

Internal Barriers to the Evangelization of Generation X

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Often the area of church growth is equated with external barriers to reaching people outside of a given church. While this is a valid area for study and most definitely part of the larger field of church growth, it is indeed only a part of that field. At its core, the field of church growth is dedicated to bringing the Gospel to those who have not heard it, under the auspices of the church. This being the case, it is extremely important for both the instructor of church growth as well as the pastor/layman doing the work of church growth to understand not only the external barriers to church growth, but also to understand both the fact and the nature of internal barriers to evangelizing people, and thus the obvious implications for church growth.

As Generation X 'comes of age', there has been more and more discussion of this group culturally, as consumers, and to a lesser degree spiritually. The spiritual development of Generation X has generally been thought of as the domain of the youth pastor, yet in 1996 the first 'X-ers' turned 30 (depending on who is doing the figuring).¹ If the church is to remain a viable and growing force in the next century, Generation X must be taken into account, increasingly so as Boomers age and X-ers become more active members of the church. Further in order to retain the person exiting the youth group and entering the workforce, or college, the internal barriers which exist in the very make-up and worldview of this generation must be explored, understood, and

overcome. Generation X is in many ways representative of a shift which has and is occurring within the larger context of western culture, namely a shift from modernism to postmodernism.²

One of, if not the primary internal barrier to church growth which can be seen among X-ers is a fundamental shift in the very way in which this generation thinks. It was not too long ago that when one spoke of truth, certain ground rules were understood. No longer, Generation X is the first of the postmodern generations as is evidenced by the shift in its approach to truth. Traditionally Christianity has held to a view of truth which at its very core holds absolute truth to be just that—absolute, in a universal sense. The problem begins with the fact that, more often than not for Generation X, this foundational premise simply does not hold. Generation X is a generation without absolutes, without a core.

In a 1992 survey of X-ers, Barna found that over 70% of X-ers said that they did not believe in absolute truth.³ When a similar survey was given to the younger end of Generation X in 1995, the percentage has grown.⁴ Further studies by Barna for Josh McDowell's 1994 book *Right From Wrong* show that though the situation is not at the same level, it is also a growing phenomenon among church youth as well as the general population.

This fundamental shift in the way in which this generation looks at life presents considerable problems for the continued vitality of Christianity in general and Evangelical Christianity particularly. The very core of Christianity, i.e., the person and work of Christ, demands that there be certain things which are true for everyone at all points. In order for the Christian church to remain just that, it must retain a foundation of absolutes, and therefore the stage is set for significant conflict between Generation X and Christianity based on the very different foundations of their respective worldviews. This raises the question, 'how do we bridge the gap between the church and Generation X?' Before I propose a solution to this foundational question, it is important to first deal somewhat more specifically with the area of truth as defined both historically by the church and as defined by Generation X, as well as delving somewhat further into the worldview

of Generation X in order to determine that very solution.

Truth as Defined Historically by Christianity

The task of analyzing and defining the Evangelical understanding of truth is a daunting one to say the least, not to mention beyond the scope of this article.⁵ Therefore it is not the intent of this chapter to investigate all of the intricacies of the evangelical understanding of truth, but rather to give a general understanding of the evangelical view of truth, with the main goal of forming a basis by which to juxtapose the understanding of truth in the eyes of Generation X.⁶ The concept of truth as being fundamental for evangelicals can not be overstated, James Emory White explains:

the subject of truth has arguably been the fundamental concern for Evangelicals from the onset of their existence. A self-conscious attempt by a group of evangelicals to describe themselves opens with the following quotation from Blaise Pascal's *Pensees*: "Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that unless we love the truth, we cannot know it." This quotation reflects the essence of Evangelical Theology: from their perspective Evangelicals both love and possess the truth in a way distinctive from other faith traditions.⁷

While philosophers have debated the nature of truth for millennia, there have basically been three major approaches or systems of thought on this issue. These approaches are known as the *Correspondence Theory*, the *Coherence Theory*, and the *Pragmatic Theory*.⁸ Evangelical Christianity has been generally understood to hold to the correspondence theory of truth, which in its most basic essence says that truth is that which corresponds to reality. It should be noted however, that in many ways Evangelicalism also incorporates elements of the other two approaches as well. The coherence theory states that things are true insofar as they coherently 'hang together,' and the pragmatic theory states that things are true if they work over the long term. While there are some obvious problems with these theo-

ries, there are elements which orthodox Christianity is quite in agreement with, namely that not only does truth correspond to reality, but it also is a cohesive whole which does in fact work. In fact, Cornelius Van Til after stating that something is "true if it corresponds to the knowledge that God has," then goes on to explain:

It is our contention that only the Christian can obtain real coherence in our thinking. If all our thoughts about the facts are in correspondence to God's ideas of these facts, there will naturally be coherence in our thinking because there is complete coherence in God's thinking.⁹

This idea of truth as corresponding to reality as well as being cohesive and working is grounded in Christianity's understanding of the very nature of God, not simply from a philosophical perspective but also from the use of the concept of truth in Scripture itself.¹⁰ Thus it is all the more clear that by rejecting the ideas of absolute truth, Generation X is already working with a distorted view of both the nature of reality and more specifically of God and the Church.

Generation X's Approach to Truth

While the Evangelical understanding of truth is a well documented and somewhat easily traceable phenomenon, the understanding of truth by the Generation X is a somewhat more difficult undertaking. The term X as a designator for this generation is a clue as to the difficulty presented in this search. Further, when the makeup and characteristics of generation X are taken into account, the task seemingly becomes only more difficult.¹¹

The single most significant statistic provided by Barna in *The Invisible Generation* is just how many members of that generation do not believe in absolute truth. According to Barna, "To the typical Buster, there is no such thing as absolute truth. Statistically, 70 percent claim that absolute truth does not exist, that all truth is relative and personal."¹² Barna also states that this statistic is supported by the fact that "two-thirds of the Buster generation concede that 'nothing can be known for certain except those

things that you experience in your own life'.¹³

The previous two statistics which are straightforward in their approach to the question of Generation X and truth, are supported in other areas as well. The skepticism seen in X-ers' approach to absolute truth is borne out in their attitudes concerning morality and society as a whole. For instance, when asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement "lying is sometimes necessary", 44 percent of X-ers agreed either somewhat or strongly, and only 29 percent disagreed strongly with the same statement.¹⁴ Barna links the lying question specifically with the "widespread acceptance of relative truth among the Busters."¹⁵ It is important to note that in 1992 the oldest members of Generation X were only 26, and the youngest were only 9, so the sample was not a complete one, and as continuing studies would show the trend towards a relative view of truth would only get larger.

The picture becomes even clearer when the information from Barna's *Generation Next*, is added to the previous research. Perhaps the greatest sign of the lack of belief in or understanding of absolute truth in these statistics is the fact that 72 percent of teens surveyed claimed that the Bible was "a clear and totally accurate description of moral truth," while at the same time 57 percent say that lying is all right; 80 percent say that no one can be certain that they know the truth; and that 91 percent say that what is right for one person in a given situation may not be right for another. There is a distinct contradiction between the first statement and the following three, a contradiction which is clearly seen and understood in light of the fact that 72 percent of these teens stated that two people can define truth in conflicting ways and both be correct. It is quite apparent then, that for the Generation X paradigm, logically contradictory views are not a problem. Further, it is clear from the data given that when the issue of truth is approached, Generation X does so from a completely personal or subjective angle.

Finally, it is clear that the loss of belief in absolute truth among X-ers is a growing phenomena. When the data from this study is compared with the data from the previous studies, there is a definite increase in the amount of X-ers who do not believe

in absolute truth. In the earlier studies, published in *The Invisible Generation*, the amount of X-ers who said they did not believe in absolute truth was approximately 70 percent. In this study, dealing with the younger members of Generation X, the percentage has increased. At best, Barna's research shows that 72 percent of these younger X-ers say they do not believe in absolute truth, at worst 91 percent do not. Even if the three survey questions dealing specifically with the issue of truth are averaged together in attempt to get a more legitimate percentage, there are still a full 81 percent of X-ers who say they do not believe in absolute truth. If the question concerning lying is averaged along with the first three, the number only falls to 75 percent. In any case it is quite clear that claims about disbelief in relation to absolute truth among are greater among the younger members of Generation X than among the older members of the generation. If this trend continues, and there is no evidence showing that it is not, the percent of those not claiming belief in absolute truth in the next generation will only continue to grow.¹⁶

It is quite clear from the statistical data above that the incidence of Generation X-ers who do not believe in absolute truth is both widespread and growing. The facts show that less than 30 percent, and probably closer to only 20 percent, of the younger X-ers say they believe in absolute truth. The approach to absolute truth by Generation X is not simply a statistical reality, it is worked out in the very characteristics and lifestyles of the generation.

Over and over in the books written about Generation X and ministering to them, certain patterns emerge which can add insight into the truth views of Generation X. For instance, the following list includes section, chapter and subsection titles from several Generation X related books:

- Generation Angst;
- A Hunger for Purpose;
- Anything Goes;
- Only Experiences Need Apply;
- Image Is Everything;
- This is My Story;¹⁷

Hope for the Hopeless;
We Are Hopeless;
We Are Immediate;
We Are Cynical;
We Are Angry;
We Are Accepting; Fears that Shaped the Generation;
The Story of Our Lifetime;¹⁸
We Could Care Less, Care Less;
The Choices are Ugly and Few.¹⁹

These headings are all erected on the same foundation—personal emotion. Just from the previous headings it is apparent that it is feelings and not truth that drives this generation. The simple fact is that truth apparently does not drive the lives and actions of the Xer; rather, 'how it makes me feel,' seems to be the motivating force. This phenomenon is evidenced by the very way in which the generation is explained and ministry to them is presented.

Hahn and Verhaagen use the area of Bible study as an example of how this type of thought pattern has even affected the church. "Everyone's opinion is considered equally viable. Respecting the ideas of others has been given precedence over a search for the actual intention of the author. In fact the unrealized assumption is that one's sincere ideas are synonymous with truth."²⁰ This statement could be applied to almost any area of the Xer's life and be equally valid. The approach outlined here goes beyond a mere pragmatism in regard to truth, it is completely subjective.

Celek and Zander give four "R's" for effective ministry to X-ers, one of which is 'Rousing.' When they define rousing, Celek and Zander use the phrase "to awaken from slumber."²¹ The very phrase, not to mention the point of section 'Rousing' is to get the attention of X-ers; it implies an emotional or opinion driven response to what is being said. Other "R's" include 'Relevant,' or 'how does this affect *me*?' and 'Relational,' that is, in reaching X-ers, relationships are of utmost importance. Practically speaking, these are all important factors in reaching Generation X, howev-

er, these are symptoms of the postmodern worldview which has eroded the belief in absolute truth by X-ers.

The desire for genuine relationships in X-ers is very much a sign of the feelings based approach to life of their generation. Barna states that "in terms of the life priorities of teens, their friendships are definitely at the top of the list."²² Hahn and Verhaagen link this extreme desire for relationships which are genuine directly to the issue of truth. They state:

As a Generation without a sense of truth, we have no unifying beliefs. We simply all agree to respectfully disagree.

This concept of truth has shaped the generation's worldview. It has also contributed to its sense of disconnection and fragmentation. Without a set of commonly held core beliefs, we are left as a group of individuals who are alienated from each other. We are left without much in common.²³

The connection between relationships and truth then is quite clear, the two cannot be separated.

Overall, Gen X-ers are driven not by the long term issues and thought patterns of their predecessors, but rather on more immediate concerns. Barna observes that:

the dominant crises are immediate and short term. That's the way teenagers think and live, more than ever before. They are not overly concerned about things that may be significant problems eons from now . . . Also, recognize that teenagers do not tend to think about underlying causes as much as they wish to confront the outgrowth of those causes. For example, morality and values are a frontline issue for just 1 out of every 20 kids. Faith decisions and choices are of pressing concern to 1 out of every 25 teens.²⁴

This short term approach to life is a further indication of the fact that X-ers (in this case the younger X-ers) are not concerned with questions of lasting or absolute truth.

When dealing with the paradox seen in the beliefs of X-ers concerning the necessity of lying in some cases (57 percent agreed that this was the case) and the fact that 72 percent believe that the Bible presents a clear and totally accurate description of moral truth, Barna has come up with several explanations which are crucial for understanding the Generation X approach to and concept of truth.

First, many teenagers use the words “moral” and “truth,” but really do not know what they mean. Theirs is a vague understanding of truth and morality—“stuff that has to do with right and wrong.” Thus, when they speak about “absolute” moral truth, they’re not really sure what they’re talking about, even when an explanation is provided. . . .

Second, some teens are willing to state that the Bible contains absolute truth claims, but because they have not and do not read the Bible, those claims may as well not exist. . . . As a result, any insights or wisdom it contains are beyond their comprehension or concern. . . .

Third, many kids seem to distinguish between the *concept* of truth and the *practice* of truth. Sure, they’ll allow that there may be a definitive body of truth somewhere But in their personal reality, truth is always relative to the individual and to the situation.

In fact, the intellectual and emotional separation many teens make between impersonal absolute truth and personal truth is very crucial to understanding them. . . . theirs is a tangible world; survival is more important than intellectual consistency or perfect wisdom. If they possess contradictory views, so be it.²⁵

Alan Bloom has stated that “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”²⁶ Josh McDowell sums up the Generation X approach to truth when he says:

Today’s youth are being raised in a culture that reflects

Hugh Hefner's "Playboy Philosophy," the creed that "if it feels good, do it." . . . This view has been expressed to me over and over, by parents and young people alike who refer to a certain behavior, and say, "I feel its wrong—for me—but people have to decide for themselves whether its wrong for them; I can't push my beliefs on others."²⁷

It is clear that Generation X approaches life from a paradigm of feeling and not truth, based on the fact that truth for the Xer has been relegated to a place of little meaning. In fact, the Generation X approach to truth cannot really even be said to conform to the pragmatic approach of William James, due to the fact that it does not even attempt to look at or be "expedient in the long run" or "on the whole course."

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NOTES

1. See George Barna's discussion concerning the dating of Generation X in *The Invisible Generation*.

2. David Dockery has briefly introduced postmodernism as ". . . a new set of assumptions about reality, which goes for beyond mere relativism. It impacts our literature, our dress, our art, our architecture, our music, our sense of right and wrong, our self-identity, and our theology. Postmodernism tends to view human experience as incoherent, lacking absolutes in the area of truth and meaning." David S Dockery Ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, (Wheaton, IL: Bridgeport, 1995), 14.

3. George Barna, *The Invisible Generation*, (Glendale, Ca.: Barna Research Group, 1992), 80.

4. George Barna, *Generation Next*, (Ventura, Ca.: Regal Books, 1995), 32, 101.

5. At this point it is important to define just what is meant by the term 'Evangelical'. For the purposes of this article the term is being defined according to Thomas Oden's statement in his article "The Death of

Modernity and Postmodern Evangelical Spirituality,” from the book *The Challenge of Postmodernism*. Oden states that by Evangelical “we embrace all those who faithfully believe and joyfully receive the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ. In particular we are thinking of those who even today deliberately remain under the intentional discipline of ancient ecumenical consensual teaching and classic Lutheran, Calvinist, Baptist, or Wesleyan connections of spiritual formation, especially in their renewing phases, freely subject to classic Christian teaching, admonition and guidance.” (p. 20).

6. For a specifically evangelical look at truth see James Emory White’s *What is Truth?: A Comparative study of the Positions of Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, Carl F. H. Henry, Donald Bloesch, Millard Erickson*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).

7. White, 32.

8. For an overview of the theories of truth consult *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

9. Cornelius Van Til, *In Defense Of The Faith, Volume II: A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, (den Delk Christian Foundation, 1969), 1-2.

10. For a study of the Scriptural uses of ‘truth’ and its cognates see *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, and *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

11. It would be impossible to deal with the characteristics of Generation X in this context, for additional reading in this area, there are a number of resources, both Christian and secular including Barna’s *Invisible Generation* and *Generation Next*, Tim Celek and Dieter Zander’s *Inside the Soul of a New Generation*, Geoffrey Holtz’s *Welcome to the Jungle: The Why Behind Generation X*, and Neil Howe and Bill Strauss’s *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?*

12. Barna, *The Invisible Generation*, 81.

13. *Ibid.*, 81.

14. *Ibid.*, 82.

15. *Ibid.*, 81.

16. This phenomenon has not bypassed the church either, for a look at just how teens within the church view truth see Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler’s *Right From Wrong*.

17. Tim Celek and Deiter Zander, *Inside the Soul of a New Generation*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996),7.

18. Todd Hahn and David Verhaagen, *Reckless Hope: Understanding and Reaching Baby Busters*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 86, 21, 23, 27,28,33, 41, 59.

19. Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore*,

Fail?, (New York: Vintage, 1993), 126, 160.

20. Hahn and Verhaagen, 39.

21. Celek and Zander, 103.

22. Barna, *Generation Next*, 52.

23. Hahn and Verhaagen, 39.

24. Barna, *Generation Next*, 26, 27.

25. *Ibid.*, 33, 34. Lest it be thought that this is simply a teen 'phase,' it is clear from other research conducted by the Barna Group that the lack of belief in absolute truth does not significantly decrease with age. For more information see George Barna, *What Americans Believe*, (Ventura: Regal, 1991,1992).

26. Alan Bloom, *The Closing of The American Mind*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 25.

27. McDowell and Hostetler, 13,14.