

Building a Biblical Foundation for Evangelism among Justice-Oriented Gen Z

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JENNIFER L. COLLINS

Vol 1:1 2021

Jennifer L. Collins is Associate Professor of Missions at Taylor University and serves with the Standards of Excellence in Short-Term Mission (SOE).

Introduction

Many Generation Z mission team members are asking: “When did it become unacceptable for evangelicals to seek justice?” Meanwhile, many ministry leaders are asking: “When did it become objectionable to verbally proclaim the gospel?” A false dichotomy often emerges between evangelism and social justice in mission circles (especially white, Western circles) that is further accentuated by today’s generational differences.

How can mission leaders help Christian emerging adults gain a biblically-integrated response to human need that fully reflects God’s nature and mission? How can we prepare them for short-term mission outreach among whole persons who experience deep spiritual concerns along with physical and social hardship? This article discusses Gen Z traits, advice for leaders, and ideas for teaching Scripture’s evangelism mandate among Gen Z with passages that integrate word and deed and link to the Bible’s grand narrative.

Others have written at length on the evangelical debate concerning the relationship between evangelism and social justice (see Ott et al. 2010, 137-161). For our purposes here, it’s helpful to remember that those who place priority on evangelism *and* those who advocate for holistic/integral mission often agree that evangelism and social action are more effective when joined together as a sign of God’s multidimensional kingdom. Indeed, when Jesus described the greatest commandments (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28), he emphasized the significance of both the gospel and creation mandates of redemption, both the vertical and horizontal realms.

Gen Z Overview

A summary of Gen Z as a whole will give an orientation to the context Gen Z believers navigate within their generation. Some would call these Christian emerging adults “resilient disciples” (Kinnaman and Matlock 2019, 32-33) or “engaged Christian young adults” (Barna Group 2020, 40) who share traits with their generational peers, yet differ on matters of faith.

The Marist College Mindset List says that for college sophomores the Tech Big Four—Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Google—are to them what the Big Three automakers were to their grandparents. Gen Zers have probably all been “gaslighted” or “ghosted,” and their world has always had smartwatches and a Catholic Pope who visits a mosque (McBride, 2019).

Social scientists describe Gen Z as recession marked, Wi-Fi enabled, multi-racial (the most diverse U.S. generation to date), sexually fluid, growing older younger (GOY), globally connected, and raised in a variety of Gen X parenting styles (snowplow to free-range). They traverse a post-Christian, post-truth world even while 78% still believe in God (White 2017, 49). Sociologist Steven Bird, who studied 18,000 students at 46 Christian colleges, explains that both Gen Z and Millennials have been raised in a fundamentally different digital and media-saturated society than older generations, and yet there are technology-related differences between them (Bird 2020b). Gen Z is more private about posting online content than the Millennial generation and prefers to learn alone (Elmore and McPeak 2019, 27).

Gen Zers perceive the world as dangerous, avoid risk, fear an uncertain future, and pursue security. They are motivated by making a difference and seeking career stability (Seemiller and Grace 2016, 15-16, 35-57). Gen Zers are entrepreneurial and nearly half expect to work for themselves. They desire individual freedom (White 2017, 48) and 51% say happiness is their ultimate life goal (InterVarsity 2018).

Gen Zers are open-minded, inclusive, and compassionate. Many are concerned about social justice, poverty, and racism (Seemiller and Grace 2016, 8-10, 37-40). They look very much like Millennials on key social and policy issues: they are progressive and pro-government and most see the U.S.’s increasing ethnic diversity as positive. “Gen Zers and Millennials are about equally likely [roughly two-thirds] to say that blacks are treated less fairly than whites in [the U.S.]...compared with about half of Gen Xers and Boomers.” They are also on track to be the best-educated generation yet (Pew Research Center 2020).

Gen Z lives in the world previous generations constructed—they did not invent the smartphone or create TikTok. As we lament Gen Z’s perceived flaws, we must remember that each generation has lamentable shortcomings. Like cultures, generations have good, neutral, and evil traits and all are in need of God’s redemption and transformation. Just as cultural groups are good at sensing an ethnocentric spirit in cultural outsiders, Gen Zers are skilled at detecting a critical spirit in authority figures that will limit those leaders’ influence.

The sky is not falling regarding emerging adult views on evangelism. A recent Barna finding received much attention: among Millennial Christians (who share many faith-related traits with Gen Z Christians) 47% think it is wrong to “share one’s beliefs with a person of another faith in hopes that the person will come to share one’s beliefs.” And yet the same study also found that young “practicing Christians feel as strongly as other generations that being a witness is part of faith” (96%), with 73% feeling confident in their ability to share their faith compared with lower rates for older generations (Richardson 2019). Additionally “young adults who remain active in the faith are, statistically speaking, just as eager as older Christians to share [their faith]” (Barna Group 2018, 71) and “when given a chance to imagine themselves serving in specific overseas missionary roles” (business leader, entrepreneur, artist, church trainer), half say “yes, I can see that” (Barna Group 2020, 75-76).

Leading Gen Z

Although they are digital natives, Gen Zers report that they prefer face-to-face interaction over online contact at high rates (Seemiller and Grace 2019, 61). Several sources agree: Gen Z wants humble, teachable, and authentic leaders who relate in personal ways. As we walk alongside Gen Z, we must seek to be relationally effective, active listeners, and responsive to Gen Z learning styles.

Gen Zers are natural researchers with vast amounts of information available at their fingertips. They find it distasteful when leaders are convinced they know best. Yet, the continuous stimuli Gen Zers consume can bring bewilderment, difficulty focusing and forming convictions, and little time for reflection. It’s wise for mentors to provide starting points for Gen Z self-directed learning, and to aid information discovery, evaluation, and life application (InterVarsity 2018).

Gen Zers need persistent messages of hope; there are voices in every direction saying they are not enough and that their life is not as exciting as the well-crafted social

media “brand” of their peers. They feel pressure to appear happy at every turn online, which does not pair well with authentic connection on spiritual matters (Barna Group 2018, 40). This leads, in part, to increased depression, anxiety, and a volatile self-image (Elmore and McPeak 2019, 47-48; Twenge 2018, 104). We should affirm Gen Z’s commitment to make a difference in the world, and instill confidence that God will help them develop (2 Cor. 3:5). Due to inexperience with risk and disappointment, mentors should assure Gen Z that failure is part of life and prepare them to lean on Christ and his body when they make mistakes.

As leaders attempt to build Gen Z conviction for pursuing gospel proclamation, we can avoid a “download expertise” method, asking instead what they think and feel about evangelism. Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do you say I am?” (Matt. 16:15) and often responded to questions with questions. We can follow Jesus’ approach by using open-ended questions to uncover Gen Z attitudes about evangelism, and to demonstrate interest in their perceptions and help them reflect. We should also seek collaborative or reciprocal mentoring rather than top-down, and let Gen Z offer critique and teach us what it’s like to be young today (InterVarsity 2018; Kinnaman and Matlock 2019 140).

Because they want to respect the beliefs of others, Gen Z Christians may not feel the same compulsion to share their faith as previous generations (InterVarsity 2018). They may fear being labeled as extreme or shamed for perceived intolerance. Leaders need to grasp the intense pressure Gen Zers feel to be inclusive and accepting. We can help them express their anxiety and address it empathetically from a biblical perspective.

Gen Z Christians may not understand the gospel fully. The sheer volume of input they absorb may leave them with multiple points of unevaluated confusion. *It’s crucial to help them develop personal convictions about the gospel before focusing on how to share it.* Mentors can sit down with them, turn off phones, listen, and be prepared to explain the basics (InterVarsity 2018). We can avoid reducing the gospel to forgiveness of personal sins, emphasizing that all “need to hear not just that ‘God loves me and has a wonderful plan for my life,’ but also to hear (and see) that God loves the world and has a wonderful plan for its future...[that] God has begun [his] redemptive work within history” (Seversen and Richardson 2014, 36). Leaders can direct Gen Z to God’s invitation to join his work within Christian community, and to a vision for participation in the *missio Dei*.

It's important to be transparent and admit to young adults that many in older generations struggle with evangelism just as they do. Leaders can show grace toward Gen Z, seek to laugh with them and lighten their load rather than add to it with weighty "duty" language. We can remember:

We cannot give to others what we do not have in our own lives. Imitation is often what helps bring real change. And information alone is often a very poor catalyst for transformation. Too many of us in the academy... and in other Christian contexts, model evangelism far too little to have any significant impact in catalyzing evangelistic engagement (Richardson 2014, 27).

Because Gen Z has been exposed to cultural stereotypes of invasive evangelism and mission association with colonialism, our word choice matters. While many are evangelistically inclined, they are concerned about mission ethics; they may think of evangelism as propagandistic proselytism. Barna discovered that young adults find the word "convert" objectionable. They also dislike "winning souls," "making disciples," and "evangelism." To a lesser degree they dislike "mission work" and "missions." Very few object to "sharing faith." They prefer "making a difference," "following one's calling," and "helping to save lives" (Barna Group 2020, 28-29, 33-35). Leaders can underline God as the one who convicts, converts, and transforms, and expose Gen Z to less baggage-laden biblical expressions concerning evangelism.

How can Gen Z's aversion to insensitive proclamation help us? Will we allow God to use it to refine our evangelism practices among those of other faiths and in post-Christendom societies where past Western conceptions of effective evangelism are less useful? I believe that if we engage and leverage Gen Z's entrepreneurial spirit and mentor emerging adults effectively, they can help us announce kingdom good news at home and abroad in fresh ways without compromising core truths.

Ideas for Teaching Witness in Word and Deed

While biblical literacy among Gen Z is low, the Great Commission passages may feel cliché; Gen Zers often favor passages about social action. Barna "found that young Christians with a well-rounded, theologically rich understanding of the gospel are more likely to have a resilient, lasting faith, but also that such an understanding is uncommon among young believers" (Barna Group 2020, 97-98). I think it's helpful to use less-familiar passages connected to salvation history when teaching about the

church's mission of word and deed. We can inspire Gen Zers with the Bible's overarching story of which they are a part to foster enthusiasm for witness. This approach examines passages that resonate due to a social action component and nurtures greater biblical literacy. It also helps them internalize a narrative identity based on the larger biblical story (Setran 2020, 94). Since Gen Z desires ownership of their learning, it's important to facilitate interactive reflection on the passages discussed below.

The Temple Cleansing Event

Outside of Jesus' death and resurrection narratives, there are just five events the Gospel writers share in common. Four of them are Jesus' baptism by John; Jesus' feeding of the 5000; Peter's profession of faith in Christ; and Jesus' anointing by a sinful woman. Each helps develop Christ's biography as the Jewish Messiah in significant ways. The fifth event is Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his clearing of the temple courts marketplace, his "temple cleansing" (Bessenecker 2014, 14). Why is the temple cleansing among the few events described by all the gospels? Perhaps this is due to its rich theological connections to the Bible's metanarrative.

Mark 11 begins with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the Jewish Passover season. Just five days later he would be crucified as the final Passover Lamb, who at great cost to himself broke down the sin barrier to God and the barriers among us in which some are privileged and others excluded. In v. 11, "Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve." It's instructive that Jesus stopped to consider the situation before acting. The next day:

Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the money changers' tables and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers'" (Mark 11:15-17).

Jesus entered "the epicenter of Judean power" (Bessenecker 2014, 15); it was jam-packed and the temple was at the center of it all. It was a deeply significant time of worship like Easter would be for us. Many diaspora Jews had come for Passover, preparing to remember God's salvation from slavery and his great mercy in bringing the

Israelites out of Egypt, even though they were a “stiff-necked people” (Ex. 33:3; Deut. 9:13). Note the links to Old Testament (OT) salvation history and Jesus as a new deliverer.

People were buying, selling, and exchanging money in the temple courts because they arrived with different currencies than the temple tax required and purchased their sacrificial animals in Jerusalem rather than bring them long distances. Since the text mentions those selling doves, the sacrifice of the poor, we know poor people were present. Imagine it: there are wall-to-wall people and merchants, wings are flapping, cattle are stomping and bellowing, sheep are bleating, people are stepping delicately around manure, and the smell is foul. Could we pray in this setting? Hardly. We get distracted today when a cell phone beeps.

Barriers to Worship for Outsiders. Historical sources tell us this market in previous years had been set up on the Mount of Olives. But at this time the high priest allowed the merchants to set up in the temple courts, almost certainly the Court of Gentiles, and likely the Court of Women. These two courts were man-made additions to the original blueprints of the tabernacle and of Solomon’s temple, neither of which corralled women and Gentiles who wanted to worship Yahweh into separate courts away from pious male Jews (Bessenecker 2014, 16). Judah’s Babylonian exile had cured her of idolatry, but exclusivism had grown.

Jewish leaders posted signs for Gentiles on the Gentile Court wall saying, “do not enter further upon penalty of death.” Clearly, this was not God’s design. By the time Herod built the first-century temple, Jewish authorities had added barriers, building fences around who was in and out of the privileged group based on ethnicity and gender. They also made worship very difficult for non-Jews and women by filling their courts with bustling commerce.

Most of Christ’s Church is Gentile, an extension of the outsiders who came to worship Yahweh in Jerusalem. Can you imagine if church authorities today required seekers to worship in a courtyard, and then at Easter created such a raucous market in the courtyard that prayer was virtually impossible? Then imagine those seekers, with many poor among them, charged outrageous prices. There is nothing wrong with commerce, but from extra-biblical historians, we know the merchants raked in great profits on exchange fees and over-priced animals among their captive audience. According to Josephus and these historians, the high priest and religious elites received a large cut (Bessenecker 2014, 17).

This event illustrates Jesus' concern for both *evangelism and justice*. Perhaps that is also why it appears in all four gospels. The justice in view is what Jesus intended in Matt. 23:23 when he confronted the Jewish leaders with: “[you] have neglected the weightier matters of the law: *justice* and mercy and faithfulness.” It is justice that reveals God's character, demonstrates our love for him and neighbor, and denounces evil and oppression. It is the social action intended when the National Association of Evangelicals was founded in 1942 with an aim “to recapture the dual commitment to social concerns and the gospel,” which the founders believed “were being neglected by both the fundamentalists and the social gospel proponents” (Hammond 2019, 6).

Jesus' Concern for People's Spiritual State. Through the temple cleansing passage we can help Gen Z discover the religious elites' apathy for those alienated from God and how this event illustrates Jesus' concern for people's ability to pray and worship. The authorities prioritized their greed and comfortable life over the spiritual hunger of Gentile outsiders who sought God's mercy. This was a serious insult to God, who planned to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham's seed (Gen. 12:1-3), and who told Malachi at the end of the prophetic record that his name would be worshipped in every place among the nations (Mal. 1:11).

Jesus was soon to become the Suffering Servant and Lamb who takes away the sins of the *world*, of the privileged and the marginalized. He quoted Isaiah 56 regarding the temple's purpose, which differed radically from the merchandising and barriers the Jewish leaders had established. Verses 6-7 say: “And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord...these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer...for my house will be called a house of prayer *for all nations*” (cf. Is. 2:2-4; 66:18-24).

One thousand years earlier scores of Israelites collaborated in a seven-year project to build the first temple. Its completion could have been the apex of Israel's nationalistic pride after all David and Solomon had accomplished. Yet Solomon prayed at the temple dedication in 1 Kings 8:41-43:

As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name— *for they will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm*—when they come and pray toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, *so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you.*

Solomon longed for and expected our Gentile ancestors to worship Yahweh unhindered. He asked God to answer their prayers! Verse 42 says they will come because they will hear of God's great name, meaning his *character*, and mighty hand, meaning his *saving activity*, implying word of mouth sharing. Why did Solomon want God to answer their prayers? So that *all the peoples may know his name and fear him*.

When Jesus referenced Isaiah 56, which connects to 1 Kings 8, he showed that proclamation about God's nature (name) and salvation (mighty hand) matters profoundly to him. We can help Gen Z uncover this event's focus on the spiritual needs of outsiders and its rich OT links to the Pentateuch (Abrahamic covenant, Passover/deliverance from slavery), historical books (temple construction/dedication), and prophetic literature (Is. 56; Mal. 1).

Jesus' Concern for Justice. The greed on display in the temple cleansing event brought enormous profits to the powerful at the expense of the poor. When Jesus said, "You have made my house 'a den of robbers,'" he quoted Jeremiah's pronouncement at the temple gates about Israel's false religion:

If you really change your ways...and *deal with each other justly*, if you *do not oppress* the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you *do not follow other gods* to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place...for ever and ever (Jer. 7:5-7).

Then in Jeremiah 7:11 God asked, "Has this house...become a den of robbers to you?" The Hebrew for "den of robbers" suggests violent thieves in a cave counting their loot, just as the first-century religious leaders did centuries later with the temple as their safe hideout. Thus, in Jesus' reference to Jeremiah 7, we find a robust concern for justice in the prophet's mention of just dealings, oppression of the vulnerable, and greed among thieves. Jesus' concern for right relationship with God also appears in Jeremiah's statement about following other gods.

Jesus Lamented When Both Were Obstructed. Jesus' two concerns in the temple cleansing were proclamation and justice. When these were hindered, Jesus lamented with the prophets; we can sense his heavy and frustrated heart in Mark 11. He grieved Israel's failure to be Yahweh's servant of his integrated mission in the world, knowing their failure would result in the temple's destruction 40 years later. Jesus lamented just as he lamented upon entering Jerusalem in Luke's account (19:41-44).

When Jesus encountered great spiritual and social poverty and grave human sin, he did not shut down in cynicism, nor retreat in separatism, nor start a political uprising through nationalism; rather, he lamented. *Many Gen Z believers understand lament.* They struggle with anxiety and depression and are haunted by the world's pain. They may find Jesus' anguish surprising and validating.

Many who teach this passage portray Jesus as angry since he overturned tables and made a whip of cords (John 2:15). They may use the event as a basis for human righteous anger.¹ It is agreed among scholars that Jesus used the whip to clear animals, not people, out of the courts. A potential hazard with focusing on anger is that some may suggest Christ's followers have indiscriminate authority to take a figurative whip and lash away when they do not think enough is being done in proclamation or justice efforts. But, the temple belonged to Jesus; he called it "my house." Believers do not own the church, nor are they sinless. As people who make up God's house, all generations must relate and minister carefully with humility as Christ's sinful but redeemed servants.

Jesus Also Acted. Jesus was expressive and assertive; he felt and responded. Not just here, but throughout the gospels this pattern is evident. He cleared out the merchants, judged the oppression that benefited the privileged, and opened space for all to hear about God and worship. He was not passive, nor vicious. He perfectly displayed his longing for access to good news and justice that fully reveal his multidimensional kingdom. Jesus marvelously combined the use of his *mind* by considering the situation the night before, his *heart* in lament and motivation, and his *will* in action. How striking it would be if his church and our mission teams consistently followed this order. Jesus modeled engaging his whole person in a holistic response.

Believers who are "evangelism champions and social justice advocates live in same house but different rooms" (Richards 2018). Together they make up God's temple (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:19-22), but they may populate different generations, attend different conferences, teach or take different courses, perhaps read the Bible selectively, or eye the other group suspiciously. They are often tempted to compare the best of their own group (or generation) to the worst of the other.

¹ Luke 19:41 says Jesus wept over Jerusalem just before he cleared the temple, indicating his great sorrow on this day. While Jesus' actions in the temple courts could be interpreted as rising from anger, the texts (Mt. 21:12-17; Mk. 11:15-19; Lk.19:45-48; Jn. 2:13-16) do not describe him as angry. Perhaps overturning tables and clearing merchants/animals was the most practical way to clear a large, crowded area. I find it plausible that sorrow was Jesus' leading emotion based on Luke 19:41-44, especially since in v. 44 Jesus references the future destruction of Jerusalem's buildings (including the temple). If other interpreters conclude Jesus' leading emotion was anger in the temple cleansing, it remains problematic to derive from the passage a basis for righteous human anger that involves physical or symbolic severity.

And Jesus still laments. We can teach Gen Z that when we unnecessarily divide kingdom good news and kingdom action, we grieve him...and our true enemy, Satan, rejoices. Emerging adults may need help seeing that even in the crushing weight of global physical and social need, our King is Christ, not a social justice agenda. Such an agenda can become an ultimate pursuit, and when threatened, may breed un-Christlike suspicion or division.

The marginalized outsider like Jerusalem's first-century Gentile, the displaced refugee, or the one trafficked needs justice that brings safety and freedom. She also needs a relationship with a loving Savior, and inclusion in a compassionate faith community to heal from trauma, find true hope and equality, and discover new purpose in God's mission. She needs the beautiful vertical and horizontal reconciliation our Lord offers; she needs a biblically-integrated kingdom that fully reflects our King and his salvation community.

Jesus' Description of His Purpose

Another passage that links to the Bible's metanarrative is Jesus' description of his purpose in Luke 4:16-21. Jesus went to Nazareth and on the Sabbath in the synagogue, the scroll of Isaiah was handed to him. He turned to Isaiah 61 and read:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus quoted another of Isaiah's prophecies that described his purpose to proclaim and liberate. The verbs show Jesus was anointed by the Spirit and sent to proclaim several blessings—good news, freedom for captives, sight for the blind, and the year of the Lord's favor, a reference to the Year of Jubilee and an announcement of salvation. Jesus said he had come to do much Spirit-enabled proclaiming among the most vulnerable, the very ones Gen Z might want to serve mainly in deed but not in word. In Luke 4:25-27, Jesus also described God's integrated OT care for Gentiles—the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian—to indicate his purpose to include Gentiles in his kingdom's spiritual and earthly provision.

Examination of this passage with Gen Z will provide insight into the Mosaic covenant's Year of Jubilee that points to Christ and God's grace, two significant OT narratives about God's holistic mission among Gentiles, and proclamation among those in physical and social hardship. Here Jesus highlighted evangelism and concern for the oppressed, and described outreach that included cultural outsiders in Jubilee grace.

Summaries of Jesus' Activity and Instructions to Disciples

Several times Jesus' ministry was summarized by Matthew and Luke with three words: *teaching, proclaiming, and healing*. Matt. 4:23 says, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." Matthew and Luke describe a similar pattern in Matt. 9:35 and Luke 9:11. In addition, when Peter spoke about Jesus to Cornelius' household, he referenced the *preaching* of good news and that Jesus "went about *doing good and healing*" (Acts 10:36-38).

Jesus also instructed his disciples to focus on teaching, proclaiming, and healing in Matt. 10:7-8; Luke 9:2, 6; and Luke 10:8-9, the same chapters where Jesus discusses finding persons of peace and being sent as sheep among wolves. These passages also point to the church age and eschatological aspects of the Bible's grand story in Matt. 10:15, 17-31 and Luke 10:18-20. These summaries of Jesus' activities along with his instructions to his disciples can help young justice advocates grasp that Jesus, the apostles, and the historical church engaged the whole person in ministry, including people's minds and hearts through teaching and proclaiming even when it risked potential persecution.

The Lord's Prayer

Due to familiarity, Matt. 6:9-10 may seem unremarkable to Christian young adults. However, the first two requests of the Lord's Prayer may be the strongest sign in all of Jesus' teaching of his desire for word and deed integration. Exploring these verses with Gen Z after a time of worship may make them especially poignant.

With "hallowed be your name" Jesus taught his followers to ask God to ignite reverence for his name. It is a request in the original language for God to reveal the good news of his greatness so that people everywhere will separate and exalt his name above every other pursuit. Jesus taught us to plead: "Father, lift up...and reveal Your name to

the people of the earth...cause the people of the earth to know and adore you!” Jesus wanted more and more people to enjoy the blessing of knowing and exalting their Creator and Savior above all else (Winter and Hawthorne 2009, 59). With Gen Z we can praise God someone shared the gospel *with us* so that we can enjoy God today. Together we can ask: Who needs to hear it *from us* so they can worship him tomorrow?

People languish in this world’s kingdoms amid hardship, oppression, and violence just as they did throughout the biblical narrative. With “thy kingdom come, thy will be done” Jesus invited us to cry out for and participate with him in bringing his reign on earth. In his heavenly kingdom under his rule, which is described in many OT and NT passages, everyone is in relationship with God, all are protected, there is no violence, pain, barrier, greed, or corrupt system.

The phrase “on earth as it is in heaven” connects to both petitions and shows Jesus’ desire for God’s name to be known, and his will to be done everywhere. The Lord’s Prayer is an integrated mission prayer! Leaders can impart new meaning on this familiar prayer to Gen Z, and inspire them to plead with God daily on behalf of people across the street and across the globe who experience spiritual and physical/social poverty. Barna recommends teaching young adults to pray because they “are far less likely than older adults to say that praying specifically for missions is in their future.” Gen Z may need pastoral teaching on prayer’s importance and mentoring on how to actually pray (Barna Group 2020, 92).

Early Church Word and Deed Ministry

What about the early church? Did they do better than the Jewish leaders in Mark 11? Gen Zers likely think of the early church positively but imprecisely. A few passages in Acts may help them grasp important specifics. In Acts 3, a man who was lame asked Peter and John for money; they healed him instead and he ran into the temple praising God. Then Peter in Acts 3:11-26...was content to let his actions speak louder than words. NO! Peter launched into a sermon and used *many words to boldly proclaim Christ* as the source of power that heals, to confront sin directly, call for repentance, and plead with the crowd to put their faith in Christ. The sermon contains direct references to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Acts 3 points to integration in the earliest days of the apostles’ ministry and reliance on scripture’s metanarrative in proclamation.

In Acts 6:1-7 young adults will be encouraged by how early church leaders listened to minority voices on a social issue, did not tell them their experience was invalid or

only perceived, corrected an injustice among poor Hellenistic widows, all while upholding the ministry of the word. In the process they prevented what could have become a significant cultural divide in the church. The outcome in v. 7 was that “the word of God spread...and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” The church quickly became multiethnic and multi-class, comprised of elite priests, widows from a cultural minority, and a Gentile convert to Judaism named Nicolas (v. 5), who was among the seven Hellenists chosen to lead a justice ministry. This illustrates that God’s kingdom community is meant to be inclusive and responsive to minority voices. It connects to God’s concern for vulnerable groups in the Mosaic law and prophetic literature that include widows and sojourners. And yes, the early church did better than the Jewish leaders. May we equip Gen Z to follow in their footsteps!

In Acts 7:2-53 and Acts 8:4-8, 12-14, 26-40 we observe that Stephen and Philip, those tasked with social outreach in Acts 6, also became powerful evangelists whose messages referenced OT salvation history. They were justice ministers who also proclaimed good news grounded in the Bible’s grand narrative. These men provide important character studies for Gen Z. They reveal that spoken proclamation only or justice activity alone is rarely enough to make sense to seekers and hurting people who need to trust the credibility of the messenger and of the message. They also show that those involved in justice work knew the Bible’s story well and were able to ground the good news of salvation in God’s work throughout history.

Conclusion

We all need to “speak to the hell that is to come, and address the hell that is now” (Richards 2018). If we miss either, Jesus laments. Transformed people go hand in hand with transforming social outreach. “People live in a series of integrated relationships; it is therefore indicative of a false anthropology and sociology to divorce the spiritual or the personal sphere from the material and the social. The church begins to be missionary not through its universal proclamation of the gospel, but through the universality of the gospel it proclaims” (Bosch 1991, 10). Separating evangelism and justice is like asking: Should I choose my heart or my lungs? Both work in unison simultaneously in our bodies. Within Christ’s body we can help Gen Z offer words and deeds anchored in the fullness of God’s transcendent kingdom rather than detached evangelism or social justice framed only by immediate needs. Together we can become an undivided sign of God’s kingdom.

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