

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska  
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## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

### *Emerging Adulthood: Implications for the Church and the Culture*

Nearly two weeks ago, I read a book by sociologist Christian Smith while returning to Omaha on a plane. It was an astounding account of the cultural phenomenon called emerging adulthood. For those of us in leadership, it is imperative that we come to terms with this stage of human development, especially in America. In this *Perspective*, I hope to define this stage in human development, speculate on its causes and cite a few implications of this development.

- First, a definition. Basically, America invented the stage of human development we call adolescence. America identified this stage as a unique stage in the development of becoming an adult. It begins about 12 or 13 and continues until age 18. But now sociologists are calling for the recognition of another stage before full adulthood, called emerging adulthood. Coined by Jeffrey Arnett, the phrase, “emerging adulthood,” (the stage of development between 18 and 30) is now being studied extensively by Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith. [The book I read recently is entitled *Lost in Transition*.] Smith characterizes the features of this stage as “intense identity exploration; instability; a focus on self; feelings of being in limbo, in transition, in between; and a sense of possibilities, opportunities, and unparalleled hope. These are often accompanied . . . by large doses of transience, confusion, anxiety, self-obsession, melodrama, conflict, disappointment, and sometimes emotional devastation.” The steps through schooling, a first real job, marriage, and parenthood (all definitions of adulthood) are simply less well organized and coherent today than they were in the past. As Smith argues, “these years are marked by a historically unparalleled freedom to roam, experiment, learn, move on, and try again.” Arnett and Smith see emerging adulthood as the recognition of unique characteristics that explain a new and particular phase of life.
- Second, what forces have combined to create this new phase in the American life? There are six identifiable changes over the last several decades that have helped create this stage of human development.
  1. First is the dramatic growth of higher education. The GI Bill, changes in the American economy, and government subsidizing of higher education all led in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to a dramatic rise in the number of high school graduates going to college. More recently, the need for graduate education has been added as an expectation and a requirement for social advancement. Hence, a huge proportion of young adults do not stop their education at 18, but extend their formal training well into their twenties. Those continuing in graduate education often do so well into their late twenties and early thirties.

2. Another powerful social change is the delay of marriage. Between 1950 and 2006, the median age of the first marriage for women rose from 22.8 to 25.7 years old. For men, the median age rose from 22.8 to 27.5. Typically, young people finished high school, married and began having children. Today, many young adults spend almost a decade between high school graduation and marriage, exploring life's many options as singles—in a period of unprecedented freedom.
  3. The global nature of our economy has undermined stable, lifelong careers and replaced them with careers with lower security, more frequent job changes and the ongoing need for new training and education. Therefore, extended schooling, delayed marriage, and “arguably, a general psychological orientation toward maximizing options and postponing commitments. Far from being happy to graduate from high school and take a factory job or office job . . . many youth today spend five to ten years experimenting with different jobs and career options before finally deciding on a long-term career direction.”
  4. Parents today are more willing than ever to help their young adults financially—well into their 20s and 30s. This financial help enables emerging adults to have the freedom to live a good lifestyle until they settle down into full adulthood (defined as financial independence, stable career and the end of schooling).
  5. Beginning in the 1960s, numerous and reliable birth control technologies became widely available. The last five decades have witnessed major changes in the variety, reliability, ease and accessibility of such methods. The primary cultural effect of this technology has been to disconnect sexual intercourse from procreation in the minds of many Americans. Sex has therefore become a normal element of many close or perhaps even many casual relationships. It also occasionally becomes a recreational activity of sorts. The “hook-up” culture is another effect of this reality for many emerging adults.
  6. The impact of Postmodernism on emerging adults cannot be minimized. The deep-seated characteristics of this worldview—a radical hermeneutic, a radical pluralism, a radical relativism, a radical morality and a radical pragmatism—define and support the emerging adult's worldview. This worldview has both caused and perhaps more importantly justified most of the choices of the typical emerging adult. A radical autonomy is the vital center of almost everything the emerging adult does and thinks. Further, the technology of this age—the cell phone, Smartphone, iPod, iPad, etc.—enables and empowers the emerging adult to define his/her own reality. This entails almost all entertainment choices, leisure choices, purchasing choices, even food and clothing purchases. Further, the social networks, especially Facebook and Twitter, frame the social dynamic of the emerging adult. This technology reinforces all the other elements that help to explain the phenomenon I am calling the emerging adult.
- Third, what are the implications of emerging adulthood for the church and for the larger culture? For the culture, Smith demonstrates that this stage in life has resulted in far more confusion and lack of certainty about almost everything for this age group. Their lives and their worldview are constantly in flux. There is no commitment whatsoever to institutions—government, family (as normally defined) and most importantly to the church. Typically,

most emerging adults are not attending church and are not involved in ministry. As Smith's book shows, they do not vote and are not engaged in civic service or volunteerism. For the church, this generation begins to come back to church once they begin having their own children; but often the church does not know what to do with them. Many of them view church through the grid of youth group with all the fun, excitement and energy so characteristic of current youth groups. Regular church is not like that and often they do not fit in. In my view, the church needs to seek a greater level of understanding about the emerging adult and develop plans and strategies about how to reach and minister to them. The church is losing its youth in increasing numbers. When they do come back, are we ready for them? Answering that question is perhaps the church's most important agenda item for the future.

See Christian Smith, et al, *Lost in Transition* and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 1-11.

## **PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO**

### ***The Importance of Worldview: Roman Paganism vs. Christianity, AD 50-180***

Recently, I read a remarkable magazine on medicine and health care throughout history. What was most striking was the article on healthcare in the Roman Empire. In my opinion, nothing better illustrates the power of worldview in explaining social change than this article.

The period from 30 BC to AD 180 is normally called Pax Romana, a period of unprecedented wealth, security, communication; an era that was the apex of Hellenistic culture. The Roman army kept this forced peace and communication was relatively easy via the fantastic Roman road system. But as historian, Gary B. Ferngren, shows, "Compassion was not a well-developed virtue among the pagan Romans; mercy was discouraged, as it only helped those too weak to contribute to society. In the cramped, unsanitary warrens of the typical Roman city, under the miserable cycle of plagues and famines, the sick found no public institutions dedicated to their care and little in the way of sympathy or help. Perhaps a family member would come to their aid, but sometimes even close relatives would leave their own to die." Roman civilization centered on its 5,000 cities, which stretched from Britain in the West to Jerusalem in the East. The cities teemed with thousands of people and the separation between the rich and powerful and the poor and disadvantaged was marked. Perhaps the baths in each urban area symbolized this social difference more powerfully than anything else. Only the rich or the military could take advantage of these places of luxury and leisure. Further, in a world filled with gods, the Greco-Roman world had no basis for caring for the sick, the destitute or the dying. The gods were viewed as selfish, immoral and capricious. Greco-Roman mythology taught that humans were often an annoyance to the gods. In this worldview there was no basis for the concept of human dignity and worth. Hence, these practices were quite common in the Greco-Roman world:

1. The sick and elderly were routinely left to waste away—in Rome on the Tiber Island.
2. Unwanted children were often left to die of exposure.
3. If a father determined that the family could not afford to feed another child, that child would be abandoned on the steps of a temple or in the public square.

4. Defective newborns were routinely left to die of exposure—almost anywhere.
5. Female infants were exposed more often than males, because girls could not really support the family and, when she would marry, the family needed to provide a dowry.
6. The chronically ill were often seen everywhere in the streets, baths and forums of the Roman cities.
7. Many sick tried to awaken the gods to care for them, most regularly the god Asclepius, who was worshipped in hundreds of temples and shrines through the Roman Empire. As Ferngren reports, “. . . they would offer a small sacrifice . . . then sleep overnight in the *abaton*, or sacred enclosure, where they believed that the god might appear to them, sometimes in a dream, to heal them.”

However, by the first century AD, a new ethic was penetrating the Empire—Christianity. Christians began to care for the sick and the destitute. The Christian ethic was founded on the concept that God created humans in His image (*imago dei*) and that proposition was the basis for the worth and value of every human being. Genesis 9:6 established the basis for justice and the value of humans: “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God He made man.” Further, because of the *imago dei*, child sacrifice, exposure of infants, infanticide and castration were all forbidden. In addition, the doctrine of the incarnation, where the second person of the Trinity added to His deity humanity, deepened the implications of the *imago dei*. Finally, the teaching of Jesus in the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) profoundly challenged the Greco-Roman ethic. As Ferngren demonstrates, “This new ethic . . . [of] compassionate love (*agape*), [was shown] not to the deserving, but to the despised, indeed to enemies. God loved us while we were sinners; Jesus commanded his hearers to ‘go and do likewise.’” The 4<sup>th</sup> century historian, Eusebius, reported on the power of the Christian testimony in this pagan empire: “Then did the evidences of the universal zeal and piety of the Christians become manifest to all the heathen. For they alone in the midst of such ills showed their sympathy and humanity by their deeds. Every day some continued caring for and burying the dead, for there were multitudes who had no one to care for them; others collected in one place those who were afflicted by the famine, throughout the entire city and gave bread to them all.” The love of God was manifested powerfully by the early Christians and that love is what transformed the Roman world. May we Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century demonstrate God’s love in the same manner. Our words and our works should mesh perfectly as we engage the culture as salt and as light.

See Gary B. Ferngren, “A New Era in Roman Healthcare,” *Christian History* (Issue 101), pp. 6-9.

## **PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE**

### ***A 2008 Offer to the Palestinians***

In the new book by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, there is a startling account of an offer Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert, made secretly to Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority in the summer of 2008. The details of this offer included:

1. Israeli transfer of sovereignty of 94.2% of the West Bank to the new Palestinian state. There was to be additional land swaps and a corridor linking the West Bank and Gaza. The result would have granted 100% of the pre-1967 borders of the West Bank to the Palestinians.
2. A formula for dividing Jerusalem that would give Arab neighborhoods to the Palestinians and Jewish neighborhoods to Israel, with negotiations to work out the status of mixed neighborhoods. Jerusalem would be the capital of both, with a joint city council.
3. The Old City would be administered by an international committee with representatives from Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the European Union and the United States.
4. The “right of return” for Palestinians would be limited to 5,000. There would be compensation for other Palestinian refugees through a fund of several billion dollars under Norwegian administration.
5. The US would protect Israel’s security and would also assist in training a reliable Palestinian security force.

In addition, Olmert showed Abbas maps charting the boundaries of this new state and arrangement. However, the Palestinian leader balked and would not sign the maps or the agreement. He said he needed to consult with his experts. He never got back to Olmert.

This is an amazing revelation. Once again, Israel offered the Palestinians virtually everything they have been demanding. But they refused! Further, when President Obama came into office, he did not build on this Israeli offer but instead demanded that Israel cease all settlements as a condition for resumed negotiations. What a mistake! I believe that this will be seen as one of the greatest blunders of Obama’s administration in foreign affairs. It was a disaster! This account by former Secretary Rice once again illustrates that no matter what Israel offers, the Palestinians will never recognize Israel’s right to exist. That remains the fundamental issue of the Middle East today. Unless and until all parties recognize Israel’s right to exist, there can be no peace.

See David Ignatius in the *Washington Post* (27 October 2011).