Topic: "**Impacting and being impacted by the next generation" –** What can we learn from youth initiatives and how can we shape training with and for them?

Introduction:

There is a profound reality that the Gospel must be renewed for each generation. It must be preached (for salvation) and cultivated (for sanctification) in the hearts and minds of individuals. While it's true that the Gospel "message" is an inheritance to pass on to successive generations, salvation is the Spirit driven work of God in individual hearts and is not a family heirloom that can be passed on because ones father has it. God's redeeming work must be proclaimed and cultivated in successive generations regardless of cultural heritage. However, while salvation is the rebirth of *individuals*, our life in Christ is distinctly *corporate*. As a newborn can't flourish without sacrificial and intentional care from adults, babes in Christ must receive intentional care from the body as a whole. And yet, while our intent is to lead individuals to Christ and raise them as members to function in a complimentary unified manner, many see a different result. Many younger Christians struggle with living in complimentary unity in the context of the Church. They struggle to commit to sound doctrine and absolute truth. They resist the inspired, inerrant and authoritative nature of the Bible. They're tempted to regard life in Christ as individual consumers, rather than sacrificial servants. And conclusions about God are based more off of personal experiences and feelings than of divine revelation.

Over the past decades (from the1950's post WWII) the Western church has enjoyed a relatively successful campaign of "proclaiming" the gospel to generations. In particular, Evangelicals succeeded through ministry methods such as tent meetings, door-to-door evangelism, good news clubs, revival conferences, gospel driven summer camps and helpful evangelistic curriculum. However, Evangelicals have faced the significant challenge of creating and maintaining a ministry of discipleship that produces spiritual maturity characterized by biblical truth in the Christian faith of successive generations. Over the past decade, the Western church has seen a mass exodus of young people leaving the church during their formative college age years never to return as adults. Prior to this, we witnessed a trend in Western Evangelicalism where younger Christians wondered from their faith and the Church to satisfy the lure of the World only to see many return after discovering life without Christ was disappointing and dissatisfying. However, we see a disturbing new trend of younger generations leaving the Church and not returning. This is unique in that, in a real sense, they're not leaving to chase the temptations of the world, rather it can be attributed to a crisis of Christian identity as they discover the significant challenge of the seemingly incompatibility of their Christian faith in a secular world. Simply put, they are leaving and

disconnecting from the Church because they don't see how their Christian worldview fits into a world dominated by an antithetical one.

It is my purpose, tonight, to explore these challenges through the lens of Western (American) culture in particular. I won't attempt to comment on the successes and challenges in reaching a younger generation through the lens of another culture. **However, I pray that all of us can explore and learn from the problems and challenges of the Western church's attempts to reach younger generations in recent decades.** As we share one faith (Eph 4) and honor the diversity of our cultural backgrounds, let us examine the historical development of youth ministry in Western Evangelicalism. Specifically, the possible causes of this disconnection by taking an honest and gracious look into the challenge of absenteeism and spiritual immaturity in younger generations and explore the challenges of older generations in reaching and training them. Furthermore, I will effort to offer practical suggestions based off of biblical disciple making models in reaching and teaching younger generations in briefly examining Israel's *succession mandate*, Paul's approach to ministry training and Jesus' model of discipleship making.

A Younger Generation's Challenges of Spiritual Immaturity!

There are several reason why younger Christians seem to be spiritually immature and absent in the Western church. Author Thomas E. Bergler identifies these challenges as the *juvenilization* of American Christianity. He says, *"Juvenilization is the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted as appropriate for Christians of all ages. It begins with the praiseworthy goal of adapting the faith to appeal to the young. But it sometimes ends badly, with both youth and adults embracing immature versions of the faith."*[i] It's worth noting that youth ministries introduced necessary reform to Evangelical ministry in the late 20th century through creatively developing methodology with elements of more relevant cultural and social heavy peer-to-peer experiences. However, the unforeseen consequence of this approach to reaching and training younger generations was the pandering of consumerism, self-centeredness and the acceptable perpetuation of adolescent immaturity living on into adulthood in American sociology and spirituality. Thomas Bergler's argument is centered on the fact that Evangelical youth ministry grossly underestimated the influence that secular culture would have on presenting a clear gospel and the ability for youth to become *Salt and Light* in a secular world. In other words, they mistakenly assumed that culture was neutral and the mere implementation of secular social practices and pop-cultural trends would not affect the message nor hurt the spiritual development of American Christian youth. The utilization of cultural trends like adolescent social rituals, music styles, fashion as well as the socio-economics of advertising were mainly seen as mere packaging to attract large crowds in order to reach them with the Gospel and train them in the Truth. Cultural trends often times can't be completely separated from the secular worldviews from which they're born. Simply stated, a Worldview is fundamentally how an individual or society determines what *truth* is. This *truth* then forms a foundation of presuppositions for life determined by individual experiences, cultural heritage and

social rituals the people in that society practice. While it is true that effective Christian living should maintain a very thin line between the "secular and the sacred", we would be wise to realize that much of the "cultural packaging" one uses to attract and relate to modern Christians, come from assumptions that reflect how a secular culture defines *truth*, often times antithetical to ours. It would serve us well in reaching and training successive generations to view secular culture through the context of our faith rather than view our faith through the context of our culture.

By the 1950's, America and the rest of the world settled into collective relief upon the defeat of Nazism. New norms burrowed themselves into the Western psyche through the unbridled evils that WWII brought to a young generation of men and new family roles were established with many women remaining in the work force after the war. On the heels of these new norms, the 1960's and 70's plunged American society into the painful process of addressing civil rights in the midst of a growing distrust and suspicion between government and citizens. These were treated with intellectual, spiritual and sexual existential exploration to make sense of life's most pressing questions of human identity. In the wake of this self-centered means of discovery, the 1980's and 90's publically introduced a new definition of human sexuality, an unsanctified view of human life and a non-biblical framework for marriage and family. Things such as these built a new foundation for Western Christians to try to wrestle within their own culture. As a result, today, we see a new era of confusion about what truth is and the purpose of human existence amidst a web of "rightness" determined by each individual to find purpose and meaning. Over the past 60+ years of Western culture, new doubts in modern society have arouse about who God is and what He's doing on the earth, the identity and place of the Western church is in flux with the rise of democratic liberalism and a technological boom challenging the very nature of what it means to be human.

So this begs the question, how did Evangelicals respond in reaching and training younger generations in a complex world such as this and what can we learn?

Again, Thomas Bergler, makes the historical argument that in trying to reach younger generations with the gospel and equip them spiritually, Evangelicals, adopted the following ministry methods: *separation*, *activism* and *pop-culture social trends*.

Like many churches today, a common youth ministry method used is *separating* age groups within the Christian community. This method was started in the 1950's by many Evangelical para-church organizations that acted on the premise that churches weren't effectively reaching youth. The thinking was that by separating youth from the rest of the body, this would allow for more effective ministry in specifically speaking into their unique social and developmental needs. Although there is great value in assessing the spiritual and social developmental needs of youth to more effectively minister to them, there were two primary problems with this line of

thinking. First, para-church ministries often times weren't under direct influence or partnership of any church. Secondly, under the assumption that peers who shared the same cultural social structures would be most effective in reaching each other, this model heavily relied on youth leading youth. This had long-term effects still being felt and practiced in the church today. A primary consequence was that several generations of young people were not spiritually raised to see the design and essential value of the community and function of the local church.   As a result, young Christians passively avoided the shepherding from church leaders (Heb 13:7, 1Pet 5:1-5), older Christians (Titus 2:1-8) and parents as well as the exercise of "the priesthood of all believers" essential to training for the Christian life (1Pet 2:4-5, 1Cor 12).   This reinforced spiritual immaturity as well as alienated generations further from one another. **With that said, I don't see the problem being *separation* in itself, rather, that it produced a subsidiary of the Church and became a much more threatening issue.** In other words, younger generations have come to believe that "youth group" was essentially church and the corporate gathering wasn't important or primary in the development of the Christian life.

The second method Bergler identifies is *activism*. As para-church youth ministry successfully homogenized activities to a specific social demographic, many felt the best way to make the gospel attractive and facilitate spiritual growth was to spur them on to *action*. Social justice was to become the main stage to connect the gospel with the unsaved world. This activism was seemingly centralized at the expense of sound teaching and the historical centrality of the Church. America's essential and ongoing civil rights efforts (especially in the 1960's) provided an ideal environment to facilitate this. As a result, in efforts to be a "light for Christ" many young Christians began to speak out concerning issues like racism, gender equality and environmentalism. Additionally, today's young Christians are passionate about poverty, human trafficking and capitalism. Issues such as these became the focal point in which young Christians gathered, essentially becoming the basis for their identity as modern Christians**.** Emphatically, the Bible calls Christians to be proactive in caring for the suffering and marginalized, rejecting prejudice and bigotry and outwardly embody Christ-likeness (i.e. James, 1Jn, Gal 5, etc.). **However, activism that is separated from the grounding of Christ's atoning work and love, isolated from the redemptive plan on the earth through His Church can be a harmful formula producing an impure gospel and a confused Christian identity.** Unforeseen by Evangelicals, many young Christians began to align themselves with secular organizations and dividing politics rather than the Christian community and a deep understanding of God's Word. This led to frustration through the unethical, hypocritical and ineffective efforts of the adult secular community. This eventually resulted in the apathy and indifference that would plague American youth in the 1970-80's. As a result this left Evangelicals scrambling for another methodological fix to recapture the interest and attention of a younger generation in hopes of reigniting proclamation of the gospel and spiritual growth through activism.

This, third, methodological fix was utilizing *secular culture*. As churches struggled with keeping the attention of younger Christians, Evangelicals began to implement tactics of *secular pop-culture* in hopes of drawing scores of young people to preach a relevant gospel and emotionally inspire them into activism for Jesus, once again. As a result, ministries began using more media, music and social activities to fill their programming. This naturally suppressed an emphasis and practice of spiritual disciplines like prayer, bible study, servant leadership and gospel centered evangelism. For instance, Christianity was given a new marketing campaign with t-shirts, bracelets and bumper stickers with slogans such as "What Would Jesus Do?" Theologically rich hymns were replaced with these catchy slogans put to the rhythm of pop-culture music hits. Inductive teaching became a 15-minute scripture headline ripped from biblical context. These changes did not produce the intended result that Evangelicals had hoped for. **Instead of young Christians receiving a spiritual shot in the arm to be openly vocal about Jesus it produced a mentality of emotionalism and consumerism.** Young Christians grew less and less interested in studying the foundation and rationale of their faith or experiencing Jesus through piety and corporate community or being a witness through personal sacrifice. Instead, they grew more and more accustomed to connecting with God through personal feelings and vied for attention through popular Christianese sound bites and trendy slogans.   All the while, allowing younger generations to be more and more separated from the greater church body and a weaker biblical foundation for who they were in Christ and why they were serving Him. As was stated earlier, culture cannot be treated as neutral. The secular worldviews of individualism crept into the Christian psyche producing the false assumption that "church" should be an emotional experience designed to meet the needs of the individual. While there is important elements of emotional connection and expression in relating to God and a reality of the Christian community that speak into the needs of individuals, I would argue that there is great benefit and even necessity in reimagining our methodology (for instance, biblically rich worship songs set to contemporary music, accompanied by a biblically centered understanding of true "worship", etc.). However, when it fundamentally changes the function of church practice that produces outcomes that are antithetical to biblical teaching we must take note and change course.

60 years later, we see what was once the primary ministry methodology in Evangelical para-church youth ministries is now the mainstream methodology in most Evangelical churches today not only for youth but for all ages.

With that said, it is natural to point a judgmental finger at these shortcomings. I would caution us to resist the temptation of sitting on our traditions, expecting younger generations to simply come and show respect for the sacred preserve that we are passing onto them. Instead, may we examine our own challenges in affectively reaching and teaching younger generations?

Our Generational Challenges!

As supported above, Christian sociologist, David Kinnaman, in his book You Lost Me![ii], identifies that younger Christians tend to be immature in their faith as adults and view their church experience through the lens of consumerism and entitlement. However, he also suggests the reason many young people are leaving churches and not returning is due to a disconnection in our discipleship making efforts. Statistically speaking, the problem is not that younger Christians have been less churched. His research actually argues the contrary. The cause of this exodus is two fold. First, young people don't feel relationally connected to older generations. Secondly, the overwhelming majority of traditional methodology and apologetics has largely remained the same for the past 60 years. This has left them struggling in applying their Christian faith to a secular world that has changed, no longer sharing their beliefs (at least on a basic presupposition level). This can leave them frustrated and confused. Simply put, to them, they don't feel they can address life's most pressing questions in the Church and that an older generations brand of Christianity doesn't seem to answer the difficult questions, problem and challenges that face a complex, modern world within the context of biblical Christianity. These include areas like sexuality, social justice, culture, politics, environmentalism, science and capitalism. The point in all of this is not that biblical truth is irrelevant and outdated for the modern individual or that an older generations methodology is not valuable or appreciated. Rather, the manner in which biblical truth has been presented and related to significant areas of life is where the primary challenge lies.   It is vital to understand how a generation is asking questions about life through the lens of their culture (Christian and non-Christian). This certainly doesn't mean that we must pander to the views instilled by our secular culture, however. Francis Schaeffer, the great apologist of the 20th Century wrote the following in the year 1968:

> "It was indeed unfortunate that our Christian "thinkers," in the time before the shift of *societal moral presuppositions* took place and the chasm was fixed, did not teach and preach with a clear grasp of the *new* presuppositions *that a young generation adopted.* Had they done this, they would not have been taken by surprise, and they could have helped young people to face their difficulties. The really foolish thing is that even now, years after the shift is complete, many Christians still do not know what is happening. And this is because they are still not being taught the importance of thinking in terms of presuppositions, especially concerning truth.   The floodwaters of secular thought and liberal theology overwhelmed the Church because the leaders did not understand the importance of combating a false set of presuppositions…The use of classical apologetics before this shift took place was effective only because non-Christians were functioning, on the surface, on the same presuppositions."[iii]

Francis Schaeffer's insight still applies today and is vital to reaching and teaching younger generations. His point is that since our modern world no longer finds truth and meaning in presuppositions of Judeo-Christian ethics (which assume a large degree of absolute and universal truth) we can no longer afford to embrace methods that assume our audience embraces these same presuppositions. This is important for the younger Christians in that, since culture isn't neutral, Western worldviews have subtly changed the very presuppositions from which they understand their Christian beliefs. Today's young Christians are reading the same Bible, yet many do not use the presuppositions of absolute truth of the person of God, the inspiration and inerrancy of

Scripture, the total depravity of man nor the divine incarnation and atoning work of Christ as the primary means to making sense of their Christian lives. **Instead, in navigating the Christian life, many use a combination of Christian truths and the presuppositions of the World like: relative truth verified through experience, scripture that is subjective and can't be completely trusted, man as inherently good and Jesus as an idealized man who was the perfect example.** These have fundamentally changed they way they ask questions, seek answers, understand truth and ultimately live in the world! The value of studying the culture of those we are reaching is that it allows us to simply understand where they're coming from and how they articulate their views and questions, recognizing their foundation for life and using it as intersections to build relationships and instill Christian truth. Invaluably, knowing this will give us the necessary framework for teaching and training them.

Additionally, in struggling to understand a younger generation, Kinnaman, verifies through extensive data, what younger Christians have uncovered as *challenges* in the Church that have further alienated them from the Christian community. I will summarize each one offering a simple solution to consider. **In their view:**

Challenge: The Church seems to hyper-demonize the secular world by overprotecting younger Christians from secular influence to the point of isolation and an intolerance of engaging secular culture.

Solution: may we consider helping them develop discernment, encouraging them to be a witness in secular culture through unsaved friendship and engagement of social justice issues while accepting the risks of temptation and persecution that come with it.

Challenge: The Church can be un-engaging and irrelevant to real-life lacking provision for individual calling.

Solution: purposefully invest in individuals and not allow programs to be the focal point, helping them discover gifting, creative talents, unique dispositions and harness their entrepreneurial desires unlocking how they can be used for God's glory and contribute to the Church through secular vocation as mission, arts, media, etc.

Challenge: The Christian faith and science are treated as incompatible, often times ignoring scientific contributions to everyday life that reflect God in which all humans appreciate and enjoy.

Solution: explore the natural world in the context of the creative order and divine human stewardship amidst the complexities between spirituality (the unseen) and empiricism (the seen) in areas such as creation/nature, medicine, technology and environmentalism.

Challenge: Morals of the Christian life are treated as legalistic rules with little chance for deeper understanding and contextualization.

Solution: teach spiritual disciplines and morals of the Christian life within the context of the larger picture of the Biblical account as well as within the realm of Christian ethics in areas such as media, dating relationships, fashion, recreation and materialism.

Challenge: The Church seems to have an apprehension to reach out to the lost that can be fueled by judgmentalism and fear.

Solution: actively engaging and reaching people who are broken, marginalized, unsavory and outwardly incompatible with the Christian social culture in areas like sexuality, social justice, world religions and politics.

Challenge: An insensitivity and even hostility to questions and uncertainties young Christians express about biblical beliefs (doctrine) and practices.

Solution: provide a safe and non-combative environment to express doubt and confusion with Christian doctrine and help doubters find their place in the church community. Also, allow for alternatives to traditional Church practices in reimagining our methodology and forms.

In all, these simply suggest that in order for a younger generation to engage their own Christian faith within their experience of the Church they must have open dialogue in the context of personal relationship with older Christians about the relevance of biblical truth in the context of living in a secular world.

So, as we consider the lessons learned from the efforts of Western Evangelicalism in youth ministry, the challenges that modern youth face and the difficulty of leading them into maturity in the Christian faith, let us consider how we might approach the building of a biblically sound and culturally effective generation of Christians.

Building Spiritual Maturity in Younger Generations.

There are several examples in which we can learn from in reaching and teaching younger generations. The following are examples of biblical discipleship training patterns that are characterized by the common element of everyday interaction that is relational, pragmatic and centered on biblical teaching. *I will comment in brief:*

First, the *succession mandates* of Deuteronomy 4 and 6 given to Israel is a command of remembrance and obedience concerning the sound teaching of who God is, His Law and what He has done (rf. Egypt, Wilderness). It was imperative that Israel passed this on to successive generations by facilitating remembrance and actively modeling obedience to the younger generation. **This was to be lived out in the context of the everyday, typical life experience of their youth for the purpose of building a nation to enter the land and enjoy the covenant God had made with them. Specifically, these things occurred in the context of their families, tribes, the tabernacle and feast worship observances and the greater community of Israel.** These were done consistently, in relational community in various contexts, specifically active dialogue and inquiry (i.e. 6:20 "When your sons ask you in time to come..."). *The youth of Israel were to be engaged by the older generations and were accountable, active participants in their spiritual community.*

Second, the Apostle Paul took an intentional interest in younger people in fulfilling his mission to the Gentiles. Specifically, he utilized Titus and Timothy. **Paul's approach to discipleship, in order to carry out The Great Commission, was highly relational, grounded in sound doctrine and prioritized a high degree of practical and intentional experiences.** Paul referred to Titus as a *my brother* (2Cor. 2:13) and *partner and fellow worker* (2Cor 8:23). He traveled to Jerusalem with Paul to observe and learn (Gal 2:1-3). He assisted Paul in his third missionary journey to Corinth by delivering important letters and reporting back to Paul the good news there (2Cor 7:5-16). Titus was also entrusted to collect aid for the poor of the Jerusalem church (2Cor 8:12). He was tasked to organize the churches in Crete with an emphasis on evangelism, correcting false teaching, addressing immorality and appointing church leaders (Titus 1:1-9). Lastly, he was commissioned and sent to be a missionary in Yugoslavia (2Tim 4:10). Timothy was affectionately referred to as *a disciple* (Acts 16:1), *a helper* (Acts 19:22), *my fellow worker* (Rom 16:21), *my son, who I love* (1Cor 4:17), *our brother* (2Cor 1:1, Col 1:1, 1Thes 3:2, Philemon 1, Heb 13:23), *servant of Christ* (Phil 1:1), *proven* (Phil 2:22), *true son in the faith* (1Tim 1:2), *my son* (1Tim 1:18), *my dear son* (2Tim 1:2) and *was well spoken of by the brethren* (Acts 16:2). He was with Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:3). While Paul was forced out of Thessalonica, Timothy stayed behind in Berea to strengthen the work (Acts 17:4). He was sent back to Thessalonica to teach and encourage the church (1Thess 3:1-9). He was utilized in Paul's third missionary journey and specifically sent to Corinth to evangelize and to resolve conflict, which failed (Acts 19:22). Lastly, he was considered a faithful companion to Paul during his imprisonment in Rome (Col 1:1, Philemon 1). *It's clear that Paul's attitude towards training a younger generation was characterized by a highly relational and interactive dialogue that allowed for failure, growth and entrusted ministry tasks.*

Lastly, Jesus' approach to making disciples was grounded in shared contextual experiences with his disciples. It was characterized by a degree of intimacy that would require commitment and intention. It was focused on The Great Commission fashioned from His *person* and *work* for the redemption of man and their future life with God. **In other words, Jesus trained his disciples in the context of personal relationships and shared experiences in order to prepare them to preach repentance and redemption and train successive generations to do the same.** Jesus was intentional about creating teaching moments for His disciples through everyday life events and settings (Jn 6:1-52). He calls them to follow him and by removing them from their day-to-day routines He fosters commitment and trust (Mk 1:14-22, Mk 3:13-19, Jn 6:16-24). He's careful about teaching and modeling for them His message and purpose (Mk 2:5-11, Mk 8:827-31, Mt 5:1-2, Mk 4:35-41, Mk 5:21-43, Mt 8:18-19, Mt chapters 5-7). He's patient as they experience success, failure and doubt allowing them learn and evaluate (Mk 6:7-13, Mt 10:1-8, Mt 17:14-22, Mt 20:20-28). They were prepared in a manner that would allow them to be instrumental in God's ultimate plan of redemption (Mk 16:14-18, Mt 28:16-20)!

In conclusion, there are complex challenges to reaching Western Evangelical youth. Contextualizing biblical truth, engaging modern issues and actively reaching the next generation can be done! I would imagine, that the challenges, concerns and solutions in teaching and training the next generation presented today are not all that unique from many of your cultural contexts. Particularly, due to the reality that technology and social media has allowed Western thought and ideals to reach the youth of your generations.

"**Impacting and being impacted by the next generation"**
Small group and panel discussion questions:

1. What *challenges* do younger generations face most often that prevent them from growing spiritually? What *obstacles* do you/elders/teachers/parents experience in reaching and teaching them?
2. How has Western culture influenced the younger generation in your specific cultural context? (positively and negatively!)
3. How has technology influenced the spiritual growth of a younger generation? How have you used technology to reach and train them?
4. How have you utilized the practice of NT principles (i.e. breaking of bread, priesthood of all believers, etc.) in the context of the local church in ministering to a younger generation?
5. What have you found to be most *effective* in reaching and training the next generation?

i Thomas Bergler. The Juvenilization of American Christianity (Kindle Locations 81-83). Kindle Edition
ii David Kinnaman. You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.
iii Francis Schaeffer. The God Who is There (pg. 9). Intervarsity Press.