

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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American Millennials and the New Narcissism

Over the last decade or so, several books and articles have posited a rather optimistic set of projections about the Millennials—the generation born between 1982 and 1999. The typical thesis is that the Millennials are helpful, civically oriented young adults who desire to save the world. This view has recently been challenged, arguing instead that the Millennials evidence an entitlement mentality, are self-centered, and uninterested in anything other than their own virtual world of Facebook, Twitter and their I-Phone. Which is it? Are they the “Me-Generation or the We Generation,” to quote Jean Twenge author of the book, *Generation-Me?* Twenge’s 2006 book presented data “showing generational increases in self-esteem, assertiveness, self-importance, narcissism and high expectations.” When it comes to the Millennials, the data demonstrate a clear cultural shift toward individualism and focusing on self. Twenge and his associates began a significant research project to determine indeed whether the Millennials are the We- or the Me-Generation. They surveyed half a million high school students and 9 million college students using an instrument called “Monitoring the Future,” which asked questions on community feeling, concern for others and civic engagement. The same survey had been administered to the Boomers in the 1960s and 1970s, providing a means for generational comparison. [Their findings are important, for they counter earlier assumptions about the Millennials, especially those offered in the book by Neil Howe and William Strauss entitled *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation.*] Here is a summary of the survey’s findings:

- Millennials are less likely than Boomers or Gen-Xers to say they are concerned about social problems, interested in politics and government, to contact public officials or to work for a political campaign.
- They are less likely to say they trust government to do what is right, and less likely to say they were interested in government and current events.
- Millennials are less likely to say they did things in their daily lives to conserve energy and help the environment. In short, they make no personal effort to help the environment. They are also less likely to agree that government should take action on environmental issues.
- Millennials are also less likely to say they want a job that is helpful to others or worthwhile to society. This is counter to earlier assumptions (as in Howe and Strauss’s book) about Millennials expressing concern for others and desiring to volunteer their time and efforts to help others.

- The research and conclusions of Twenge confirm what Christian Smith has argued [see his book, *The Lost Generation*]: “The idea that today’s emerging adults are as a generation leading a new wave of renewed civic-mindedness and political involvement is sheer fiction. The fact that anyone ever believed that idea simply tells us how flimsy the empirical evidence that so many journalistic media stories are based upon is and how unaccountable to empirical reality high-profile journalism can be” (p. 224).

In addition to the research of Jean Twenge, there is a significant body of social science research demonstrating that the Millennials are far more narcissistic than Howe and Strauss would have us believe. For example, Dr. Nathan DeWall and his research team found “a statistically significant trend toward narcissism and hostility in popular music” since the 1980s. Further, Shawn Bergman, assistant professor of organizational psychology at Appalachian State University, notes that “narcissism levels among Millennials are higher than previous generations.”

The Social Network phenomenon seems to feed this trend toward narcissism. In fact, in a recent essay in *The Atlantic*, Bill Davidow summarizes research that shows a “high correlation between Narcissistic Personality Inventory scores and Facebook activity.” In fact, technology as a whole, including the Internet, permits the young adult (and other age groups as well) to individualize each entertainment choice, each technological experience and each music selection to suit their personal wants and desires. In other words, technology feeds narcissism. Davidow argues that “In virtual space many of the physical interactions that restrain behavior vanish. Delusions of grandeur, narcissism, viciousness, impulsivity, and infantile behavior for some individuals rise to the surface. . . . What is clear is that social media platforms are frequently used by those with narcissistic tendencies to feed their egos.” The same social media applications are being used by millions of people to build their own businesses, coordinate events and maintain close ties with friends and families. Thus, the Social Network can be positive, but there is a growing body of evidence that social media can also feed the narcissistic personality and produce significant imbalance in life and tendencies in behavior that are far from healthy. As with so many things in life, balance is a key virtue.

Finally, what can we conclude about the religious behavior and preferences of the Millennials? Robert P. Jones, writing in the *Washington Post*, summarizes the 2012 Millennial Values Survey, conducted jointly by the Public Religion Research Institute and Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs. Among other things, this research demonstrates that college-age Millennials are more likely than the general population to be religiously unaffiliated. Among Millennials who were raised white mainline Protestant, only 59% continue to identify with their childhood faith, while nearly 3-in-10 identify themselves as unaffiliated. Similarly, only 2/3rds that were raised Catholic remain Catholic. Only 25% of Millennials say they attend religious services at least once a week, while 30% say they attend occasionally. More than 40% say they seldom or never attend church. Strong majorities of Millennials agree that modern day Christianity is “hypocritical,” (58%), “judgmental” (62%), and “anti-gay” (64%). The research that Jones cites illustrates convincingly that the stand of Christians on the gay and lesbian issue is driving Millennials away from Christianity. Jones concludes that “the Millennial generation’s rate of dissatisfaction is higher than previous generations at comparable points in their life cycle. It’s probable that fewer Millennials than

previous generations will reliably return to congregations when they are older, settled, and raising children.”

The Millennial generation is decidedly more narcissistic and technology is feeding that narcissism. The Millennial generation is also decidedly anti-institution and Christianity is seeing the negative effects of that anti-institutional bent quite decisively. This is one of the greatest challenges biblical Christianity has faced in several generations. We are losing our young adults and they are not coming back. The church needs to re-emphasize the simplicity of the Gospel and the ethical implications of biblical truth and how to speak that truth in love. As it has been since the first century, the “power of the Gospel” (Romans 1:16-17) is the answer—and creative use of the Social Network to communicate that Gospel needs to be explored. The Digital Revolution can be leveraged to communicate the truth of the Gospel and all of its profound implications. It is, after all, the most important message there is. May God give us the insight to be shrewd in our communication of biblical truth (see Luke 16).

See Jean Twenge, “Millennials: The Greatest Generation or the Most Narcissistic?” in www.theatlantic.com (3 May 2012); Bill Davidow, “The Internet ‘Narcissism Epidemic’” in www.theatlantic.com (27 March 2013); and Robert P. Jones, “Why are Millennials leaving the Church?” in www.washingtonpost.com (27 April 2012).