Oregon Trail Theology

The Frontier Millennial Christians Face —And How We're Ready

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Contents

Preface

Why Take This Journey?

"I was never so contented and happy before."
"I long for the quiet of home where I can be at peace once more."
"I had never found a place to call my own."
"I did not think I would feel comfortable until I came here."

The first and second of these four sentiments are from the letters and diaries of two young pioneer women—Narcissa Whitman and Agnes Stewart—who were twenty-eight and twenty-one, respectively, when they each wrote those words during their sojourns along the westward Oregon Trail.[1] The third and fourth are simply refrains that I have heard time and again, in slightly varying forms, from friends, peers, and congregants concerning the institutional American church.

I have come to believe that the refrains never really change, only the century in which they are uttered. The lack of belonging, the need for something new, the continual search for what so many of us crave and what not nearly enough of us ever really find—all of those motivations swirl in the mixture of purpose and desire that we religious types tend to refer to as a calling.

I genuinely believe that many of the pioneers who traversed their way across the continent in covered wagons during the mid-1800s did so out of a sense of calling. Many also did so out of a sense of greed for the land itself, and for the homes of the American

1. "Narcissa Whitman," National Park Service, *https://www.nps.gov/oreg/learn/historyculture/history2.htm*, last updated February 24, 2015, last accessed December 11, 2017; and "Historic Trail Quotes," Jim's Trail Resources, *https://jimstrailresources.wordpress.com/trail-quotes/#historic-trails*, last accessed December 11, 2017.

Indian peoples[2] who inhabited it. But many a family dared to pick up the only life they had, pack up or sell all they owned, and take a life-or-death gamble on the chance that they would survive the six-month journey from Missouri to Oregon, and the subsequent settling down in a new home that they had never before seen.

I likewise genuinely believe that the millennial generation traverses its way across the spiritual landscape—from church to church to no church and perhaps back to church again—out of much that same sense of calling. Broadly speaking, millennials are our young people who were born between the early 1980s and the late 1990s, and many of us were raised on a series of 1990s-era cultural staples, such as Nicktoons, R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps* series, and, of course, the *Oregon Trail* video game franchise. Many of us retain nostalgia for these icons of our childhood, but it is the last one, the *Oregon Trail* franchise, that has stuck to us so much that older millennials are even sometimes referred to as the Oregon Trail generation. And when it comes to describing our spirituality, I find it to be an apt label.

For even as we see others working within the church out of a sense of Prosperity Gospel-driven greed or politically minded selfishness, many a millennial has dared to pick themselves up on Sunday morning and take a gamble on a chance that they would not only feel included in the church they were visiting that day, but that they would thrive there. Though the headlines blare that my generation is the most godless ever, the most likely to shun organized religion ever, and—according to that iconic opening clip of Aaron Sorkin's hit television show *The Newsroom*—simply the worst ever, I know in my heart that I belong to a generation that, far from being godless or hateful of church, is instead a generation crying out

2. Occasionally in this book, you will see me refer to the indigenous tribes of the Americas as "American Indians." I utilize the names of specific tribes whenever possible, but I also want to acknowledge and honor the fact that there exists no consensus opinion on the preferred term for the indigenous tribes of the Americas. I have elected to use the term "American Indians" here in deference to the dissatisfaction expressed by some American Indian leaders and activists towards terms such as "Native American."

from thirst. Even as we are inundated with twenty-four-hour news cycles, two-day Amazon Prime delivery, and dating apps for every demographic imaginable (find your soulmate on Left-Handed-Postmodern-Christian-Pastors-Mingle.Com today!), we crave the depth of those relationships that we have chosen rather than those based solely on who our family is or what job we perform. Friendships of truly great depth are forged in the fires of social media, Reddit, and online forums. We fan ourselves when a favorite musician or athlete likes one of our tweets. We plan entire road trips to meet in person friends whom we know only from the internet. We find recognition, affirmation, and community in new places as they emerge.

None of this may seem to have a lick in common with the far more primitive world of the intrepid pioneers of the 1800s, yet I promise that it does. For, faced with the prospect of wilting away in lives that were less than what they could be, those pioneers left the circumstances in which they found themselves. In like manner, we millennials, having long since realized that our parents' and grandparents' churches were not always going to nurture us out of wilting, have sought to strike our own paths.

Just as the pioneers of old loaded up their wagons with what they needed—staples, clothing, hunting arms, and ammunition—so too do we load our lives up with what we spiritually need—podcasts, new books, social media, and much more. Far from merely being glued to such digital temptations, millennials have found liberation in them; our spiritual fixes can now come on Monday through Saturday, not just Sunday morning. They come in the briefest of fleeting moments and in hours upon hours of conversation. They come from far outside the church's walls and, yes, sometimes within them too.

So why take this journey? Because we are a generation unbounded, for better and for worse. And I wouldn't have it any other way. We take it upon ourselves to journey outward because it is fundamentally a part of who we are, and it is a journey that we are ready to take.

I sit here typing these words in my childhood home in the suburbs of Kansas City, not very far at all from where the pioneers pushed off on their journey across the United States. Kansas City will always be home to me, and it is a fitting setting to spring off when talking about a new generation's travels and travails alike, and for myself especially: after graduating from high school nearly thirteen years ago, I moved to Portland, Oregon, for college and have remained on the "Left Coast" ever since. Whether in the north of the Willamette Valley like the pioneers, or in the Bay Area like the forty-niners of the San Francisco gold rush, I have lived and learned new lessons to build upon the strong Midwestern roots that Kansas City gave to me, and my gratitude for those roots abounds.

As a traveling pilgrim, I continue to carry gratitude not only for what my home has given me, but for what the church has given me: to be a provider of truth, goodness, and meaning where there previously had been a lack of such virtues. My hope for the church is that it can still inhabit such roles in the lives of my generation, even though it will require a great deal of work and self-examination. My desire and prayer for you, dear reader, is that the following chapters will provide you a bit of the truth and goodness that I know my generation seeks, and still yearns to find, not just within the institutional church, but outside of it as well.

The frontier this generation faces is the fundamental reshaping of that institutional church which, in all honesty, has been decades in the making, and certainly longer than either I or the *Oregon Trail* video game have been alive. Yet a combination of sociological, theological, and economic factors have converged to create this present spiritual frontier.

Just as I have, this book will follow the Oregon Trail, from starting off in Independence, Missouri, to traveling the trail, to, God willing, arriving home. There is a lot of trail to cover. It begins with an inventory of the baggage my generation brings with us to the church gates and how we are still capable of joyfully surrendering that baggage to the love of a community in which we can fit. It ends with a forceful critique of the state of American Christian spirituality

in an era of a resurgent white Christian nationalism. I hope you will find comfort and challenge alike in what humble testimony I can offer you in these pages.

The first two chapters of this book focus primarily on illustrating the circumstances at hand. You may have read some of the myriad think pieces in newspapers and magazines about how we millennials are vicious, unstoppable serial killers of all manner of treasured cultural artifacts. I think it is important to offer an explicitly spiritual interpretation of my generation.

In chapter three, we will begin to pivot away from the wider circumstances of the present and home in on how millennials, and spiritually inclined millennials in particular (including Christians), have adapted to those wider circumstances in our ordering of priorities, finances, and other critical aspects of our lives that in turn can inform our spirituality.

Chapters four through seven outline those adaptations in specific areas of millennial spirituality and community-building, and then describe how they can be used to great effect: how we form online connections and friendships, how we heal from emotional and religious wounds, how we lead from a place informed by our understanding of God, and how we engage in the politics of the Trump presidency and all of its attendant prejudices and newly enabled enmities.

That is an awful lot to try to cram into one book, and I do not expect you to see this work as the definitive treatment of such an important and pressing concern to both the church and the rising millennial generation. But it does seek to describe at some length the journey that we are undertaking together, and I am eager to take the trail with you, regardless of your generation. We are all in this wagon train together.

To my elders, the Greatest Generation and the baby boomers and perhaps even some of the older Generation X-ers: please do not take my championing of my generation as a personal slight upon yours. If ministering in two intergenerational congregations over the past decade has taught me anything, it is that on this trail of faith that we blaze together, the wagons in our trains need not be circled

up and segregated by age. Indeed, I have learned much as a child at your knee and now as a young adult. I would not be the God-image I am without you.

And to my fellow young people: I pray my words here will put a song in your heart and a fire in your spirit. You surely put a song and a fire in mine.

Finally, to those even younger who come after me: my deepest desire for you is that you will be as passionate for your causes of justice and peace, whatever they may be, as I know that my generation is for ours. I will be saying a prayer of thanksgiving and encouragement for you.

Overland Park, Kansas
December 2017

Chapter 1

Matt's General Store

What We Bring with Us

My eyes cast over our refinancing options. I see a lot of numbers with commas separating them every third number. Even though we are talking about buying a house in addition to refinancing my wife's medical school debt, I am not accustomed to computing household budgetary matters that have that many zeroes, especially on the negative side of the ledger.

The surprise and dismay on my face must register to my wife, because she pipes in helpfully, "Look, I know you're not familiar with just how expensive medical school really is. I've been living with these student loans for years now. I'm used to it. I know you're not. But you'll get there."

You could skate across the look I give over my eyeglasses and the papers in my hands. Despite her words of reassurance, I am not convinced. Between student loans, a car loan, and a potential mortgage, I am terrified that we are going to have to auction off the naming rights for our firstborn child just to keep the lights on.

Appealing to our shared goofy sense of humor, my wife tries again. "This amount of student debt is like a big, smelly walrus that I've just gotten accustomed to living with. I call him Clyde. Clyde's smelliness is just now hitting you. But you'll get used to living with his stink too. And when all our debt is paid off, we will throw a huge 'Clyde is dead!' party."

A loud guffaw escapes from my previously clenched jaws, momentarily easing my worries—and startling our two dogs, Sir Henry and

Dame Frida. But with student and car loans plus the mortgage on the house that we are about to buy, the amount of money we owe seems a more suitable figure for describing the national debt.

We are not alone in that regard when it comes to our generation. Our finances are no longer just a statement of values; they are a statement of inhibitions and obstacles as well.

As the American Church faces down an existential and financial crisis on a par with the economic collapse that brought about the Great Recession that my generation faced as we completed college, many of the young families and households that are seen as highly valuable in church planting and recruitment literature are facing similar financial crises, but on a more microcosmic scale. We lack assets. Cash is spent as quickly as it is brought in. In order to maintain any semblance of a quality of life, or to attempt any real furthering of our circumstances in life, we often must take on substantial debt.

One would think, then, given the financial similarities between so many churches and so many millennial-aged households, that the former would have a more apparent understanding of the latter, even if begrudgingly so. After all, we millennials may be the generation of fidget spinners, smartphones, and avocado toast, but we also have a deep and abiding need to make a difference in our world, just as churches feel called to build the realm of God where they are. In spite of the financial chains which hamper millennials, we remain determined to make an impact. Jacques Berlinerblau, a professor at Georgetown University, says of us:

> My [students'] career plans are a peculiar mix of naked ambition and hair-shirt altruism. If they pursue investment banking, they do so not merely to make money. Rather, they wish to use their eventual wealth to distribute solar light bulbs to every resident of a developing nation. They'll apply to the finest law schools in hopes of someday judging war criminals at the Hague.[1]

1. Jacques Berlinerblau, *Campus Confidential: How College Works, or Doesn't, for Professors, Parents, and Students* (New York: Melville House, 2017), 187.

Ideally, those needs—or callings—would have intersected more than they have so far in the emergence of millennials as fully formed adults. Yet they have not. Between 2010 and 2015, the percentage of millennials who said that the church has a positive effect on the way things are going in the United States today plummeted from 73 percent to 55 percent.[2] The reasons for this precipitous drop in my generation's approval of the church are manifold, and as an increasingly homogenous church looks down on increasingly diverse generations of young people, I would be surprised if that figure were not already lower.

The antipathy towards the church from younger generations is real, and in many cases reciprocated. Yet many millennials have resolutely remained within the realm of spirituality, hoping, praying, and striving to change it from within rather than taking our cards and going home. We millennial Christians have not given up on the body of Christ, and we are determined to find our own communities within it, even if it means migrating away from the brick-and-mortar communities in which we were raised and that our elders keep impressing upon us are our sacred duty to save.

In order to both explore and affirm that perseverance of my generation, I want to turn to another name by which we are sometimes called: the Oregon Trail Generation, a term that was coined in 2015 by entrepreneur Anna Garvey.[3] It serves as a moniker more precisely applied to the older millennials (in addition to some very young Generation X-ers) who were raised on a steady diet of MECC's *Oregon Trail* video game series in which players led a fictitious covered wagon party to Oregon. *Oregon Trail* as a game and a cultural phenomenon has so deeply penetrated our pop culture that video parodies, card games, and "You have died of dysentery"

2. Hannah Fingerhut, "Millennials' Views of News Media, Religious Organizations Grow More Negative," *Pew Research Center*, *http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/04/millennials-views-of-news-media-religious-organizations-grow-more-negative/*, January 4, 2016, last accessed December 11, 2017.

3. Anna Garvey, "The Oregon Trail Generation: Life Before and After Mainstream Tech," *Social Media Week*, *https://socialmediaweek.org/blog/2015/04/oregon-trail-generation/*, April 21, 2015, last accessed December 11, 2017.

memes have all been byproducts of the original game's massive popularity. In other words, *Oregon Trail* is something whose presence eclipses more than just one generation, or one subset of a generation, and is instead a more widely, if not universally, understood and shared phenomenon.

It is precisely because we millennials—and younger Gen X-ers—played so much *Oregon Trail* that it is useful in describing our generation's sojourn through faith. From beginning the trail after already being loaded up with so much baggage that we need a team of half a dozen oxen just to make some forward progress, to having to bargain our way through the grief and consternation of things breaking down and going wrong, the mechanics of *Oregon Trail* gameplay offer an apt springboard to not only explore how millennials have come to live out their faith, but to celebrate it, affirm it, and offer ways to dive deeper into it as well. Let us begin, then, with an honest look at how many of us have begun these adult journeys of the soul.

How We Got Here

In the original *Oregon Trail* games, you could choose not only your occupation, but the riches with which you began the game. You could choose to be a farmer from Illinois with a very small savings account, a carpenter from Ohio with savings double that of the farmer, or a banker from Boston who was absolutely loaded. The object of the choice was to inject a variable degree of difficulty into the game. If you were a beginner, you could choose to be the banker with vast reserves of cash, and if you wanted a challenge, you could elect to be the cash-poor farmer.

Whatever your occupation, you began the trail itself at the same place: Matt's General Store in Independence, Missouri, where you had to outfit your wagon party with oxen, sets of clothes, spare parts, food, and boxes of bullets. Matt would helpfully chime in with advice, but beyond buying at least a yoke of oxen to slowly haul you off to Oregon, you could purchase as much or as little as you wanted—or that

you could afford. If you did not buy all you could at Matt's General Store, prices got progressively—and prohibitively—more expensive along the trail. It was the economy that we millennials walked into after college, but written into a computer game decades beforehand: limited cash to invest in our livelihood at the start, which has meant paying a higher and higher price as time has elapsed. Starting conditions were, and are, everything.

I graduated from college a scant eight months after the collapse of the investment firm Bear Stearns set off the Great Recession. I already knew that I would be going to graduate school—seminary—for at least three more years, so I had somewhere to wait out the immediate devastating effects of the crash. However, as I would quickly learn, the market was still suffering in the spring of 2011, when I earned my master of divinity in May, was ordained in June, and began my first day at my new church in Longview, Washington, in September. I was profoundly fortunate, though. I had classmates who waited years for their first calls out of seminary. My friends in other fields, from law to teaching to healthcare, for which they had invested vast sums into their education, likewise suffered. They went months, even years, either unemployed or underemployed as jobs were eliminated via attrition and older employees delayed their hard-earned retirements because of the deleterious effect the recession had on their retirement investments.

All of these factors, as well as many others, also affected congregations through decreased giving, and congregations were forced to quickly adapt to such scarcity. There was one church that interviewed me for an associate pastor position. On paper, it looked healthy and was looking to expand its staff. But at the interview, they admitted that they could only guarantee the position for a two-year period; after that, its existence would largely depend on whether congregational giving had begun to improve.

For some millennials, the variability and mobility that comes from changing jobs may be welcome, even sought after, especially since so many of us cannot even afford mortgages, much less are looking for one that would tie us to a particular city or town for

several years. But as we will see in chapter three, the leaps of faith that millennials have taken in response to such variability aren't always for a job. And for other millennials, especially those emerging from expensive degree programs with hefty debts to repay, a relatively low-paying job that may not be around in a year or two has the potential to become a real obstacle, not a help, to paying the bills—especially if it is a job we relocate for.

Now, take such a socioeconomic circumstance and throw into the mix a congregation that is continually preaching tithing. Theologically, there is nothing wrong with the practice of tithing. I do it myself as a pastor because in part, as my seminary field education supervisor told me, "Never ask your congregation to do something that you are not willing to do yourself." But I am also a part of a two-income household that is essentially fiscally solvent despite juggling the debt of student loans, car loans, and a mortgage. Such solvency has become a luxury rather than a necessity for our up-and-coming generations. When you have student loans to pay off and car payments to make, there is often precious little left for tithing to a church, much less any charitable giving at all. What little giving can be done, ironically, sometimes goes towards the GoFundMe campaigns[4] of our friends and relatives who, faced with unexpected expenses of their own, are forced to ask their loved ones for cash to repair their financial breaches. Setting up a GoFundMe may be seen as more respectable than panhandling because it does not take place on a street corner, but the circumstances that necessitate it are sometimes no less dire or dramatic, precisely because there is so little opportunity to create any sort of safety net in our unforgiving economy that has yet to bear the occupational fruit that was promised. That lack of forgiveness extends to church, where millennials are often seen as takers rather than as givers in part because of our relative lack of financial security.

4. For anyone who is unfamiliar, GoFundMe is one of several "crowdfunding" websites that offer the service of helping a person raise money for anything, from a business start-up to medical bills, in exchange for a commission on all the monies raised. Because donations often come from peers rather than wealthier donors, crowdfunding can result in people without vast reserves to draw upon redistributing their meager funds amongst each other.

Preoccupied with Our Occupation

What we do for a living, and how we make ends meet, remains a foundational source of identity in American culture. Think of how many times you meet someone new and, perhaps without even thinking about it, ask them, "What do you do?" As much as millennials are made out to be artistic and sensitive snowflakes in perpetual search of safe spaces to create whatever their art happens to be, the jobs that have opened up for our generation frequently do not allow for such creative expression unless we force the issue. Having been raised on an educational curriculum that emphasized the creation of one's own voice not only in the traditional venues like English class, speech, and the debate team, but also in a bevy of extracurricular activities, millennials have come of age in a world that wants us to continue being children, or even pets: to be seen and not heard; to simply be grateful for the crumbs that fall to us from the adults' table.

Think of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7 who begs Jesus to heal her stricken daughter. After Jesus cuts her down with the withering comment, "It isn't right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs," she maintains her dignity and responds, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

I have seen many pastors and writers assuage their discomfort with what is pretty clearly an ethnic slur from an Israelite towards a Syrophoenician by saying that Jesus was satirizing such attitudes, but there is no indication in the text of mirth or parody on his part, just as there is no indication that she took Jesus's comment in jest. It seems accurate—albeit ghastly—to view Jesus's comment, then, not as some joking commentary but as an insult.

Here is where Jesus returns to the role of teacher, role model, and, indeed, Messiah. Having conceded the rightness of the woman's response by saying, "Good answer," he assures her that her daughter has been healed. The woman's response to Jesus makes it clear that she is not content with the crumbs that fall from the adults' table; she wants to be treated as an equal at that table. Jesus, in turn, grants to her the miracle that she was seeking. Her daughter is made well.

Millennials realize that the dignity that comes from our occupations is innately valuable. We do not demand economic or financial miracles. We have been conditioned to accept our position beneath the table, and the pitiful few crumbs that fall our way, as though some kind, benevolent soul at the table were surreptitiously slipping us sustenance the way I "accidentally" drop scraps on the kitchen floor for my own dogs. Being endlessly reminded that "the world does not owe you a living" is among the least nutritious of those crumbs, and one that is typically reserved for us. But if that line of reasoning is an inadequate word of comfort to an older manufacturing worker whose job has been outsourced despite their skill and dedication, then why is it of value to someone younger than that worker?

Younger generations are not stupid. That sounds self-evident to the point of being borderline ludicrous, but I will double down on it because of how urgently it needs to be said: Younger. Generations. Are. Not. Stupid. We know when we are being talked down to, we know how to recognize doublespeak and passive-aggressive mockery, and we know that if we are to make a living off of our passions we must find people, companies, and entrepreneurs who are willing to pay us to pursue those passions.

As the cultural landscape has dramatically changed over the past ten to fifteen years with the arrival of social media and digital apps, new needs have emerged, and for those of us whose passion involves meeting those needs, there is no better time to be alive. Those occupations may not be the same as being a farmer, or a carpenter, or a banker, but what they offer us is not all that much different than what the Oregon Trail offered its own wayfarers: a chance to start something new out of the sheer will to bring about a new thing, whatever it might be.

New Economies Necessitate New Communities

If I could communicate one of the most basic truths that I believe informs the actions of both the historical Oregon Trail generation and the modern-day Oregon Trail generation, it is this: new economies necessitate new communities. The United States of the

1840s and 1850s had not quite reached the apex of the Industrial Revolution, but its primarily agrarian (and, in much of the country, slavery-driven) economy had already begun to permanently morph, and the industrial capacities of the Union played a significant role in its eventual victory over the Confederacy. Similarly, today in the early twenty-first century, the Digital Revolution is in full swing, and much of the economy that has been in place since the Industrial Revolution has lamentably been outsourced, shuttered, or outright demolished. Some of the biggest brands of the twentieth century, like Pan American and Sears Roebuck, have given way to newer upstarts that have become titans in their own right, like Southwest and Amazon. They, in turn, may well cede their titan status someday, if for no other reason than such the nature of the proverbial economic beast.

Changing consumer preferences have had a lot to do with the demise of many storied brands, but where those changing preferences come from is not simply a matter of a proclivity for dating apps and eschewing chain restaurants. The changing economic preferences of millennial adults have emerged in what has thus far been an intractably stunted earning potential relative to older generations, to the tune of a nearly 20 percent loss in earnings relative to the baby boomer generation when they were our age.[5] Our economy is, at its core, one of increased scarcity. It is a tidal change to which we are still adapting, both economically and spiritually.

When we transverse the bridge between economic and spiritual realities, how much of our church life has remained unchanged since the twentieth century? I do not mean the fundamentals, like the study of scripture or the Sabbath worship of God or the administration of a church, but more how we go about those fundamentals. We still preach and teach the sacrificial giving of tithes and offerings to our spiritual communities—that has never and hopefully will never change—but is the only avenue for doing so at your church the Sunday morning collection plate, or does your congregation also enable online or

5. "Millennials Earn 20% Less Than Boomers Did at Same Stage of Life," *Associated Press*, *https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2017/01/13/millennials-falling-behind-boomer-parents/96530338/*, January 13, 2017, last accessed December 11, 2017.

mobile-based gifts with a credit card or an e-commerce service? We still proclaim the value of Bible study—something else that will hopefully never change—but is the only Bible study class at your congregation offered at a time that is convenient for only one generation?

I cannot stress the premise of that last question enough. This book is not a manifesto for a millennial-run monopoly on the church. Rather, it is a plea for a millennial-aided church, a church that has made space sufficient enough and sacred enough for millennials to be able to flex our spiritual and moral muscles. These muscles are strong indeed, even when they have propelled us away from the church. In fact, it is often because of the strength of those muscles that our departures have taken place. This strength of moral resolve on the part of my generation has led to a mass exodus that has unfortunately become far too familiar as more and more millennials recognize the toxicity of some, or much, of what we were once taught.

An Exodus of Conscience

I grew up in the Christian faith, attending both a Catholic and [an] evangelical church. Despite the theological distance between the two, one thing remained: homosexuality was a sin. They didn't even talk about trans or genderqueer folk because it was all the same to them.

I entered college with shards of faith still clinging on, one element of which was the oft-spouted "hate the sin, love the sinner." It didn't take long to realize that telling someone their existence is sinful translated as abhorrent regardless of whether one believes [and] had nothing to do with compassion.

That revelation was my first big step towards coming out as an atheist. I'm still so ashamed I thought that way for even a second about the truly beautiful, talented, and loving queer folk in my life.

These words from my longtime friend Lauren cut through me like a sharply honed blade when I saw them. Despite our disparate religious worldviews, we have maintained a solid friendship for a number of years after squaring off against one another many a time on

the collegiate debate circuit. Intellectually curious and passionate for a more just world, Lauren is raising her young daughter to choose her own religious path, whatever it may be, including the possibility that her daughter's own path might diverge significantly from her own at some point in the future. It is one of the things that I appreciate most about her. She is raising her child to be her own person, and not a carbon copy of the original article, no matter how good a person the original article may be.

But reading Lauren's testimony of leaving the church, I found it impossible to begrudge her reasons. I grieved the church's loss of such a soul, but even more strongly, I realized that I had to grieve that the church has inflicted such losses upon itself with countless other Laurens. Their exodus—largely driven not by laziness or malice, but by conscience—is a reckoning that we cannot blame them for. The church is responsible for our decades of not engaging the spiritual concerns of an entire generation.

Is the church truly loving our neighbors—our immigrant neighbor, our LGBTQ neighbor, our addicted neighbor—rather than simply saying that we do? Is the church really being salt for the earth and a light for the world as Jesus demands of us in the Sermon on the Mount? And has the church truly integrated this generation into its fold, or has it shunned its young off to the side, like a subdepartment seen as a particularly undesirable assignment within a sprawling conglomerate?

When the church marginalizes a generation, that generation picks up on what is being communicated: You. Do. Not. Belong. Here. Millennial Christians, and the Generation Z Christians who are, to my great joy, fast rising with the gospel behind us, are not oblivious to the signals being sent. It is not that we have not heard the message of the church; on the contrary, we have heard the message loud and clear, and have consciously reacted by stepping back.

A critical part of American Christian spirituality in the twenty-first century, whether or not we wish it were so, is having to acknowledge, understand, and empathize with the grievances and complaints of those who have been leaving the church over the past couple of decades. It may not be the job that we had hoped for, but

to simply say, "It is not my job" is to completely miss the heart of the stories in the Gospels that depict Jesus acknowledging, understanding, and empathizing with those who initially disagreed with his teachings. In Mark 10, a rich young man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Upon hearing this man's question, the Gospel says, Jesus looked at him and *loved him.* And the rich young man's subsequent walking away did not end Christ's love for him.[6]

What I struggle with in this story is that I see in the rich young man not just my generation's deep-seated need for spiritual righteousness, but also the older generations' prioritization of possessions over experiences. The rich young man's foregoing of a lifetime of discipleship under Jesus in favor of his possessions resonates with every time I have seen a church prioritize its own possessions, be they pews or hymnals or even the buildings themselves, over its kingdom-centered mission according to the Great Commission: to go and make disciples. Just as the young rich man was focused only on himself, many churches have elected to focus on their own pet issues rather than on what Jesus calls the "more important matters of the Law" in Matthew 23:23: justice, peace, and faith.

So, is the church really prepared to love a generation that has been told repeatedly that those who have spent decades championing cultural wedge issues over justice, peace, and faith do not give a whit about what the young think about those pet wedge issues? If so, the church must do a far better job of it. If not, it is high time to own that unwillingness, lest its duplicity implicate the church even further in the pushing aside of a potential generation of Jesus followers.

A Desire for Life, Not Death

In spite of such experiences at the hands of the institutional church, I believe that many millennials, even atheist millennials, do not

6. The rich young man is by no means a one-person band on the list of those who initially disagreed with Jesus's teachings but were still left moved by him. Think of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, or Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7, and consider how they, unlike the rich young man, were able to see past their personal preferences and understand what Jesus was asking of them.

necessarily want to see the church die off entirely. Lauren is not raising her daughter to be an atheist. She is raising her daughter to pick a path all her own that may well include a profession of faith in God someday. That is not the mark of a hardened heart; quite the contrary, it is the fruit of a heart of openness.

Despite that openness—from both millennials and the churches and pastors who claim to want to minister to us—there remains a massive cultural chasm between millennials and the church that I believe remains traversable. As much as there are characteristics of my generation that separate us from previous generations, there are also a great deal in which we remain like our forebearers. Even when it comes to characteristics that are often regarded as quintessentially millennial—like access to technology and the repetitive news cycle of information that is increasingly equal parts disruptive and addictive—we surprisingly share in the experiences of our elders. In such matters, it seems, misery—or at least consternation—loves company.

According to the Christian research firm Barna, 54 percent of adults struggle with the onslaught of information from the twenty-four-hour news cycle. Despite the stereotype of our being much more in love with our smartphones, 56 percent of millennials do as well.[7] Among baby boomers, 44 percent report that they would struggle to go an entire day without internet access, as do 47 percent of millennials.[8] Even when it comes to issues closely associated with our generation, our concerns often align with those of other generations, and theirs with ours. I can attest to this from personal experience. As much as social media has shaped the millennial experience of relational ministry, it is often my social media friends whom I have never met in person, many of whom are Gen X-ers or baby boomers, who frequently voice the same concerns as mine on any number of issues, from politics to popular culture. Indeed, they are often able to get me to think about such things in ways that I otherwise might not have, and that means the world.

7. Jun Young and David Kinnaman, *Hyperlinked Life: Live with Wisdom in an Age of Information Overload* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 25.

8. Ibid, 60.

On a more spiritual note, while it is true that many millennials are divorcing themselves from organized religious trappings at a rate greater than their elders, we in fact show similar levels of spiritual practice compared to older generations when they were at the same age as millennials. Research indicates that millennials engage in prayer at almost identical rates to those of Gen X-ers when the latter were coming of age in the late 1990s, and at only slightly lower rates than those of the baby boomers during the early 1980s (which is the earliest statistical data available for the baby boomers).[9]

So, let us be clear as we discuss how we got here, and what baggage we are carrying at this point in the trail: there are differences between generations, sometimes vast ones, but in other ways, our values and our concerns are quite similar. Instead of a gaping void between the generations of the church, imagine a canyon: it winds along, with some areas where the gulf between each cliff seems intractably large, and others where the sides are so close that it feels as though you could reach out and touch the other.

Instead of feeling threatened by an impending millennial coup that may or may not ever happen (once we have had our fair-trade, organic, shade-grown, handpicked-by-the-Vestal-Virgins coffee and logged onto our Slack thread, we will let you know if the coup is still a go), let us recognize the smaller gaps that can be bridged, those shared concerns and values, and let us utilize them to facilitate a peaceful passing of the baton from one generation being in power to another.

More to the point, we must arrive at some sort of power-sharing arrangement. The sheer length of the boomer and silent generations' reigns of power, in both the church and the government, has shut out not only millennials, but Generation X-ers as well, even as the eldest among their ranks are already transitioning into their mid-fifties. The United States just replaced its only president born after 1946 with its third president born *in* 1946, risking a gap not unlike the twenty-two-year canyon between the birth year of George H.W. Bush and the

9. Paul Taylor and Scott Keeter, eds., "Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next," *Pew Research Center, http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf*, February 2010, last accessed December 20, 2017, 93.

birth year of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump. An entire generation was shut out of the American presidency. We risk doing the same thing again. Instead of fearing a generational coup, can there instead be openness to having a few more sets of younger hands on the levers of power? I continue to hope that openness remains possible, in spite of the church's tendencies to the contrary.

Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank tried to explain why the baby boomer generation insists on keeping its power, writing as a part of his own lament on behalf of his Generation X compatriots: "Boomers, coddled in their youth, grew up selfish and unyielding. When they got power, they created polarization and gridlock from both sides. Though Vietnam War–protesting boomers got the attention, their peers on the right were just as ideological, creating the religious right."[10] The themes of being coddled in their youth and growing up selfish should sound familiar: they parallel in striking detail many of the critiques made today of millennials.

We will talk more in chapter seven about how the historical context of the Religious Right has been a contributing factor in turning millennial Christians away from the institutional church, but suffice it to say for now that Milbank's indictment, scathing though it is, gives voice to many of the grievances of not just the Gen-Xers but also the millennials. Milbank refers to his generation as the "clean-up crew" for the baby boomers, but at what point does that generational sharing of power take place—and not just in the halls of government, but in the pews at church? What might such a power-sharing arrangement even look like?

The Problem of Denial

So much ink and emotion have been spilled over the imperative acknowledgment that the institutional church must change or die that it is hardly necessary for me to belabor the point here. Rather, a

10. Dana Milbank, "Baby Boomers Have Been a Disaster For America, And Trump Is Their Biggest Mistake Yet," *Washington Post*, *https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2016/10/25/7d0c6a62-9aef-11e6-b3c9-f662adaa0048_story.html?utm_term=.aab28ae6fd7a*, October 25, 2016, last accessed December 15, 2017.

fundamental postulation to make going forward is that one crucial piece of baggage we carry with us, one obstacle that continues to bedevil the legacy church, is one of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of grief: denial.

A prerequisite to envisioning a church in which millennials are not shut out of its life and mission is a basic acknowledgment that the church itself has never ceased breathing, living, and changing into something new throughout its entire history. Yet so much of church life is spent mourning what once was, or what might have been. The churches of the mid-twentieth century, with their teeming classrooms of children and their packed pews each Sunday, are wonderful for a church to strive for once again, if that is truly the vision. But to strive for it by trying to replicate the churches of the 1950s by means of the methods of the 2010s and 2020s is where, I think, the church has begun to lose a bit of perspective. The attempt to reproduce a bygone era is where our mourning of the past becomes worship of the past, which constitutes a form of idolatry. Too often, the church is using its gifts and resources to worship an idealized, revisionist vision of the past, leaving the future church on the outside looking in, because that vision of the past will never be ours.

Those are perhaps harsh words to hear about any congregation's outlook and institutional memory, in part because denial is very good at blunting such truths. Yet what the church must follow is Jesus Christ, not a particular decade's or era's way of discipleship.

The expectations we take with us on this trail of spiritual transformation and understanding of Christianity can make all the difference between a connection with God as revealed by the Church of Jesus Christ and further spiritual disenchantment. It is entirely possible to have that connection with God without membership in a congregation, but community has capacities that enhance this divine connection in ways that solitude does not. But to eschew the chance to deepen this attachment to God through community is precisely what many souls have done. That millennials are foregoing church involvement on a week-to-week or even a month-to-month basis is hardly news, but we are eschewing the church even on special occasions. For instance, there

has been a 37 percent decline in weddings taking place at religious institutions since 2009.[11] Not coincidentally, the timeframe of 2009 to the present intersects with both the dramatic aftereffects of the Great Recession and millennials beginning to come of age and getting married.

Given the economic realities detailed thus far, being asked to help foot the bill for years' worth of deferred maintenance on church buildings does not rank highly enough for many millennials. For us, being the church has to do more with what it can do now, not with what it once was, because we were not around for those golden-era years.

I have to think that any organization in any other field would react quickly to such shifts in interest and relevancy, and yet, a whopping 61 percent of people report that they gained no new insights about God or their faith the last time they attended church.[12] It is a near-perfect statistical summation of the church's collective denial: people see the church as irrelevant, and are treating it as less important not only in their day-to-day lives, but for special occasions as well. Despite much hand-wringing and existential angst over the future of American Christianity, the church appears not to be bothered enough to offer the people who do show up anything new to say.

If the church cannot acknowledge that millennials continue to face a uniquely bitter-tasting brew of economic circumstances the likes of which we have not seen since the Great Depression; and that those circumstances have, along with the dictates of our consciences, necessitated a departure from practicing Christianity as our forebearers have done for decades and centuries; and that in spite of it all, we still remain very much attached and attuned to the notion that there is indeed a God who created us and loves us—then, yes, it will be a difficult ask for the church to adapt to this new frontier.

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11. "Cost of US Weddings Reaches New High as Couples Spend More Per Guest to Create an Unforgettable Experience, According to The Knot 2016 Real Weddings Survey," *The Knot, https://xogroupinc.com/press-releases/theknot2016realweddings_costofweddingsus/*, February 2, 2017, last accessed December 15, 2017.

12. "Americans Divided on the Importance of Church," Barna Group, *https://www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/*, March 24, 2014, last accessed December 15, 2017.

Denial, however, will be a difficult stance for the church to maintain. Pretending that things have not changed and that the church can continue as it always has, catering to the same programs and systems that are increasingly unsustainable simply because we have forgotten what the church was like without them will be more painful in the long run. The church has always been changing, growing and evolving organically over time. The more we try to approach it as a de facto time capsule surrounded by a world that is organically changing and growing, the more we risk doing real and lasting harm to the realm of God that we are called to help build in this life.

If the church's fear of change and growth is greater than our fear of dying, then we are listening more to denial than to the hope, which is simply no way to faithfully be the church. If it were, millennials would be right to keep on walking toward the exit rows, because the message would be that the current church fears millennials, and what they have to offer, more than the church fears death. Considering Christians worship a Savior who taught us that death can indeed be overcome, a Savior whose resurrection compelled Paul to write in 1 Corinthians 15, "Where is your victory, Death? Where is your sting, Death?" then the Church must embrace the organic growth of the body of that selfsame Savior instead of steadfastly and stubbornly accepting the death to which its spiritual paralysis sentences it.

What This Book Is Not

Having described the conversation I hope to have with you throughout these pages, and the scope of the task that sits before a generation and the church that simultaneously chases after it and pushes it away, it is prudent to take a moment to discuss what this book is not. Broad, sweeping, or universal claims are best left, I think, for the most basic of truths about God as a God of love for all people. This book goes well beyond such foundational claims about the nature of both God and the church. It is far sounder, then, to reserve my words here for what may be thought of as both my generation's and the church's respective general directions, while also recognizing

that there is more than one set of directions to get from one point to another, or that one could simply forego attempting to arrive at that point at all. Quite simply, generalization is not the same as universality, and claiming the latter is not my aim.

While I am using research data to draw certain conclusions about millennials and the church, particularly within the United States, these conclusions will be largely about the trends and directions I see in my generation's complicated relationship with Christianity. Considering how wonderfully diverse both an entire generation and the entire church are, these identifications of trends and waypoints are not meant to be seen as universally applicable claims, but as observations of the direction in which many millennial Christians are currently traveling.

Put a different way, I would never dare to be so bold as to call this the definitive work on the millennial generation's relationship with the church. Other worthy treatments have already been created, and I am sure even more will be written in the years to come. Mine is one voice of many adding to the conversation currently taking place in the public square alongside valuable perspectives from other writers, pastors, poets, and thinkers. Far from settling the matter, I hope what I offer will further spur those conversations already taking place, add another layer or dimension to them, and offer new affirmation to millennials who would, in spite of everything, dare to follow Jesus, and in so doing change the world.

I will be drawing extensively on my own personal experience as a pastor alongside my citations of research data, both because I am a storyteller by nature and by vocation, and because I have come to believe that the relatively impersonal nature of data and statistics can benefit from the personalization of one's narratives, stories, and memories. This project, then, strives to embrace both. Without the data, I would not be able to place my personal journey into its wider context of the journeys of many other millennial believers. Likewise, without the stories, I would not be able to do justice to the impact of the data.

A substantial influence of many of those stories—of my story—is the positive impact that my elders, the Gen X-ers and the baby

boomers and the silent generation, have had on me. This book is not a polemic by one generation against another. It is a compendium of stories, considerations, and reflections that seeks to affirm and celebrate how one generation—the millennials—has come to understand and practice Christian spirituality, while also telling other generations of how and why our practice and understanding of Christianity has come to be. Our practice and understanding of our faith should not be taken as a threat, even though in my experience it often is, both because it is something new in an institution that positively venerates tradition, and because it is still being formed.

One final thing this book is not is a eulogy for the church. The conclusion that Christianity, and especially institutional Christianity, is doomed in the United States, or in the occidental world as a whole, cites some of the same statistical evidence cited here. It already fills plenty of books and articles. Even if that were my perspective, I would have scarcely little to add to those tomes. Nor is this book a diatribe of why the church is dying and how millennials are the ones who are burying it. Those books and articles, too, have all been written already.

Rather, I request that you think of this book as a possible rededication of and for the church. In my denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), infant baptism is usually practiced only in cases of extreme emergency, as our preference is to wait for the newborn to reach adolescence before they make the conscious decision to follow the Way of Jesus Christ. Infants, then, are dedicated rather than baptized (think of the opening scene of Disney's *The Lion King*, where Rafiki anoints Simba and hoists him aloft). A child who comes into our tradition having already been baptized as a baby is often asked to affirm that previous baptism and rededicate themselves to the profession of faith in God as revealed by Jesus Christ that baptism represents to us.

The fundamental question this book asks is: can the church be rededicated to following the Way of Jesus Christ instead of adhering to a single generation's methods and practices of following the Way of Jesus Christ? Asking the church to follow Jesus sounds so simple, even insultingly simple, but even in Jesus's experience, often

the simplest of requests can be the hardest to fulfill, such as those of Luke 6:37: do not judge; do not condemn; forgive, and you will be forgiven. We do so much of the first two and so little of the third.

It is the same with our rededication to and of the church. To love and follow God, and to love each other, sound like exceedingly simple requests for Jesus to ask of us, but they have proven exceptionally arduous for us to live out, so much so that we struggle and wrestle every day to do what is right by God and by each other. Our rededication must involve an acknowledgment of so many truths that the church has been slow and often recalcitrant to admit: that we must be better at honoring and adjusting to the needs of others, that we need to be putting those needs ahead of ours a whole lot more often, and that far too frequently, we repurpose the programs and missions of the church to serve our own selfishness rather than God and the world.

All of these tendencies of the church have had a role to play in arriving at the reality of a generation that wants the least to do with organized Christianity of any generation in recent memory. This is how we got here. We chose to stock up on goods that ended up poisoning the spiritual diet for so many young people that they simply quit the community as a result, a decision far easier to arrive at today than on the historical Oregon Trail, where a decision to leave a wagon train was often a one of life and death.

There are indeed life and death implications at work today as well, not just for the spiritual lives of the people who are leaving, but also for the wagon train of the church itself. We can acknowledge that reality and seek to change how we govern ourselves out on the trail, or we can continue along our wagon-wheel-made ruts of denial, and hope we still make it to Oregon regardless.

But if the church were to listen to what God may be saying to it through this new generation and consider a change of course, courageous and difficult though that may be, I can at least promise that the church will not end. Both the world and the church will be better off for the Church having shown the courage to embrace a change of this magnitude as not only possible, but also Spirit-led.