

## The Gospel for iGens

Reared on self-esteem and impervious to guilt, the next generation needs good news that can break through their defenses.

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The first step a young man takes toward a woman who he thinks might be his future is delicate. The operative words seem to be "sensitive" and "careful" and "first impressions matter." As in love, so in "gospeling" (or evangelism). When Peter preached at Pentecost, he opened his sermon with a time-honored citation of Scripture and then sketched, in third person, what had happened to Jesus. Only then did he zero in on his audience: "and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death" ([Acts 2:23](#)). When Paul got behind the dais on the Areopagus, he opened with one of the most seeker-sensitive sermons in history: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious" ([17:22](#)). With that opening Paul paved a way to warn the Greeks of the coming judgment. These examples show that biblical evangelism is marked by both boldness and sensitivity to audience.

Teaching twenty-somethings for nearly 15 years has made me acutely aware of a significant trend. It has everything to do with what to assume when it comes to evangelism.

Emerging adults (those between 18 and 30) form a generation that is largely insensitive to the potency of God's holiness, and are therefore insensitive to the magnificence of his grace, the shocking nature of his love, and that gratitude forms the core of the Christian life. Some today complain about these matters. But I doubt very much that ramping up moral exhortations and warning about an endless hell are the proper places to begin with emerging adults. Paul was sensitive to his audience; we need to be as well.

Self in a castle

The typical emerging adult, if I can capture the trend in one expression, is a "self in a castle." That is to say, the "self" is protected from the onslaughts of those who will attack it. I suspect that this is something unique in history. Never has a generation been more in tune with the self and more protective of the self. How did we get here? What led to the self-in-a-castle condition among this generation, whom I call the iGens?

First, Mr. Rogers. I have no desire to blame Mr. Rogers; I like Fred Rogers and his image-of-God set loose in helping young children understand who they are. But Mr. Rogers, for all his good, gave to the current generation a free-standing consciousness that daily says, "I am okay." Whether the current generation watched him or not is hardly the point; he's in the air because of a trend that has been riding the airwaves since the 1960s.

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Second, Sesame Street. Played out daily for this generation was a show that baptized diversity, sanctified difference, and affirmed the radical uniqueness of every person—regardless of their color, beliefs, or personalities. If Mr. Rogers indoctrinated a generation to believe "I'm okay," Sesame Street focused on "We are all okay." Once again, even if current iGens did not directly watch Sesame Street, the themes of the show express a movement that gets at the central attribute of iGens.

Mr. Rogers and Sesame Street are early examples of the self-esteem movement. Jean Twenge's book *Generation Me* is an excellent treatment of this issue; her subtitle opens the windows on the movement: *Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Ever Before*. She ought to know; she's one of them.

Twenge is a professor of sociology at San Diego State University, and her research method has been to study the history of answers to standard personality tests over the last 50 years. She provides raw numbers that are worthy of serious attention, and she offers stinging (and sometimes exaggerated, provocative, and hilarious) illustrations. She tells us that the American educational system and other cultural forces have so focused on self-esteem that they are producing a generation of potential narcissists. This sentence summarizes her assessment of iGens: "The individual has always come first, and feeling good about yourself has always been a primary virtue."

Twenge's study examines how this general conclusion emerges from her analysis of social trends when it comes to social etiquette, the centrality of "me," the belief that iGens can be anything they want to be, their experience with pre-marital sex, and their cynical disposition. This culture of self-esteem has also raised expectations of personal accomplishment, in some cases, so high that depression and anxiety accompany iGens like their iPods.

Note what she's not saying: iGens are not selfish or spoiled. Instead, they are intoxicated with the impact of 40 years of education that has focused singularly on self-esteem as the entitlement of each and every person for nothing more than being alive. As Twenge puts it, "GenMe is not self-absorbed; we're self-important."

Please don't get me wrong. iGens may have the healthiest, most robust egos in the history of the West, and some of this self-perception is profoundly good. Nevertheless, this robust self-perception is more than a formidable issue when it comes to the gospel and to church life today.

Jeffrey Arnett is perhaps America's most respected scholar of "emerging adulthood." He identifies five major characteristics:

1. They are exploring their own identities in love and work
2. They are in an age of instability
3. They are in a self-focused period of life
4. They feel in between adolescence and adulthood, neither one nor the other
5. They are driven by endless possibilities and are actively exploring them—jobs, travel, love, sex, identity, and location. This generation collects experiences more than money. While some may head off to Africa to change the world, at least as many (and probably more) head off to experience the world.

One important caveat: not every American twenty-something is like this. In fact, many emerging adults have been reared into a world vastly different than the self-esteem culture. Some gravitate, instead, toward an Augustinian perception of the self and find their own contemporaries annoying. (But this is not the place to examine every exception among iGens.)

Storming the castle

My own experiences teaching iGens, listening to iGens, and reading the papers and journals of iGens have confirmed that most iGens reside behind a carapace of protection nothing short of a castle wall. Older models of evangelism aimed at leading humans to a reception of God's grace in Christ by making them aware of their profound and utter sinfulness—indeed, that they were themselves sinners by nature. But a different model might be in order to "reach" iGens. This generation may need to be wooed to the castle door, the way Paul wooed the Athenians on the Areopagus, before they will hear the gospel.

If we begin with an assault on a human's worth, Mr. Rogers' gospel of self-acceptance will come to their rescue. If we begin by claiming that all humans are depraved, Sesame Street's gospel of universal acceptance will make its defense. If we question the self's disposition, we will find that the gospel of self-esteem has created a bunker deep enough and a wall thick enough that deflection and absorption are instinctive responses. It might work to reach some iGens, but not most.

When I saw the title of Alan Mann's book, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, I knew he was onto something. The intent of evangelism that focuses on preaching the law and God's holiness, wrapping those two elements into a vision of God's wrath and hell, is to stimulate a cry for salvation out of a sense of guilt over who we are and what we have done. This model still works for some. But it may not be the wisest model for iGens.

One of the most insightful elements of Mann's book is whether iGens feel guilt. For a person to feel guilty, that person must have a sense of morality. But morality requires a potent sense of what is right and wrong, and it needs a powerful sense of what is true and false. Contemporary culture does not provide the average iGen with a profound grasp of what is right and wrong apart from the conviction that assaulting the self is clearly wrong.

Yet deciding to stake one's life on Jesus and the cross requires a sense that we are wrong, that we need Jesus, and that his saving death and resurrection can become effective. Mann claims that iGens are neither moral nor amoral. Instead, because of trends like the self-esteem movement and the impact of relativism, he concludes that iGens are pre-moral. Mann suggests that they do not feel guilt as much as they feel shame for not achieving what they are designed to accomplish.

This realization has helped me see that Jesus is the place to begin with iGens. In fact, we can make this more precise: Jesus as lived out by a credible witness or through a community that makes Jesus real. This is not Jesus as revealed by institutional religion or churches, but Jesus seen in the lives of genuine compassion and commitment to something that transcends the superficiality of modern and postmodern culture.

Dan Kimball wrote in his book *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* that what turns off iGens about the church is that it's too organized, political, judgmental, chauvinistic, homophobic, arrogant, and fundamentalist. But Kimball's research uncovered that iGens like Jesus. This is solid footing for gospeling iGens.

More evidence for starting with Jesus comes from the "Images of Jesus" personality profile designed by the North England Institute for Christian Education, and is republished in my book, *The Blue Parakeet*. In the assessment, a person records answers to personality questions about himself or herself ("Do you suffer from the nerves?") and then answers the same questions about Jesus ("Does he suffer from the

nerves?"). There are no right answers. The intent is to determine how high a correlation exists between self-image and Jesus-image. Among iGens the answer is a loud Yes! This test shows that nearly everyone conforms Jesus to their self-image. A startling affirmation of what Jean Twenge discovered: iGens—surprise, surprise—have a robust enough self-image to think Jesus is just like them.

Just give them Jesus

If this generation likes Jesus, and if iGens have the chutzpah to think they are like Jesus, then let's start with Jesus. We sometimes forget that the earliest Christian gospeling was telling the story of Israel's history (Peter on Pentecost) or acknowledging God's presence in the world (Paul in Athens) so that it led to the story of Jesus. Sometimes we forget that the first four books of the New Testament are called "gospels" because they are just that. The earliest Christian preaching, the early narratives about Jesus, grew and grew until they became the four Gospels.

Sometimes I think we forget that no where in the pages of the New Testament do we find what many of us heard when we were gospeled: God loves us, we are sinners, God still loves us and sent us his Son to die for our sins, and if we receive God's plan we will spend eternity with him and be empowered by grace for a new life now. I believe every line in that gospel to be true, but no one said it quite that way in the New Testament.

There are so many things we can say about Jesus, and that is why gospeling grew into four big Gospel accounts. And there are many different places to begin—Creation and the Fall, Israel's story, the birth of Christ, or any number of his teachings. But no matter the starting point, gospeling must lead to Jesus—his life, his death, his burial, his resurrection, and his coming again.

Nothing in my experience mesmerizes iGens like the kingdom vision of Jesus. One approach I use is to move through the Gospel of Luke. I begin with the preliminary expectations of Mary, Zechariah, and John the Baptist. I then focus on what Jesus wanted to bring about on earth ([Luke 4:16-30](#); [6:20-26](#), and [7:18-23](#)). Then I observe that Jesus knew the cross was the way to that kingdom ([9:18-27](#)). We move from there into the cross and resurrection, and then emerge on the other side of Easter with Pentecost and the apostolic church community ([Acts 2:42-47](#)).

Anyone who vividly sketches a community marked by justice, love, peace, and holiness has a message iGens want to hear. The self hidden behind the castle wall is now interested. And I have found that the self-in-a-castle feels shame about systemic sin, and their sensitivity to things like AIDS, poverty, and racism leads inevitably to recognizing the sin in each person. At some point in this movement to the castle door, the iGen will realize that systemic sin is linked to personal sin. Suddenly he or she feels accountable to God.

Along with Jesus' kingdom vision, some iGens are awakened to faith by the discipleship demands of Jesus. I usually focus on the Sermon on the Mount, and not just because I'm an Anabaptist. This message of Jesus was the church's favorite and it remains a powerful sketch of a moral life that both creates a world of possibilities and—at the very core—unmasks pretence and sinfulness. Through the Sermon on the Mount, I find the self-in-a-castle lured to the castle door. In fact, rather than turning off iGens, the demand of Jesus for a life that matters and a morality that exceeds what they have experienced, is radically attractive. It challenges them to their core.

One danger to avoid when gospeling iGens is the common tendency to choose between Jesus and Paul. Given the option, iGens will choose Jesus every time. But this is a false choice. The Jesus who preached the kingdom vision and who laid down discipleship demands lived the life that Paul unfolds in his letter to the Romans. In other words, embracing the kingdom vision of Jesus is not enough if at the heart of that kingdom vision there is no cross and no resurrection.

The life Jesus lived, the life that made his kingdom vision so appealing and so potently penetrating, was the life that ended up on a cross as an atoning sacrifice. The story of Jesus, the only story the church has ever told, is the same story told by Paul, and Peter, and John, and the writer of Hebrews. It is a story of the Incarnate Son of God who sketched a vision of a kingdom that God wants for the earth ("your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven") and who made that kingdom possible by willingly surrendering himself on the cross for others. And it was the life of a body that came back to life on Easter to empower us to new life as the new creation.

From Jesus to the gospel

A student came by my office the other day to chat. She began by saying she had grown up in the church, had done all the right things, had made all the right decisions, and gone to all the right conferences. She said that embracing the Christian faith had been natural and painless for her. But her faith wasn't vibrant or all-consuming until she went to Central America, saw the needy of this world, and realized that Jesus' kingdom vision was bigger than her personal happiness.

When she returned to the U.S., she began to cut back deeply on her spending. She was more committed to prayer and Bible reading, serving others, and plotting a life of service. More importantly, she said she realized more and more what the cross meant and how selfish and materialistic she had become. This young woman has committed her life to Christ and to missionary work. Recently she broke up with a boyfriend because, as she put it, "He doesn't get it. He doesn't want to give his life for others as Christ calls us."

Like many young people in her generation, what finally led this student to embrace the gospel was being brought into the story of Jesus. Our task in gospeling iGens is following the example of Peter and Paul and helping them find their place—and themselves—in that remarkable story.

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