A Gospel for the Twenty-First Century

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The Gospel for Youth

Every age segment of the Church is unique, and requires unique methods of communicating and equipping. No one would disagree that ministry to children differs from ministry to young adults, which differs from ministry to senior Christians. In this lesson, we will look at just one age segment of the population – youth – which we will broadly classify as 13-25 years of age.

We have focused in on the young generation for three primary reasons:

The Gospel for the World
The Gospel for the Church
The Gospel for Israel
▶ **The Gospel for Youth** ◀
The Gospel for the End Times

- ➲ Because today's youth require special methods and styles of communication, due to the impact upon our culture of rapidly changing technologies.

- ➲ Because youth are the cutting edge of today's Church and the foundation of tomorrow's Church.

- ➲ Because youth are the people who will shape tomorrow's society.

What will tomorrow's world be like? The seeds of that world can be found in youth culture today. For this reason, "[if] you want to understand the future, you have to understand those who will dictate the contours of the days to come."[1] In his book *Real Teens*, George Barna explains:

> "[Adults] have a classic love-hate relationship with teenagers. We love their energy, their creativity, their carefree pursuit of new possibilities, their sense of hope. But we hate their defiance, their unpredictability, their ease with change, and their propensity to challenge what everyone else holds dear. But whether the adult population likes it or not, teenagers are the future of the nation, so it is imperative not only to continue to shape the values, morals, beliefs and behaviors of young people, but also to understand where they're coming from and where they're going. As a group, teenagers are a force to be reckoned with; increasingly, they are not a group that is looking for moral and behavioral guidance, but are a segment seeking to influence the world based on the moral and spiritual foundations they have already adopted."[2]

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And so it is important not only to understand what makes youth "tick," but also to understand how as a generation that are shaping the world around us, and will continue to shape the world in the years to come. Only when we understand today's youth will be able to communicate the Gospel effectively to them.

The Generation Gulf

The term "generation gap" has been in vogue ever since the counter-culture decade of the 1960s. But since then, the generation gap has not diminished; if anything, it has widened, becoming a full-fledged "generation gulf."

> "The good news is that the gap is about as big as it ever is going to be. This is because technology has so quickly taken today's young people away from the knowledge and wisdom of their parents...The bad news is that the gap is about as big as it ever is going to be! That means we have more work to do *right now* than we ever have had to do, in order to understand and reach people who are not the same age as us. It also means that we have very few models we can look to in order to find help. We need to start from square one and develop new models that work for us in this time of transition."[3]

The difference between how adults view teens and how teens view themselves is stark. George Barna explains:

> "Talk to teenagers and they have a rather healthy self-image. But ask them how they believe adults perceive teenagers and the picture changes dramatically... [T]he widespread talk about teenagers as 'slackers' and 'pessimists' is borne of adult perceptions, but does not at all seem to mirror the self-perceptions of teenagers."[4]

A recent survey[5] revealed just how differently American teens perceive themselves. The survey offered the teen respondents eighteen adjectives from which they could select to describe themselves. Here are the results:

- ➲ "Happy" – 92%
- ➲ "Responsible" – 91%
- ➲ "Self-reliant" – 86%
- ➲ "Optimistic about my future" – 82%
- ➲ "Trusting of other people" – 80%
- ➲ "Very intelligent" – 79%
- ➲ "Physically attractive" – 74%
- ➲ "Seen by others as a leader" – 69%
- ➲ "Religious" – 64%
- ➲ "A committed Christian" – 60%
- ➲ "Spiritual" – 60%
- ➲ "Very popular" – 57%
- ➲ "Emotionally sensitive" – 55%
- ➲ "Skeptical" – 45%
- ➲ "Stressed out" – 36%
- ➲ "Lonely" – 11%

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Overall, as you can see, the self-image of the average American teenager is largely positive. When these same teens, however, were asked to identify how they believe adults perceived them, the responses were very different:

- ➲ "Lazy" – 84%
- ➲ "Rude" – 74%
- ➲ "Sloppy" – 70%
- ➲ "Dishonest" – 65%
- ➲ "Violent" – 57%

While the majority of the respondents admitted that most adults would describe them as "friendly" (63%) and "intelligent" (58%), and that some might characterize them as "trustworthy" (36%), "family-minded" (33%), "making America a better place" (31%), "hard working" (29%) and "spiritual" (21%), it is obvious that teens do not have a positive self-image when trying to view themselves through the lens of the older generation.

What this amounts to is a serious gulf of perception. Young people believe that the older generation does not have a correct view of youth, and this perceived gulf in perception has serious repercussions for teens. George Barna explains:

> "The real issue is not whether teenagers have an accurate understanding of how adults view young adults. Perception is reality, and teens will act on the basis of their perceptions. The fact that teenagers so overwhelmingly perceive adults to possess negative views of young people creates a major chasm between young and old people. Most teenagers believe they cannot get a fair shake from those who hold the power in our society. Consequently, their choices and behaviors reflect their sense of being unjustly judged and rejected by adults."[6]

This gulf in perception has resulted, not surprisingly, in many churches experiencing "difficulty building effective cross-generational teams," and explains "why so few organizations have effectively rallied young people around a vision, cause or purpose that might ordinarily appeal to young adults: more often than not, those organizations are led by adults perceived to hold negative views about teens and young adults. Without a sense of acceptance and respect, young people are not prone to submitting themselves to the leadership of people or organizations that have failed to embrace them."[7]

What is the remedy to this gulf of perception? George Barna draws this conclusion:

> "The answer to the perceptual gap is not more programs, more events or more materials. Teens need unconditional love from their parents, and they need it to be expressed in a variety of very tangible ways."[8]

And so, not surprisingly, the Gospel for Youth begins in the exactly same way as the Gospel for All Generations – unconditional love. Even if behavior doesn't yet line up with God's Word, the starting point is genuine love. We are to extend grace to youth in the same way that God has extended grace to us.

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Profile of a Generation

The best starting point for bridging the generational gulf is to appreciate the uniqueness of today's generation of youth. Brenda Laurel quotes the findings of Cheskin Research regarding American teenagers:

> "They're potentially the most powerful generation ever. They're generally well educated and well cared for. They're widely connected, have powerful computers in their homes and schools, and are extremely sophisticated. Many have a global perspective. They're already convinced that the environment is important to save, politicians are suspect and sex is dangerous. On the other hand, they have few, if any, role models who aren't either athletes, actors or models. Money is seen as the main reason for working and heroes are billionaires. They have never known anything but prosperity and good economic times. The way to get ahead is to avoid too many years invested in education, jump into the stock market game, and break all the rules."[9]

This brief summation of Cheskin Research's findings shows that today's youth are:

- ➲ Connected
- ➲ Sophisticated
- ➲ Cynical
- ➲ Globalistic
- ➲ Consumeristic
- ➲ Model-lacking
- ➲ Rule-breaking
- ➲ Powerful

While we should avoid falling into the trap of making generalizations, these adjectives can help us better understand the qualities common to many of today's youth. So let's take a quick look at each of these eight attributes:

Connected

> "They're widely connected, have powerful computers in their homes and schools..."

Technology has greatly enhanced the "connectedness" of today's youth. While the telephone and television have played a major role, the Internet in particular has shaped how young people interact with each other and with the world at large.

This connectedness (or more accurately, inter-connectedness) is one of the defining characteristics of today's youth. But when it is harnessed within church life, it may prove to have far-reaching impact on tomorrow's church. In fact, whether we like it or not, the Internet is relentlessly shaping how church will be experienced in the decades to come. As George Barna observes:

> "Fifteen years from now you may tell your grandchildren that back in the old days, when people wanted a religious experience they attended a church for that purpose. Chances are good that your grandchildren will be shocked by such a revelation."[10]

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What does this connectivity through technology mean for today's youth when it comes to their search for spiritual meaning? According to recent research, 12% of teenagers use the Internet for religious or spiritual experiences,[11] and this is likely to increase in the years to come, as teens enter early adulthood. Around 16% of teens say that within the next five years they expect to use the Internet as a substitute for their current church-based religious experience.[12]

> "You can buy books on the Internet, strike up relationships on the Internet and a growing proportion of the population are experiencing God in cyberspace, as well. A new study...indicates that among the growing number of Americans who use the Internet, millions are turning to the digital dimension to get them in touch with God and others who pursue faith matters. The report projects that within this decade as many as 50 million individuals may rely solely upon the Internet to provide all of their faith-based experiences."[13]

Of course, the Internet can't provide the sole arena of either social interaction or church life. Youth still want to meet face-to-face. However, just the Internet enhances these social interactions, so it can enhance the experience of church life for youth.

Sophisticated

> "They're generally well educated and well cared for...and are extremely sophisticated."

The result of modern connectivity means that today's youth are much more sophisticated in their outlook than the youth of previous generations. They are exposed much earlier to a range of opinions, and are better equipped to discuss those opinions with great sophistication.

The teenager's approach to spirituality is just one of the factors influenced by this increasing sophistication, and for this reason teenagers often view church life as superficial and, therefore, irrelevant to their lives.

Cynical

> "...politicians are suspect and sex is dangerous."

While it is important not to stereotype youth as completely cynical, many young people show a marked distrust toward politics, organized religion and institutional authority. Top-down information is not as valued as interactive information.

Teenagers have been exposed very early to the "facts of life" through movies and the Internet. Everything from sexuality to psychology is discussed within their peer groups. For this reason, teens often see through the thin veneer of hypocrisy and lies that proliferate the adult world.

Globalistic

> "Many have a global perspective. They're already convinced that the environment is important to save..."

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Despite increasing tribal tendencies, today's youth form the basis for the first truly global culture since the Tower of Babel. It is for this reason that the globalist agenda is aimed primarily at children, teenagers and young adults. Some of these global values are positive – for example, concern for the environment or the desire to break down cultural and racial barriers – but without the strong moral foundation provided by the Bible, youth may not be able to discriminate against globalistic values that are anti-Gospel and displeasing to God.

Consumeristic

> "Money is seen as the main reason for working and heroes are billionaires. They have never known anything but prosperity and good economic times…"

One value that today's young generation has largely embraced is consumerism. As Brenda Laurel observes:

> "Kids speak the language of money very well; they are among our finest consumers. Teens in America control around $160 billion dollars in annual spending."[14]

She goes on to say that many in prior generations "began their political lives at tender ages. They read the classics in Greek and Latin and studied the stories of Athens, Rome, and the Republic of Venice. They were well-educated kids looking for action – more precisely, for the ability to take action in the arena of government and politics. For young people today, the desire to take action is much more likely to eventuate in a purchase than a vote. We've taught them how to be good *consumers,* you see, but not necessarily how to be good *citizens.*"[15]

Model-lacking

> "…they have few, if any, role models who aren't either athletes, actors or models."

In times past, each new generation modeled itself after the previous generation. A young man was expected to become an apprentice to an older man, as he learned the trade selected for him, and often that older man was his own father. Likewise, a young woman grew up in the family environment, learning the "trade" of homemaking, with her mother as model.

Today, however, we live in a world which is in rapid flux. Youth no longer look upon the older generation as the template against which they can construct their lives. Instead, they draw upon a pot pourri of cultural values, cutting and pasting these values into a mosaic of their own making.

Rule-breaking

> "The way to get ahead is to avoid too many years invested in education, jump in the stock market game, and break all the rules."

There are indications that the desire to "avoid too many years invested in education [and] jump in the stock market game" may be passing as today's youth enter a new world of global insecurity and economic instability. According to recent surveys, teenagers are becoming more conscious of the need for education and more

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contemplative of the future.[16] Yet the same rule-breaking tendency is there, as youth seek to push the boundaries of what can be done. They tend to approach spirituality "outside of the box," unconstrained by traditional theological parameters.

Powerful

"They're potentially the most powerful generation ever."

The combination of connectedness and sophistication is shaping a new generation of youth that "may be establishing new benchmarks of meaning, purpose and success. [This] emerging generation...is just now starting to mold its own identity and values."[17] George Barna observes:

> "It will be a few more years before we have a clear grasp of [this new generation of youth], but the early signs suggest that they may redefine the fundamentals of purposeful living based upon their unique experiences, environment and life opportunities."[18]

This generation of youth is powerful, but the question is how that power will be wielded. "The youngest generation is already starting to makes waves in our culture in areas ranging from music and language to sexual patterns and educational commitment. This new segment of our population earned the label 'Mosaics' in response to various attributes it possesses. Among those attributes are their eclectic lifestyle, their non-linear thinking style, the fluidity of their personal relationships, their cut-and-paste values profile, and the hybrid spiritual perspective most of them have developed. While the labels assigned to the previous pair of generations were based upon their size – i.e. Baby Boom, Baby Bust – this new group is more likely to be known for their character, even though they are likely to eventually surpass the Baby Boomers as the most numerous generation in the US history."[19]

Under the Microscope

The average adult approaches communication with young people with one basic assumption: "I understand how they think." Usually this assumption is based on a vague memory of "how it was when I was young." But it is important, when communicating with *anyone*, not to generalize and stereotype.

> "In American society it is difficult to make sweeping generalizations about any group of people. Teenagers are a microcosm of the American population – more than 20 million young people, each of whom is unique and bristles at being stereotyped, categorized or labeled."[20]

George Barna, however, has evaluated the personality types of teenagers, and his research suggests that they fall into four broad personality niches:

➲ **Interactives** – This personality type makes up nearly half of the American teenage population. "These are young people who are highly personable and develop their lifestyle according to relational possibilities and parameters...this segment operates with a stream of consciousness approach to problem solving while remaining sensitive to the needs and feelings of those with whom they have contact."[21]

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- ➲ **Dynamos** – This personality type represents about one quarter of American teenagers. Dynamos "are the aggressive, focused, driven individuals who are effective at problem-solving and are above-average producers. However, they also irritate some with their relentless energy, competitiveness and self-assurance."[22]

- ➲ **Stabilizers** – This personality type makes up roughly one-fifth of American teenagers. Stabilizers "provide continuity and consistency wherever they are found...they are appreciated for their loyalty, thoroughness and predictability. They are also criticized for their rigidity and lack of creativity."[23]

- ➲ **Evaluators** – This personality segment represents fewer than one tenth of American teenagers. Evaluators "are the detail-oriented individuals who are continually assessing situations and people, and they insist on accuracy and completeness. They place lofty demands upon themselves – and others. Their perfectionist tendencies and aversion to taking risks can frustrate others."[24]

When dealing individually with teenagers, it is important to recognize that there is no such thing as an "average" teenager. While there are common traits that characterize today's generation of youth, there is much variation within that generation. When reaching out in evangelism or pastoral care to today's teens, it is important to treat each person as an individual.

The Gospel for Youth

When communicating the Gospel to youth, the communication principle we introduced in **Module 103** and developed in **Module 111** still applies.
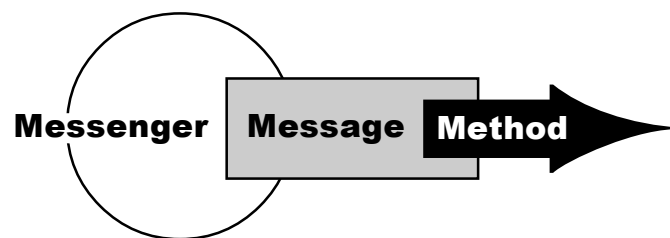
As we've seen in previous lessons, the priority flows from Messenger to Message to Method. God always works on the Messenger first, then clarifies the Message, and finally uses a specific Method to communicate that Message.

So let's take a look at the three parts of the Gospel for Youth:

The Messenger

The starting point of the Gospel for Youth is the Messenger. This element of the Gospel should include:

- ➲ **Credibility** – The perceived credibility of the speaker influences how much a young person will accept and respond to the Message.

- ➲ **Naturalness** – Modern youth are street-smart and can smell a fake. Young people are looking for the genuine article.

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⮞ **Identification** – If a young person can identify with the speaker, and believe that the speaker is identifying with him, he will be more receptive to what the speaker is saying.

The Message

In much ministry to youth today, there is a tendency to focus on the Method and neglect the Messenger and the Message. If this happens, there is a danger of the Method itself being perceived as the Message. For example, if the perceived message coming across in a Christian concert is, "Hey, it's cool to be a Christian," then the Message has been drowned out by the Method.

Any young person should be able to walk away from a Christian event with a clear understanding of the Message that is being communicated through the Method. That Message should contain the core elements of the Gospel:

⮞ **Revelation** – an understanding of Christ and the finished work of the Cross
⮞ **Repentance** – what it means to turn from self to God
⮞ **Reality** – the practical steps of living for God in the real world

The Method

Once the Messenger is credible and the Message is clear, then we can look at the Method, for this is the next important element in communicating to youth.

Today's young people are inundated with information, coming from a broad spectrum of sources – television, radio, internet, school, friends, magazines, books, parents and church. For this reason, youth have learnt to filter information on the fly. They are accustomed to receiving information at a faster rate than older adults; in fact, they are generally able to process different types of information, coming from a number of sources at the same time. This is why many TV programs and advertisements now throw a lot of simultaneous information at the viewer.

> "[In order] to make television more compelling to the remote control viewer, television editors sliced and diced their programming into more rapid-fire elements. Although any film textbook will explain that an audience cannot comprehend a shot with a duration of less than two seconds, and that such rapid-fire editing should be used only for effect, two-second shots and even one-second reactions soon became the norm of television."[25]

Many older adults bemoan the shorter attention span of today's youth. George Barna underscores the shortness of this attention span.

> "Time is treasured [by youth]...the tendency is to tune out after six to eight minutes – unless there is some type of transition that renews their interest."[26]

But what most adults don't realize is that although many young people do appear to have a *shorter* attention span, the *breadth* of their attention capacity is far wider than that of the older generation. In other words, young people are able to assimilate more information in shorter periods. When surfing the Internet, they are likely to have a number of windows open on their computer. And as they

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watch TV, more often than not, they will have a TV remote in their hand, as they swap back and forth between programs in rapid succession. Theirs is a "broad-band" approach to information and learning.

This should be taken into account when communicating the Gospel. Many forms of media can be used to communicate to youth, and the greater variety in the presentation, the more likely it is for youth to pay attention and absorb the content. In fact, appropriate technology is a great tool in communicating to youth.

> "The medium used to transmit information impacts the perceived credibility of that information. Information conveyed through the use of technology often has a higher degree of believability than does information coming directly out of a speaker's mouth."[27]

The most effective technique in communicating to youth, however, is to make a transition as quickly as possible from monologue to dialogue. Rather than being on the receiving end of a lecture, a young person wants to participate in the process of learning. "Don't tell me what to think," the average young person says. "Give me the options and let *me* think. Let me verbalize what I am learning."

Don't be worried if the process of dialogue with youth appears to be somewhat chaotic. Youth thrive on dynamic interaction, where a moderator guides, but doesn't control, the process of learning.

As we have emphasized throughout the Biblical Studies Course, communicating the Gospel is all about guiding another person along their own path of discovery. And this is especially true for communicating the Gospel to youth. Young people don't want pre-digested messages; they want to be able to discover for themselves that the Gospel is, indeed, God's will for their lives.

As with every generation of youth, today's young people represent a massive pool of as-yet untapped potential. To date, the younger generation has been largely self-focused, due to the generation gulf that has disempowered them.

But history has shown that when the young generation is driven by a purpose beyond themselves, society is impacted. What if today's young people catch a vision for the lost? What if they discover for themselves the power of the Gospel? What if they embrace the purpose of God for their lives? As with generations of youth before them, they have the capacity to change the world.

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27 George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church: A Blueprint for Survival* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), p.58.

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