

A 2012 Pew Research Center study revealed that one-fifth of

the U.S. public—and a third of adults under 30—are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research polling. In the last five years alone, those who marked “none” identifying their religious affiliation have increased from just over 15 percent to almost 20 percent of all U.S. adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6 percent of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14 percent).

Motivated by these findings, the Barna Research Group delved deeper with their own study to explore the nation’s emerging post-Christian landscape. The study found that the younger the generation, the increasingly post-Christian it is compared with its predecessors. Nearly half (48 percent) of Mosaics (ages 3 to 21) qualified as post-Christian, compared with two-fifths of Busters (40 percent), one-third of Boomers (35 percent) and one-quarter of Seniors (28 percent).

Barna Research commented on their findings: “The [generational] differences are striking, and they suggest a less ‘Christianized’ nation in the decades to come. ... These patterns are consistent with other studies that show the increasing percentage of ‘Nones’ among younger generations.”

With these findings and statistics in mind, how do we redesign youth ministry to capture the hearts of church kids and win back the new teen atheists?

A Decades-Old Challenge

For the past 70 years, reaching young people has been a daunting challenge for the church. Since the term “teenagers” was conceived as a sociological group in the 1950s, the struggle to authentically pass on faith has met continued resistance. In each season, the church has faced the challenge with diverse tactics in hopes of reconnecting the younger generation with the gospel. During the Billy Graham crusades

and Youth for Christ movement of the 1950s, millions of youth were won to Christ. The 1960s gave rise to a number of ministries, such as Young Life, birthed to take the gospel to campuses. Thankfully, many of those ministries have stood the test of time and still exist.

We also saw the emergence of a new leadership species: the youth pastor. Senior pastors seeking to be diligent in their duties to care for the younger generation hired youth pastors who specialized in grounding teens in their faith. I was one of those teens in the 1970s who was reached by a youth pastor in the middle of my party lifestyle. I thank God for his intervention in my life.

Each youth generation has faced its challenges. And for the most part, the church has always risen to those challenges, ensuring that the gospel was passed on.

Yet today we face a whole new set of truth-obscuring obstacles. The Internet and media pull at the hearts and minds of teens as they seek community (including virtual, pseudo community fueled by social media), acceptance and a place to belong.

For the past 25 years at TeenMania's Acquire the Fire conferences, I have stood face to face with teens every weekend. In each season, I've worked hard to bring a message that's relatable to teens—helping them deal with the most urgent issues they face—while boldly proclaiming the orthodox biblical gospel. Each year, we wrestle with how to present the gospel to the millions of teens who will come to our events, listening to the thousands who after high school have come to our campus for an internship called the Honor Academy (see *An Unshakeable Nation*).

This real-life, consistent experience has given me perspective and insight to ask two essential questions: *In light of today's advancements and "progress," what are the most*

poignant challenges to reaching an ever-changing group? As leaders of Jesus' church, how do we confront these challenges?

Our Current Dilemma

Think about the above-mentioned studies, then add to them this report: In a 2007 poll by the Pew Research Center, 83 percent of Millennials said they “never doubted God’s existence.” In 2012, that number decreased to 68 percent—a 15-point drop in five years.

These trends are no doubt the result, in part, of the popularity of the “new atheists” and the growing trend of tolerance as the ultimate virtue. These factors have caused the younger generation to regress, believing that even if God exists, Jesus could not be the only way to God. For example, consider the sentiments and comments of popular atheist authors like Christopher Hitchens and TV personalities such as Bill Maher, who regularly serves up one-liners like these:

- “Believing in God is like believing in your invisible friend.”
- “Even if there was a God, believing that His Son, Jesus, is the only way to God is so arrogant. It is so intolerant of you to judge other religions and think that you are the only one who is right.”
- “Believe in Easter Bunny, Santa Claus and Jesus Christ: All are fantasy, your parents just forgot to tell you about Jesus.”

Hearing these and their derivatives in sitcoms and classrooms thrusts teens—churchgoing and not—into a conflict, especially when they realize they have no response. Because they have been told to “just believe,” regardless of what anyone says, they are both humiliated and embarrassed. “Just believing” is getting more and more difficult. As a result, today’s teens are literally being mocked—not talked—out of their faith!

The strategy of the mockers is simple:

- 1) Use ridicule to label people of faith as anti-intellectual or irrational.
- 2) Set off a false dichotomy between science and faith, asking people to choose one or the other.
- 3) Keep the debate one-sided by not allowing dissenting opinion in the public arena, ensuring that expressions of faith are only allowed in religious settings.

Add to that the fact that by the time a teen graduates from high school, he has been exposed to 40,000 hours of television and movies and 11,000 hours in the classroom, while getting only 800 hours in church. It's easy to see, then, as Christian media and film critic Ted Behr writes in his book, *The Culture Wise Family*, how teens are overcome with prevailing cultural views.

Hearts Not Heads

Part of our challenge as we reach out to young people who have grown up in church is that we've literally won their *hearts* to Christ, but not their *heads*. In other words, they may have a really moving experience at church, youth group or summer camp, but they are not taught how to think deeply about their faith. They are "low information believers."

Here's what you and I can do:

Seek to understand: If we were in another country as a missionary, the first thing we would do is to try to understand life from the viewpoint of those in the culture we were trying to reach—to learn their perspective on life and their concept of God. It's the same with reaching post-Christian teens.

Considering that almost half of this generation is post-Christian—and most have grown up in church—we would be wise to recognize that even though we talk about God every week, teens

are not necessarily on the same page as us. The 2005 National Study on Youth and Religion found that even though many teens call themselves Christians and attend church every week, their beliefs are so different from orthodox Christianity that they are now labeled “moral therapeutic deists.” They may be using the same words as us, but the meanings for salvation, commitment to Christ and the concept of “God” are completely different. They may really believe that Jesus is good for them but not the “only way” to heaven, since in their view that would be arrogant and narrow minded.

In seeking to understand, we need to know what our teens believe and why they have come to specific conclusions. To communicate with them, we need to understand how they think and the connotations to our spiritual Christian-speak—and then find new metaphors and phrases to connect the truth of Scripture to their present paradigm in a meaningful way.

For example, if you’re talking about homosexuality—and addressing the popular belief that people are born this way—start with a point of agreement: “We all know that everyone wants to be loved and to love. The question is: What is an appropriate expression of that love? You might say, ‘Anything is appropriate; love whomever you want.’ Of course you don’t really believe that, because you wouldn’t accept a romantic relationship between any adult and a 3-year-old, right? So you do have a line. And I have a line (that I found in Scripture). It’s OK to admit you have a line somewhere. So do I; we just have them in different places. So let’s talk about where to put that line and why.”

With this example, you’ve leveraged questions for them to ponder. Don’t think you need to (or even can) get them to change their thinking immediately. Give them questions that bother them.

Remember, we can no longer simply say, “The Bible says this, so do it.” They may not care what the Bible says, and it may

not be a good enough reason for them anyway (since they doubt Scripture's authority in their life). They want to see we have good reasons for what we believe.

Sometimes our version of getting truth through to teens is similar to going overseas and speaking really loudly and slowly so the person who knows no English will understand you. If we use the same words we've always used, we'll get the same results we have now. We may be saying words, but the important thing is how they interpret what we're saying. Is it changing their perspective? Is it touching their heart? I've found that even though I'm in youth ministry and think I'm relatable, if I do not keep asking questions and seeking to understand, my words become limp and lifeless to the ears I want to affect most.

Live authentic lives: This should go without saying, but I can't stress how important living authentically is to the younger generation. They are so used to seeing hypocrisy when it comes to religion. Yet they are looking for traces of authenticity to connect our lives to our message. The adage "more is caught than taught" may be truer now than ever.

This doesn't mean that we need to be perfect. In fact, teens like it better when we're not perfect, if we talk about our imperfections, wounds and flaws. Somehow, most of us grew up and were trained for ministry in a way that presumed we needed to put out a performance of perfection so others could live up to it. None of us could live perfectly, so many leaders just lived one way but preached another.

The time for show is over. *Our life is our show.* Honestly sharing the issues we have struggled (and are currently struggling) with—and how God helped/is helping us confront and walk through those issues demonstrates authenticity to the younger generation. They will be more willing to trust what we have to say about Jesus.

Senior pastor engagement: We are in a time of potential crisis in the church, and as has happened in past seasons, church leaders have the opportunity to rise to the occasion and focus our attention on getting the truth of the gospel firmly planted into the hearts and heads of the next generation.

The senior pastor determines what's important to the church. As I mentioned earlier, as a teen a youth pastor reached me. But it was the senior pastor of the church who drew me to the deeper things in Christ. Ultimately, he invited me to live with him and his family for my senior year of high school after discovering I'd been kicked out of my house because of my faith. This man took a risk on behalf of the younger generation.

Unconventional encounters with God: The undeniable distinctive with this generation is the amount and frequency of media it consumes. Of course, now it's not just TV and movies. Every handheld gaming device known to man has somehow been made into a constitutional right of ownership at increasingly younger ages.

My concern is about not only the content (I wrote extensively about this in my book *Battle Cry for a Generation*), but also the frequency of time they're consistently in front of a screen. I continue to hear of teens (and adults) spending hours, sometimes all night, in front of a screen playing video games. Even if they regularly attend church and youth group, it's increasingly difficult to connect in a meaningful way.

Extracting teens from the noise long enough to engage their hearts and minds can happen in a number of creative ways. Summer camps and retreats have long been known for their great impact on teens. How much more important are events like these to serve as a culture detox of sorts, to pull them away from all the confusing voices long enough to hear God's voice.

This is what we've worked so hard for as we carefully plan out

the 27 hours that thousands of teens spend at Acquire the Fire each weekend. This phenomenon has been called a “temporary suspension of disbelief,” as a teen will come to our gathering and think, *I don't really believe all this stuff, but there are thousands of others singing and worshipping, so maybe it's true.* Then after a few hours, the calloused layers begin to peel off. The heart softens. God breaks through.

I think of a story about a hardened teen that Jacob Bergui, a veteran youth pastor in New Jersey, shared with me. This kid refused to respond to the gospel. His single mother had come to Jacob saying, “I’m going to get my kid here, but I need you to get through to him!”

Jacob used every trick in the book to get through. He met with him one on one, used everything he knew to build a relationship with him, but Mom still had to force the teen to come to church. He was still living his worldly lifestyle. Finally when Acquire the Fire came to town, his mom forced him to go.

The teen was having a pretty good experience surrounded by more than 10,000 peers worshipping God. Little did Jacob know that the following week the 15-year-old would bring all of his secular CDs to him and say, “I’m through—you can have them all!” Shocked, Jacob stared at the pile of music and asked, “Why now?” The teen described how God had gotten hold of him over the weekend and how he really “got it.” Four years later, this young man is now growing in his maturity in Christ and still on fire for God!

Sending teens on a mission trip provides the same effect. Teens are extracted from the culture for a week, maybe two or, even better, a month (the longer, the better in my experience), giving them a chance to see God do some real work in their lives.

I think of Jeremy, a 14-year-old pastor’s kid who had heard

the gospel preached his entire life. He went on a mission trip with his youth group to get away from his parents and have fun, and after six weeks in Guatemala was revolutionized. Jeremy came back with a passion and zeal for God and began sharing with his friends what he had found. Each summer throughout his teen years, he returned to the mission field, always bringing more friends with him. After graduation, he went on to college and then to live on the mission field for a number of years. As a result of that initial trip, Jeremy is still in active ministry today, often sharing how that trip to Guatemala was when “my faith became my own.”

Creative apologetics: Equipping the flock to “give an account for their faith” has taken on a whole new meaning when we examine how this culture demeans people of genuine faith. We live in a world full of one-liners and comedic mockery. We can’t teach our people just to approach the “nones” with statistics and data to prove the Bible when they’re wrestling with truth. They aren’t interested in a dialogue about the probability of Jesus actually fulfilling 800 prophecies in His lifetime. To them, using the Bible to prove the Bible just is a lot of ineffective circular reasoning.

What if, in addition to Scripture, we were to find ways to talk about God that validates His existence and the truth that Jesus is the only way to Him?

Consider this potential dialogue: “When I pick up a phone to call home, is it arrogant of me to believe that only one number will cause that phone to ring? What about a pilot flying an airplane? Is it arrogance for him to insist there is only one way to fly that plane? What about a doctor who insists there is only one medicine for your ailment. Is that arrogance? Throughout life, we’re not offended that there’s only one way. In fact, we’re quick to admit, ‘I dialed the wrong number.’ Why is it so outrageous to think that there is only one way to the Creator?”

What if we not only taught teens the arguments for the validity for their faith (which we must do), but we also equipped them with one-liners that provoked doubters to seriously question why they doubt. In this manner we can start to transform “low-information believers” into “high-processing disciples.”

When our kids literally have no response to the guy who says, “You’re so arrogant to think you know the only way to God,” their belief begins to wane. No one wants to be seen as judgmental about other religions, so our kids slowly move into the Universalist belief system.

Simply telling teens, “The Bible says so,” does not work to validate their faith in today’s culture, nor does it work for those with no faith.

This is our moment. History will record what the leaders of the church in the 21st century did when it looked as if the most Christian and wealthy/generous nation in the world’s history tipped towards atheism in mass. We have the opportunity to rise and do what our courageous forefathers have done in the past as we focus on planting the gospel firmly in the hands of the next generation.

*The author of 35 books who has made numerous media appearances, **Ron Luce** continues to be a significant voice not only to emerging generations, but also to parents and pastors, helping them understand the plight of today’s youth and showing them how to be part of the solution.*