

SEVEN QUESTIONS ABOUT LIFE AND FAITH

WHAT GEN Z

REALLY

WANTS TO

KNOW ABOUT

GOD

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FOREWORD BY CHAP CLARK



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WHO IS GENERATION Z?

“What is great about being a member of Gen Z?”

I asked this question to an upperclassman last year. I like to ask my own children that question for their ages: “What is great about being eight years old?” My son beams and says things like, “It’s so great! You get to play outside with your friends, ride bikes, and play hide-and-seek. Someone else does my laundry and makes me yummy food. I get to read in my room before bedtime and snuggle with you!” I share this to provide context, because when I asked the same question to a Gen Zer, I did not get the same response.

“What is great about being Gen Z?”

This upperclassman looked straight into my eyes with a deadpan expression and responded, “Is there anything?”

I noticed two college students next to me at a coffee shop today, so I leaned over and asked them if I could ask them a question. They agreed, so I asked, “What is great about being Gen Z?” Their first response was to look at each other, perplexed, and then they started laughing in their own discomfort with the question. They both needed a moment to come up with a response.



I have to wonder if that response is a surprise. What do you think Gen Z hears about themselves from older generations or the media? Go ahead and pick up your phone and ask some Gen Zers in your life. I have asked hundreds of Gen Zers this question, and the same answers pop up over and over again. How do they hear their generation described? *Weak, fragile, snowflakes, entitled, self-centered, over-emotional, confused, anxious*, and so on. I have never had any Gen Zer bring up one positive thing they hear. It breaks my heart. In our lack of understanding, let us never refer to Generation Z as fragile. It is an unfair label to a generation of people who are indeed strong, but often strong in ways unseen or unrecognized by older generations.

The next generation will live into the words we speak over them, so we should consider what words we are speaking over Gen Z. We, older generations, are responsible for raising, stewarding, and discipling the next generation, and right now, they are hearing from us, “We don’t like you.” I picked up a printed manuscript of this very book at an office supply store, and the employee behind the counter said, “I just saw Gen Z on the cover, and just thinking about Gen Z gives me a headache!”

Now, as Gen Z is entering adulthood, they have started to complain about the generation following them: Gen Alpha. I have heard Gen Zers refer to Gen Alpha as feral badgers and as a doomed generation. In their frustration or annoyance in asking “What is wrong with this Alpha generation?” Gen Z is simply repeating what we have modeled for them: complaining about the next generation.

I think we can model a different way. We can change the message our young people hear from us. We still have time and plenty of opportunity to speak vision, hope, and gratitude for

Gen Z. We can identify the ways Gen Z reflects the image of God, and encourage them in this, because it is different from the ways other generations reflect the image of God. To do so, we need to listen to the Lord, so that we can see our young generation through his eyes.

WHO IS GEN Z?

Gen Z (born 1997–2012¹) is the largest, most diverse generation in the United States, but Gen Z is also globally connected and makes up almost a third of the global population.² Gen Z was the first American generation raised in a culturally post-Christian United States.³ Gen Z isn't simply leaving the church, but they are carrying into adulthood the impacts of their cultural surroundings.

Generational culture. It is helpful to begin the conversation by recognizing that generations have their own distinct cultures. This means Gen Z has its own generational culture, distinct from previous generations. If older generations feel like there is a communication breakdown, it's because there is one. Gen Z has its own way of communicating and use of language (and I don't mean slang, no cap). We can use the same words, and those words have different meanings to different generations. Terms like *acceptance*, *safe*, *respectful*, and *appropriate* are a few examples of these. Generational cultures have their own cultural values, taboos, mores, and experiences.

Safe. Safety is a top value for Gen Z, who are consistently analyzing: "Is it safe?"⁴ Gen Z wants to feel safe all of the time, which involves different types of safety, including physical, emotional, psychological, perceived, and so on. Their value and search for safety prompts Gen Z to actively "mitigate risk and

challenges” in their lives.⁵ This has led to the belief and practice that if something is not safe, it must be avoided.

Digital connection. Gen Z is often described as digitally native. They have had access to interactive, smart technology for most of their lives and are first-language speakers in the digital space. Gen Zers seem to flow seamlessly between the real world and the digital one, integrating the culture of the digital space into the real world and forming a third, blended culture in which they live. This is not limited to certain demographics of Gen Z. By 2015, race and socioeconomic differences did not have a measurable impact on social media use by Gen Z,⁶ wiping out an internet gap that once existed between social classes in the United States, and eventually, around the world. Gen Z is digitally proficient and connected, with constant access to endless information. They are first-language, digital speakers and understand the digital space fluently. This generation has been marked by smartphones and access to interactive, digital technology from a young age and throughout most of their lives.

This access to social and digital media has impacted mental and physical health, identity and worldview formation, and the form and function of relationships. Digital and social media have also constructed a global system for communication, education, and relationships that Gen Z would be disadvantaged to leave behind. The softball team at our local high school communicated important information through Snapchat. One of the players told me she was constantly missing updates on practices or what to wear on game days because her parents did not allow her to have Snapchat. I thought about different youth activities, classes, or churches. How much information is shared in a digital form, and more specifically, through a

social media app? Would someone miss out if they were not on social media?

Technology accelerates the pace at which the world is moving. Most of what is happening is shared in the digital space but impacts real-life relationships. It is how their world works, and increasingly how the world works. For the most part, older generations do not know what this means for the next generation.

Mental health concerns. With the arrival of Gen Z came a wave of mental health issues and crises. Many studies show a rise in mental health issues that began in 2012, while the oldest members of Gen Z were young teenagers.⁷ This rise follows the same trajectory as adolescent access to smartphones and social media. Often in conversations I am met with surprise and shock when I mention Gen Z's mental health issues began before the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic highlighted and exacerbated what was already happening. During the Covid-19 pandemic, anxiety tripled and depression quadrupled in adults, but disproportionately affected young adults.⁸ It brought visibility, and I think some understanding, among older generations as we all experienced life on screens for a while.

The following are just a few stats around mental health and Gen Z. Most of these studies were done when Gen Z was in middle school or high school, and they are impacted by those experiences into adulthood. It is the context in which they have grown up and helps us understand where they are coming from. Their generational context is a constant conversation around mental health, and for good reason:

- Suicide rates for those aged 15–19 doubled from 2010 to 2020, but suicide rates for those aged 10–14 tripled from 2007 to 2018.⁹

- 20 percent of adolescents ages 12–17 had a major depressive episode in 2022, and 1 in 15 made suicide plans.¹⁰
- 47 percent of young people say they are moderately or extremely depressed, 55 percent say they are moderately or extremely anxious, and 45 percent say they are moderately or extremely lonely.¹¹
- Gen Z is the loneliest generation in the United States,¹² and adolescent loneliness has risen globally in thirty-six countries since 2012.¹³
- Declines in adolescent happiness, life satisfaction, and flourishing, as well as increases in loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptoms since 2010 have been linked to the increasing popularity of smartphones and social media around this same time.¹⁴

Can we agree that something is wrong? This isn't kids being kids or a generation being over-dramatic. They are suffering, and we must pay attention. This isn't limited to the United States or Western, English-speaking countries. Mental health struggles are popping up globally for the same age group, Gen Z. The reasonable next question to ask is: *What do they have in common?* Experts like Dr. Jean Twenge have answered with *technology*.¹⁵ Many are surprised to find the presence and ubiquitousness of technology in so many corners of the world, connecting Gen Z through digital and social media. Bobby Gruenewald, in a conversation for the YouVersion Bible app, shared that it is actually easier to get digital Bibles through smartphone apps to remote parts of the world than paper ones. The international news outlet France 24 reported millions of Filipinos are playing online games to earn income through cryptocurrency.

Whether or not a particular member of Gen Z has struggled with mental health, they certainly know someone who does. They are not untouched by the mental health statistics even if they are not a statistic themselves, and this impacts their values, experience, and worldview. As they have grown up, they have navigated social media, active shooter drills and school shootings, and a global pandemic. All of these are unique to Gen Z's specific time of adolescence. They bring a new and different perspective to life and faith that, if we let it, adds value to the life and faith of all generations. It is our task today to understand how, so that by drawing these things out, Gen Z can reflect the kingdom of heaven the way they are designed to.

PURSUING GEN Z, NOT FIXING GEN Z

Each chapter will include four parts. First, it will present a question Gen Z is asking about life and faith. As mentioned earlier, these questions are based on the values, experiences, and worldview of Gen Z. Then, the chapter will discuss the generational context surrounding the question. This can include why it is being asked, how it is being asked, and why older generations may be misunderstanding the question or not even recognize it being asked. Third, each chapter will refer to a feature of a disciple, connecting the question with discipleship. Finally, each chapter will look at the life and ministry of Jesus Christ in conjunction with the feature of a disciple and question presented.

Through this process, we will explore a response to each Gen Z question that we can share through the gospel and discipleship. Of course, there is overlap between chapters. Ideas and conversation are not isolated to one question or feature

of a disciple. The questions presented here are not clearly compartmentalized from each other, and the ideas in each chapter reach into other ones. Make those connections, flip between chapters, and draw out the integrated nature of the evangelism and discipleship of this generation.

There are no quick fixes to the deep and complex Gen Z experience. It would be a mistake to look for one. The purpose of our discussion is not to find an antidote to “fix” a generation or the issues they face. It is a pursuit to understand and enter the context of a generation, respectfully and compassionately, with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

My hope is that this is not simply an instruction manual, but a guidebook on the process to answer any of the questions our next generation brings to us. I hope that this process can be applied to different scenarios as we figure out how to introduce the next generation to Jesus Christ and help them grow in their faith.

The seven questions. What is Gen Z asking about life and faith? We are going to examine seven questions Gen Z is asking based on their generational values and worldview. These questions may not be easily verbalized by Gen Z, or even be on top of mind for them. Sometimes the deepest questions aren’t, but are lying under the surface, shaping so much of who we are and what we believe. Of course, a generation is not limited to seven questions; there are always more questions.

These seven questions come out of a deep dive into understanding Generation Z. By identifying what is important to Gen Z, what they are facing, what they experience, the culture that surrounds them, and what they value, celebrate, or mourn, we can begin to understand how Gen Z navigates life.

Part of that navigation is asking questions related to their values and experiences.

The questions discussed here are a reflection of Gen Z's generational culture. They may not be new questions—some are timeless, and many of us have asked these questions in our lives. However, the context around these questions has changed, and that changes both how we understand the question and the response needed. These questions are not outside ideas applied onto Gen Z, but questions drawn out of how this generation is navigating, seeing, and experiencing the world. These questions are based on values, experience, and worldview.¹⁶

<p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;">THE SEVEN QUESTIONS</p> <p style="font-size: 48px; text-align: center; margin: 10px 0 0 0;">7</p>	1. Is God good?	5. Can I trust you?
	2. Am I enough?	6. What is true?
	3. Will you accept me?	7. Am I safe?
	4. Do all people matter to God?	

It is tempting to quickly read and interpret each question from our own generational lens, but this would be a critical mistake. Each question is influenced by specific generational experiences and context. In this book, we will delve into the generational environment that cultivated Gen Z's questions. If older generations do not understand the context and purpose of the question, or even the linguistic nuances and meaning of the question, we will not be able to answer them, which is what has been taking place in our churches and ministries, as well as in our homes. Without understanding the questions Gen Z is asking, older generations of Christians are providing irrelevant and flawed answers, perpetuating the disconnect between themselves and Gen Z.

This, right now, is an opportunity to slow down and listen to the experiences and ethics, hopes and hurts, and curiosities and convictions of the next generation. It is when Gen Z is heard and understood by older generations that older generations can have meaningful conversations with Gen Z relating to the gospel and faith.

The features of a disciple. Part of our job as pastors, ministers, parents, and mentors to Gen Z is to help them figure out what it means to be a disciple of Christ. We get to look at Gen Z and consider how they can live in the way God designed them to reflect his image here on earth. That's why each chapter will pair a feature of a disciple with the question presented. Seven features of a disciple (Follower, Prophet, Steward, Forgiver, Neighbor, Worshiper, and Witness) are drawn from Kathleen A. Cahalan's work in *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*.¹⁷ I added an eighth feature of a disciple to this list: Intercessor. Each feature is connected intentionally with a specific question Gen Z is asking. In some cases, it is because the question and the feature of a disciple engage the same values. In others, it is because the feature of a disciple helps to provide the answer to the question, or a landing place in the complexity of the question. It offers a change in the worldview from secular and fragmented to one centered on Christ.

The goal is to connect the dots between the questions Gen Z is asking and the life of a disciple, revealing a faith that is relevant and meaningful to their generational experience as we share the good news in evangelism and discipleship. They are not connecting the dots on their own. We have to work at making those connections for Gen Z. Let's explore how Gen Z can engage their generational values and experiences in a way that reflects the kingdom of heaven.

The example of Jesus. No conversation around the gospel and discipleship is complete without looking at the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. It is God incarnate, in the person of Jesus Christ, who not only speaks the gospel and teaches about being a disciple, but also models it. We can take the questions Gen Z is asking and look at gospel encounters with Jesus through that Gen Z lens and see what comes to light! Each chapter invites us to answer Gen Z's questions with the life and ministry of Jesus and practical discipleship. This helps make connections between the Christian faith and everyday life in a meaningful way. By entering into this practice, we can demonstrate that God is not irrelevant and disconnected, but in fact very relevant to the values, questions, experiences, and needs of our Gen Z friends.

READY, SET, GO!

Get ready to be comfortable being uncomfortable. We are entering into a crosscultural practice of contextualization. It means putting down our lens and picking up another we are not familiar with. I can say from my experience, it has developed a deep compassion and appreciation in me for Gen Z and their courage, creativity, and much more. It has deepened my passion for Gen Z. I have gained a deeper love of the Bible and awe of the gospel as the good news for all people. I have gained a new appreciation and perspective on the kindness of God, who reaches people within their cultural contexts in their own moments of time, and it has drawn me to a deeper level of worship. I hope this journey is not only about loving and caring for Gen Z, but also about our own personal gospel and discipleship journeys.

KEY IDEAS

Ask Gen Z: What have you heard about your generation from older generations or the media?

Gen Z asks: Is God good? Am I enough? Will you accept me? Do all people matter to God? Can I trust you? What is true? Am I safe?

Response: Take some time to understand the experiences, values, and worldview of Gen Z to better see their perspective on matters of life and faith.

Result: Open communication between generations creates opportunities for gospel and discipleship conversations.

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