



# REACHING MILLENNIALS

PROVEN METHODS FOR ENGAGING  
A YOUNGER GENERATION



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To my sons, Dan and Kevin,  
who were my first teachers about  
the Millennial generation as they grew up.

To all the staff of Rustica Bakery in Minneapolis  
who served me well as I wrote this book.

To all the great churches, coast to coast,  
that are doing the work to represent Christ  
to the younger generations.

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## Introduction

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**J**ust before I sat down to write this introduction, the Pew Research Center released its latest comprehensive survey of religious life in America. The findings, unfortunately, mirror what I have experienced on the ground consulting with churches over the past two decades. Increasingly, people are not going to church or affiliating with Christianity. The “unaffiliated” are growing quickly in numbers, while all branches of the Christian body in America are declining, with a few noted exceptions. But the part of the story I want to focus on is the younger generations, specifically Millennials, people born between 1978 and 1998. The report concludes:

As the Millennial generation enters adulthood, its members display much lower levels of religious affiliation, including less connection with Christian churches, than older generations. Fully 36% of young Millennials (those between the ages of 18 and 24) are religiously unaffiliated, as are 34% of older Millennials (ages 25–33). And fewer than six-in-ten Millennials identify with any branch of Christianity, compared with seven-in-ten or more among older generations, including Baby Boomers and

Gen-Xers. Just 16% of Millennials are Catholic, and only 11% identify with mainline Protestantism. Roughly one-in-five are evangelical Protestants.<sup>1</sup>

I was talking about this challenge some years ago with leaders of a large African-American church in Memphis, Tennessee. It had all the vibrancy of a great church—three thousand people in worship, fabulous choirs and music, a talented senior pastor and associate pastors. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s freed up many to pursue higher education, and this church had attracted more PhDs, MDs, JDs, MBAs, and every other letter combination of professionals I had ever seen before. The problem was, the children and grandchildren were not in church nearly as often as their parents and grandparents.

As I was presenting information related to a strategic plan for the church, I mentioned that we were in a season where the cultural setting in America had gotten a lot tougher than it used to be. As is true in some African-American churches, audience participation is common. One woman in the back of the room shouted, “They’re not coming, they’re not coming.” I appreciated her input. It was God’s way of magnifying the reality we all face.



It is vital today that we shift our focus and planning for this reality, not in resignation and defeat but by envisioning new ways to engage the culture and younger generations. This book is written to address how we do that, with many examples of thriving churches making this shift. The road ahead will not be easy, but God is moving to help us represent and re-present the gospel and Christianity to our skeptical, yet still spiritually hungry world.

This book is divided into two major sections. In the first part, “Mindset,” I explore the understanding that Jesus and the

apostles had toward engaging people outside of Christianity, whom I will call outsiders. I do not use the term *outsider* in a demeaning or degrading way. I simply use it to designate people who do not affiliate with Christianity. Returning to how Jesus and the apostles viewed and approached outsiders will challenge many Christians and confirm for others what they have already been thinking and feeling. But hopefully it will get us to think like the early church did in loving and reaching the world.

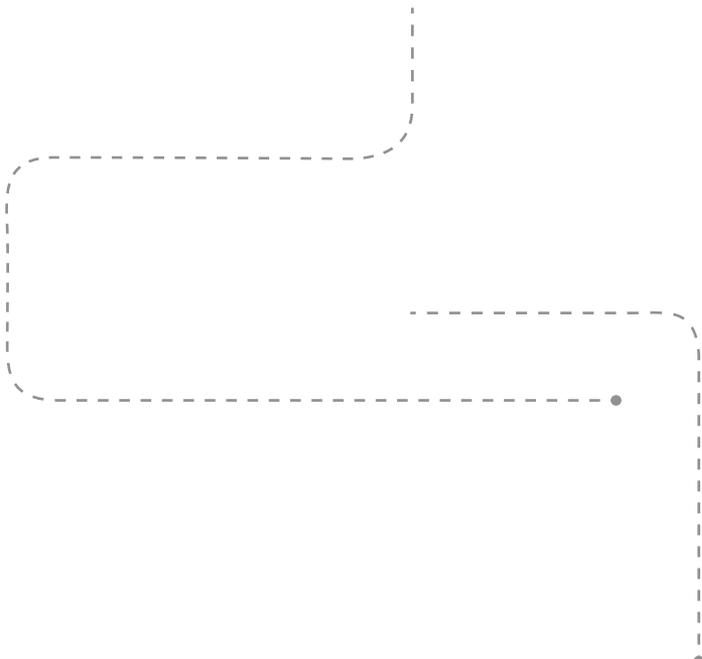
The second part of the book, *Methodology*, looks at how churches are shifting their strategy and tactics to enter back into relationship with people outside the church walls. Large parts of God's renewal of the Christian body are happening outside of a physical building with a sanctuary. But for the purpose of this book, I concentrate on churches that have a building or physical presence in their community. Still, many of the principles I share also apply to other expressions of Christian community.

Some readers will undoubtedly want to get to the methodology chapters quickly and skip the first half of the book. Use the book for your purposes, however it is useful. My one caution is this: Without the right mindset in your church, any methodology has a great chance of failure, so I ask that you keep *mindset* and *methodology* connected as a whole.

The good news is, God is very much at work today around us. Even so, it will help to keep the first part of the Serenity Prayer in mind: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference." Again, this is far from surrender. It is a path to renewal. As Paul wrote,

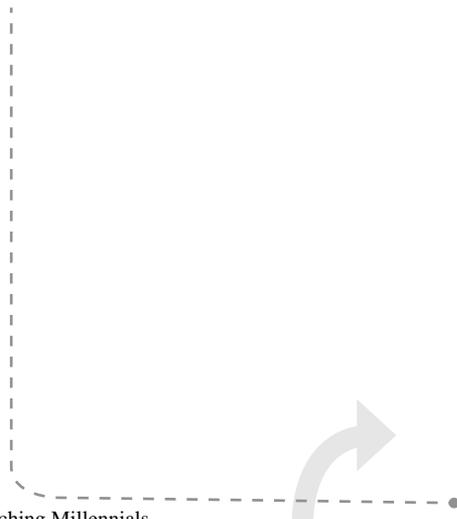
Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3:20–21



**PART ONE**

# MINDSET



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## CHAPTER 1

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# The Question Before the Questions

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I spent many hours interviewing Millennials for this book. And with one group of women in their twenties, all good friends with very different spiritual and religious lives, I was looking forward to a particularly insightful, lively discussion.

My wife and I had invited them to our home for a dinner party. And the conversation early on was indeed energetic as they shared their opinions and stories about everyday life, technology, you name it. I eventually moved into a series of questions that were structured as word associations. I told them I wanted their honest impressions: good, bad, or otherwise.

All was great until I brought up the words *Jesus* and *Christianity*. Suddenly, the room went quiet—for a whole minute—until one young woman broke the ice and said, “Well, that silence speaks a lot.”

Whether they were unwilling to talk because they knew they might offend their friends (not likely with this group), or they were simply afraid to express their true feelings, clearly both the Christians and outsiders in this group were uncomfortable about Jesus and Christianity.

Immediately I was reminded of David Kinnaman’s work with Millennials, people whose age is broadly twenty to thirty-five today. Kinnaman has overseen many research projects on matters of faith, spirituality, and other topics for Barna Group. We’ll be referring frequently to his bestselling book, *unChristian*, written with Gabe Lyons, but I want to focus initially on what he calls “the disastrous decade.”

In 1996, 85 percent of young people had a *positive* impression of Christianity’s role in society. By 2006, it had become dramatically worse.

The image of the Christian faith has suffered a major setback. Our most recent data shows that young outsiders have lost much of their respect for the Christian faith. These days nearly two out of every five outsiders (38 percent) claim to have a “bad impression of present-day Christianity.” Beyond this, one-third of young outsiders said that Christianity represents a negative image with which they would not want to be associated. Furthermore, one out of every six young outsiders (17 percent) indicates that he or she maintains “very bad” perceptions of the Christian faith. Though these hard-core critics represent only a minority of young outsiders, this group is at least three times larger than it was [in 1996].<sup>1</sup>

Most of these impressions came from firsthand experiences. “Eighty-five percent of young outsiders have had sufficient exposure to Christians and churches that they conclude present-day Christianity is hypocritical,” Kinnaman says.<sup>2</sup>



The exodus from church life and Christianity has been enormous. I have had the opportunity to work with evangelical churches, mainline churches, Catholic parishes, non-denominational churches, and charismatic fellowships. People tell me about their churches’ high points and great moments,

but in many cases they were decades ago, and since then they've seen declining attendance and engagement.

I was discussing these observations with a pastor who had a new intern from a local seminary spending a year with him as part of his education. In the middle of our conversation, he leaned over to his intern and said, "Welcome to the new reality: declining budgets and diminished expectations."

In many of the mainline denominations I interact with, leaders tell me that 80 percent or more of their churches are dying. In my research, some of this exodus stems from "internal" practices—how churches minister to people inside the church. But a greater factor is how the church interacts with outsiders and the polarizing rhetoric they often hear.

When I became a minister, I was excited to participate in the monthly gatherings of our presbytery, a regional group of ministers and lay leaders. At my first meeting, I was surprised to see quite a few people wearing a certain symbol, protesting the denomination's stance on what I will call "issue A." It was clear that if you weren't wearing the symbol, people assumed you were on the opposite side of the issue, whether true or not.

Each month it was surreal to see ministers and lay leaders divide into two long lines down the aisle of the host church sanctuary, waiting to get to the microphone to try to convince the audience of their point of view. It got so comical (tragic) that a colleague and I, a friend of mine who tended to be on the other side of many issues, began calling each other Pepsi and Coke. We knew we would cancel ourselves out when we voted, but we didn't allow it to destroy our relationship, making us the large exception to the rule. As issue after issue played out in the late 1990s, enormous amounts of time and money were spent on dealing with splits in the denomination, churches leaving, and hostile environments within presbyteries.

All this masked a much more important problem—the lack of thriving local churches, which was almost never discussed at the denomination level. The fallout has apparently spread. As I mentioned earlier, over 80 percent of the mainline churches are declining, and a good number may soon be gone completely.

Millennials, by the droves, are leaving the church. But there is an even more urgent and daunting result to all this fighting. Before we even approach young outsiders, they are loaded down by negative views toward Christians, churches, and Christianity.

I was teaching parts of this book at a local Christian university recently, and I brought my backpack with me. I gave each student a blank sheet of paper and asked them to write down the negative things their outside-the-church friends said about Christians. I then collected the papers and stuffed them into my backpack. We filled it easily.

Try this for yourself sometime. Put on a full backpack, walk around, and look at yourself in the mirror. Now imagine that over 40 percent of young people today are carrying around this backpack of negative impressions about Christianity before we even start building relationships with them and trying to discuss faith at all. The research shows that 57 percent of outsiders know evangelicals and 86 percent know a born-again Christian, whereas 49 percent have a bad impression of evangelical Christians, and 35 percent have a bad impression of born-again Christians.<sup>3</sup>

But enough on the negative side of this reality. I believe there is a way out of the past decades' counterproductive activity. It begins by thinking differently about our approach to ministry, especially when it comes to the younger generations. Jesus and the apostles had such a laser focus on the gospel that they made it the center of the work of the church. They viewed ministry and their mission to the world through the lens of what I call “the question before the questions.”

## **The “Before” Question: How Do We Not Make It Hard for the Gentiles to Come to Faith?**

This vital question comes directly from the first-century Council of Jerusalem: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). This statement, somewhat surprisingly made by James, came as the early church was struggling with questions of the law (which we will discuss in depth later). If you know the book of James even a little bit, he writes about how faith without works is dead. In fact, his letter seems to get close to saying it is not just the gospel that people need; it also must be played out in changes of behavior in people’s lives. But even James saw the priority of placing the gospel over all things and how this should affect our approach to outsiders.

This conclusion did not come out of a vacuum. The apostles had heard the teaching of Jesus and seen his encounters with outsiders.



Some of my greatest memories with my wife and family have been dinner parties, life celebrations (anniversaries, birthdays, graduations, ordinations, etc.), and other joy-filled gatherings.

Several parables in the Bible not only involve celebrations and parties, but show the centrality of the gospel over all things. I want to focus on four parables in particular: the three “lost” parables in Luke 15 and the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14.

The parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (prodigal son) are all set in the context of the Pharisees’ criticism of Jesus for welcoming sinners and eating with them. It is important to notice initially that these three parables were meant to be a corrective to the Pharisees concerning how they approached people outside their church (the temple, in their

case). Each of the three parables has a different setting but teaches a similar lesson:

1. There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous people who do not need repentance.
2. There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents.
3. The father tells his older son about the need to celebrate and be glad because his brother was dead but is alive again—was lost and now is found.

Whether people have wandered off (the lost sheep), have been misplaced (the lost coin), or deliberately walked away from God (the prodigal son), a great party is thrown in heaven when they are found and come back to God. This is what gives Jesus and the angels the greatest joy.

A fourth parable that mirrors this same priority of God's is the parable of the great banquet. God has invited people from all walks of life to celebrate together by throwing a banquet. God is also very upset when people don't attend the banquet for various reasons. So he invites every group possible to this banquet, because the desire of God is that the banquet be full. Wrapped in this parable is the passion of God that none would perish, but all would obtain eternal life.

This same focus is reflected in an encounter Jesus has with the disciples after they come back after ministering in the towns and countryside (Luke 10). The disciples are very excited about the power of the Holy Spirit to drive out demons and heal the sick. Jesus acknowledges that they have been given this authority over the demonic realm through the Holy Spirit, but what Jesus wants them to get excited about is that their name is written in the Book of Life because of the grace of God through faith.

When Jesus interacts with outsiders, he models the priority of the gospel. A vast majority of these encounters involve Jesus leading people to the living water, to be born again, to eat and never be hungry, and so on. Sin is mentioned only a few times in these encounters, and always to move the person toward repentance and to come back to God. A few examples:

1. Zacchaeus—I need to eat dinner with you tonight
2. Nicodemus—you need to be born again
3. Nathaniel—a man in whom there is no guile
4. Levi and the party—follow me
5. Peter—put down your nets in deep water
6. Man with leprosy—I am willing, be clean
7. Woman caught in adultery—neither do I condemn you
8. The paralytic lowered through the roof—your sins are forgiven
9. The woman at the well—if you asked him (Jesus) for a drink, he would have given you living water

All of this interaction and teaching by Jesus caused the apostles to view outsiders in a very specific way in order to keep the gospel central to their teachings and actions.

### **The Disciples Apply Jesus' Example**

After Jesus spent forty days with the disciples and then ascended to heaven, the day of Pentecost began the public ministry of the apostles and other Christians to make disciples of all nations. It is my contention that to engage our culture, we must begin by changing our whole orientation toward outsiders, back to how Jesus and the apostles saw them, if we are to have a chance of influencing and/or recommending the Christian faith so they will genuinely consider following Christ in their lives. I know

that God’s action in the world is much bigger than our efforts, but I believe that the Holy Spirit is leading many pastors and lay leaders to reconsider how to participate with God in the work of the gospel and the kingdom in today’s context. What I want to focus on in the book of Acts and a few other sections of the epistles are those passages in which the apostles are working out this “question before the questions”: How can we not make it difficult for outsiders to come to faith?

Looking at the sum total of what was taught, decided, and modeled, we see that the apostles divided up God’s revelation in relation to people outside the church (the way they approached the whole body of teaching and wisdom from the Scriptures) into five parts:

1. **Not God**—This area included parts of the surrounding culture that were counter to the teaching of the Bible. They did not try to embrace this part of the culture or acquiesce to the worldview that was clearly forbidden in Scripture.
2. **General revelation**—This is a category of beliefs and teachings that (the church believes) has been revealed by the Holy Spirit all over the world, regardless of background, belief system, or circumstance. The first example of this is the natural witness of creation mentioned in Romans 1, Psalm 33, and elsewhere. The second example is understandings of the world that agree with the worldview of Christians, even though the source of this wisdom comes from a source other than Scripture. One clear example is Paul’s use of stoic philosophy in Acts 17 when talking to the Epicureans and Stoic philosophers on Mars Hill.
3. **Disputable matters in the church**—In Romans 14–15, Paul gives extensive teaching on how the church should handle disputable or nonessential matters in the church.

4. **The law**—This part of God’s revelation includes all the commandments and teachings of how to follow God faithfully and live a Christian life.
5. **The gospel, Jesus, and the kingdom**—This essential part of God’s revelation is best captured in the Apostles’ Creed (even though parts of the creed are debated in some circles).

Understanding how the apostles used these five parts of God’s revelation illustrates how central the “question before the questions” was to the early church. Over the next few chapters, we will look closely at each area to understand what it meant to the apostles and how it applies to the contemporary church today. A summary of this teaching is in the following chart, which will be presented again in the following chapters to help us see how everything fits together.

<b>Category of Revelation</b>	<b>What Should We Focus On?</b>	<b>What Question Should We Ask?</b>
Not God	Define yourself by what you’re for and not by what you’re against.	Will focusing on this idea or interest resonate with or discourage people who are considering Christianity?
General Revelation	Build bridges to ideas outside Christianity, and find as much common ground as possible.	Is this idea or area of knowledge consistent with biblical teaching on this topic?
Disputable Matters in the Church	Stick to the essentials of the faith and allow for diversity on anything else where Christians disagree.	Is this topic or area of interest a disputable or indisputable matter?
The Law	Limit the requirements to engage with the faith to the very small list (4) in Acts 15.	Are we making it hard for outsiders to come to the faith?
Gospel	Focus on thirsts, hurts, and journeys rather than what is wrong with the individual.	Are we using language and concepts that will be understood by our audience?

Please note that when I use the words *God's revelation*, I am speaking of the Scriptures. The five major categories are biblical categories that the apostles used (Gospel, The Law, and Disputable Matters in the Church) as well as two categories that are inferred by the actions of Jesus and the apostles (General Revelation and Not God).

Overall, in the first part of this book, I want to communicate:

1. First, the apostles and Jesus had a worldview and mindset that viewed all of Scriptures and the revelation of God through the five categories summarized in the chart.
2. These categories filtered how they went about using the revelation of God with outsiders and insiders, whom they treated very differently as they approached evangelism. Again, I use the term *outsiders* for those people who do not yet believe the claims of Christianity and *insiders* for those who are followers of Jesus and the kingdom.
3. We, in turn, need to heed the wisdom and pattern that the apostles and Jesus had in understanding ministry and mission to those outside the faith in order to genuinely represent Christianity, however imperfectly, to a world that is skeptical, neutral, and negative toward the Christian faith.
4. In each category in the chart, I have framed a question that the apostles asked or used as a filter when they were engaging decisions of how best to communicate the good news to a variety of audiences in the Roman Empire.
5. These questions directed what would be emphasized, modified, or left out completely as they interacted with those outside the faith, either by way of direct encounter or by instructions they gave to the churches to “make the most of every opportunity” (Colossians 4:5).
6. Much of the unnecessary (in my opinion) devastation of reputation and engagement that happened throughout

the latter part of the twentieth century in churches in America stemmed from ignoring these patterns and the wisdom of the apostles and Jesus.

7. Part of the renewal of the church in America and restoration of reputation, as well as witness and proclamation by Christians, begins by re-embracing this orientation to those outside the church. I have mentioned in each category in the chart one question the apostles asked about each part of God's revelation, and one focus or insight that summarizes how we are to approach this category of God's revelation with outsiders.

You'll see that in the following five chapters I share a representative text from Jesus or the apostles' experience that illustrates their interactions with various subcultures. (The biblical texts I have chosen are only one of a series of texts that could be quoted, which is why I consider them representative.) After gleaning principles from each biblical passage, I will then talk about how churches and church leaders are applying this to their communities today.

My biggest concern is that I have met only a few Christian leaders who start their understanding of missional activity and evangelistic strategy by asking how not to make it hard for the Gentiles (people outside the faith) to come to faith in Christ. The way is already narrow, as Jesus teaches in the Gospels. We should not make it narrower by overlooking or misunderstanding the apostles' faithful witness to the world.

<b>Category of Revelation</b>	<b>What Should We Focus On?</b>	<b>What Question Should We Ask?</b>
Not God	Define yourself by what you're for and not by what you're against.	Will focusing on this idea or interest resonate with or discourage people who are considering Christianity?
General Revelation	Build bridges to ideas outside Christianity, and find as much common ground as possible.	Is this idea or area of knowledge consistent with biblical teaching on this topic?
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