

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON

# The Next Generation



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How can we reach the next generations with the gospel? This is a challenge since these younger generations know less about the Bible than previous generations. Although the problem of biblical illiteracy has been discussed for decades, the most recent surveys point to a growing problem, not only outside the church, but inside it as well.

In this booklet, I will be referring to

some significant surveys undertaken by Probe Ministries that were targeted to answer some fundamental questions about Generation Y and Generation Z. The surveys also help dismiss some of the prevalent myths about these two generations.

The 2010 Culturally Captive Christians Survey was limited to born-again Americans (18-40) and provided insight into the millennial generation. A more recent 2020 survey was commissioned of more than 3,100 Americans (18-55). It looked at both generations and allows us to make meaningful comparisons with the 2010 results, as well as to compare them to many other surveys (General Social Survey, Barna, Lifeway, etc.).

## **The Unaffiliated**

The most dramatic change has been the percentage of young people who are unaffiliated with any religion (often referred to as “the nones” because

they select atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular on a survey). In the last decade, the unaffiliated have almost tripled (from 13 percent to 35 percent of the population). As we might expect, they know the least about the Bible, theology, and the biblical worldview.

Christian leaders aware of this concerning trend have sometimes predicted that these unaffiliated young people will eventually come back to church once they marry and have children. I refer to this as the Field of Dreams Myth – “if you build it, they will come.” We have built over 350,000 churches, but there isn’t much evidence these young people are coming back to church.

We see the opposite when we compare the 2020 survey to the 2010 survey. Those who were in their twenties in 2010 are now in their thirties in 2020. There is no evidence for the assumption that young adults returned to a

conservative faith (and affirm key doctrinal beliefs) when they got older.

A significant number of these young people were never in church when they were young, so they aren't "coming back" to a church they never attended. Our surveys demonstrate that they are not only not coming back, but a significant percentage of those who were in church are leaving. We have also found that many of these young people aren't hostile to the Bible and church. They just don't see the Bible, Jesus, and the church as relevant to their lives.

If we are to reach these younger generations, we will have to go to them and not assume they will come to us. Outreaches from small group Bible studies in a neighborhood to open air crusades to media ministries (radio, television, and online) will be important in reaching them. And it will be important for pastors and Christian

leaders to show them how the Bible and a relationship with Jesus Christ provides meaning and significance to them.

## **Are the Unaffiliated Uncommitted Christians?**

Before we look at born-again Christians inside the church, we need to dismiss the idea that these unaffiliated young people are merely Christians who are not committed to attending church. The previously mentioned 2020 survey provides the answer.

What are some of the views and practices of young people who identified as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular? Let's first look at a nominal level of religious activity (prayer at least daily and read their Bible at least weekly). Less than five percent of them performed such activities. Second, let's look at what they believe. How many of them agreed with this statement: "I believe that the only path to a

true relationship with God is through Jesus Christ”? Only about five percent of these unaffiliated young people agreed with this statement.

These and other metrics in the survey indicate that very few young adults who identify as the unaffiliated are Christians with latent Christian beliefs. The survey also found that even those who grew up within a Protestant church did not have a higher percentage of affiliation with Christian beliefs.

### **Inside the Church**

Both Probe surveys documented that born-again young people inside the church also show high levels of biblical illiteracy. They spend many more hours in front of screens each week exposed to unbiblical ideas than they do in church. In our surveys, young people are identified as born-again if they answer affirmatively questions about making a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important to



them today and another question about going to heaven because they confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their savior.

We have found in our surveys that born-again young people (Generation Y and Generation Z) don't always have a biblical worldview. On questions concerning a basic worldview (God, the Bible, Jesus, and salvation) we found that those who are older (40-55) are more likely to give biblically orthodox answers than those who are younger (18-39). Once you add additional questions (absolute moral truth, belief that Satan is real), the percentages drop significantly.

One question that best illustrates biblical illiteracy is this, the Probe study asked these young people if they agreed with or disagreed with this statement: "Muhammad, Buddha, and Jesus are all valid ways to God." Nearly two-thirds of young born-again Chris-

tians (60% to 65% depending on the age group) agreed with the statement.

This is hardly the only survey that documents the rising number of young born-again Christians who accept pluralism. Pastors and Christian leaders must address this issue and teach what Jesus says in John 14:6 – “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Another example can be found in a survey question concerning tolerance of other religious beliefs. Nearly three fourths (73%) of born-again young (18-39) Christians agreed with this statement: “It is important to let people know that I affirm as true their religious beliefs and practices.” The younger generations have an incorrect view of tolerance. I call this the Princess Bride myth - “You keep using that word. I don’t think it means what you think it means.”

They use the word “tolerance” but have redefined it to mean affirmation. We should be civil and gracious to non-Christians, but that does not mean we should affirm their false beliefs about salvation. We should speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). Acts 4:12 reminds us that Jesus is the source of salvation: “there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

These false views about salvation and tolerance also explain why there is a diminished interest in evangelism. A significant percentage of young people said they did not witness to others because they believed that other religious beliefs lead to heaven. The Probe study also found that many did not even know that Jesus commanded His followers to “make disciples” and have never heard about the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

## **Action Steps**

Pastors and Christian leaders need to teach about the basics of the Christian life. We may assume that everyone in the congregation or Bible study believes what we believe. Yet, in surveys provided for some churches, pastors have been surprised to find out how many in their congregation or Bible study do not hold to biblical truths.

We also need to prepare our young people for a hostile, secular world. Consider sending high school students to the Probe Mind Games Camp or to Summit Ministries. They need to know how to confront the false teaching they will encounter at college and in society.

We should work to make our preaching and teaching relevant to the lives of these next generations. Although some are hostile to the Bible and Christianity, many more are just apathetic about spiritual issues. They don't

think that Christianity and the church have any relevance to their lives.

These young people are also looking for authenticity. Often that is used as a buzzword, but it is a way of expressing a deeply felt need to know people who are real and authentic. We need to model this inside the church and in society.

These surveys should encourage all of us to diligently (Deuteronomy 6:7) teach God's word. We must equip (2 Timothy 3:17) the next generations with biblical truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

## **Additional Resources**

Stephen Cable, *Cultural Captives: The Beliefs and Behavior of American Young Adults*, Plano, TX: Probe Books, 2013.

Probe 2020 Survey of Religious Views and Practices

<https://probe.org/introducing-probes-new-survey-religious-views-and-practices-2020/>

Thom Rainer and Jeff Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* Nashville: B&H Books, 2011.

Jean Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, New York: Atria Books, 2017.





# *Point of View*

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