SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN EMERGING ADULTHOOD

A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry

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Contents

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Introduction

Remember your Creator during your youth: when all possibilities lie open before you and you can offer all your strength intact for his service. The time to remember is not after you become senile and paralyzed! Then it is not too late for your salvation, but too late for you to serve as the presence of God in the midst of the world and the creation. You must take sides earlier—when you can actually make choices, when you have many paths opening at your feet, before the weight of necessity overwhelms you.

Jacques Ellul[1]

So the time of late adolescence, which has received the least attention in Christian education literature, has actually become the period in the life cycle that poses the most far-reaching challenges to church and theology.

Friedrich Schweitzer[2]

In the United States, the years between the ages of 18 and 30 have long been heralded for their formative potential. Even a surface analysis of this period reveals a dizzying array of critical life tasks: choosing a college, choosing a life calling and vocation, moving away from home for the first time, buying or renting a home, making independent financial decisions, choosing and maintaining church commitments, forging new friendships and relationships with members of the opposite sex, and embracing the potential for singleness, engagement, marriage, and parenting. These years also mark a crucial stage for developing a worldview and faith stance amid a wide array of competing perspectives. This time of life is often attended by the need to assume ownership of one's faith and to select mentors and communities capable of

challenging and nurturing that faith over the long haul. Many of the choices made in these areas shape the contours of the rest of the life span, serving as gateways to future meaning, lifestyle, and mission. In short, this is the time when the fabric of life is woven together into a discernible—and increasingly solidified—pattern.

While the importance of this age span has often been acknowledged, however, it is critical to recognize that the experience of these years has changed dramatically in recent times. Most prominently, the last fifty years have witnessed a gradual delaying of traditional adult milestones. Sociologists have marked this shift by monitoring five key social events: leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having children. The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy reports that in 1960, more than two-thirds of young adults had attained all five of these markers by the age of 30; by the year 2000, this was true of less than half of females and less than a third of males.[3] Seventy percent of 25-year-old women had attained these markers in 1960, but only 25 percent in 2000. The later timing of these traditional adult responsibilities has reconfigured the typical "shape" of life between the ages of 18 and 30. As sociologist Christian Smith helpfully comments, "Half a century ago, many young people were anxious to get out of high school, marry, settle down, have children, and start a long-term career. But many youth today face almost a decade between high school graduation and marriage to spend exploring life's many options as singles, in unprecedented freedom."[4]

In the American context, a number of social and cultural factors have fueled delays in traditional adulthood. First, and perhaps most importantly, a growing number of individuals in this age group are delaying marriage. The average ages of first marriage in 1960 stood at roughly 20 for women and 22 for men. Now, approximately fifty years later, the average woman marries at age 26 while the average man waits until he is nearly 28.[5] This delay can be explained in part by a second social change: the expansion and extension of higher education. In the shift from a manufacturing-based economy to one anchored by technical and service sectors, higher education is often required to enhance career opportunities and earn a solid income. Therefore, while about 38 percent of high school graduates attended college in 1960, that number has now risen to approximately 70 percent. About a third of college graduates also attend graduate school, thereby extending schooling into the mid-to-late twenties. It is important to note that this change is even more dramatic for women. Women now constitute 58 percent of all undergraduate students in the United States, and they also constitute 50 percent or more of the students in medical schools, law schools, and business schools.[6] With higher education filling

the early years of the twenties and beyond, other responsibilities—including career, marriage, and parenting—are put on hold.

For both men and women, economic factors are critical. In a changing global economy, many in this age range explore multiple career options and change jobs frequently, diminishing the stability usually desired before entering into the commitments of marriage and parenting. Less likely to begin and maintain a lifelong career with a single company, many feel a perpetual need for educational and geographical flexibility, postponing other kinds of commitments until they achieve some sense that they have found their vocational niches. When coupled with the need to repay sizable student loans, these factors often postpone the financial independence that is thought to be the prerequisite for settling down.[7]

In addition to these structural issues, personal concerns are also at play. As Smith reports, middle- and upper-class parents seem a bit more willing to finance these delays, providing the economic safety net necessary for young people to "find their place" educationally and vocationally.[8] Parents may provide a geographical safety net as well. Increasingly, twentysomethings are living at home during school or returning home after their schooling to relieve financial pressure while they seek to gain the education and skills required for a career. In a culture of high divorce rates, delays in marriage and parenting may also be linked to fears of marital failure. Particularly for children of divorced parents and those who have experienced such realities close up, delayed marital commitment can seem a wise safeguard against the disappointments of a fractured family. Finally, the cultural tolerance for premarital sexuality and the advent of easy and reliable birth control methods have broken the perceived link between marriage and sexuality. In a culture where sexual taboos have been abolished and where reproductive consequences have been removed, marriage is no longer viewed as a necessary precursor to sexual intimacy.[9] While this is obviously less true in Christian contexts, the church is far from immune to these shifts.[10]

These changes, according to many psychologists and sociologists, have actually paved the way for a genuinely new phase of the American life course. In 2000, psychologist Jeffrey Arnett posited a new life stage—"emerging adulthood"—to describe the growing chasm between adolescence and the completion of traditional adult milestones.[11] Between age 18 and the late twenties, he argues, emerging adults are characterized by five interrelated characteristics. First, they are actively engaged in identity formation, exploring personal meaning in love, work, and worldview. Second, they live lives marked by instability: regularly moving, changing jobs, and revising their life plans. Third, they tend to be very focused on themselves, free from parents' oversight and yet also

free from significant responsibilities to others. Fourth, they feel "in between," recognizing that they have transcended adolescence and yet unsure if they have achieved full adult status. Finally, they see this time period as an "age of possibilities," optimistic about the future and desirous of keeping all of their options open.[12] "Having left the dependency of childhood and adolescence, and having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood," Arnett notes, "emerging adults often explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and worldviews."[13]

While many of these emerging adult changes can be exhilarating, they also tend to produce a great deal of anxiety. Because many of the stable and scripted road maps of the adult life course have vanished, there is little clear direction on how to proceed through the twenties. In a period of instability, continual change, and new freedom, the weight of personal responsibility can be overwhelming. The uncertainty and volatility of this decade, coupled with the loss of clear expectations, often results in fear, depression, emotional paralysis, and various forms of addiction and escapism. While the midlife crisis during the forties and fifties is often a result of stagnancy and monotony, the so-called quarterlife crisis is linked to the pressure of developing a life plan in the absence of strong social cues and supports.[14]

How does all of this relate to the Christian vision of growth, maturity, and kingdom responsibility? Over the last ten years, a number of scholars and practitioners have embraced the language of emerging adulthood and attempted to analyze the religious dimensions of "twentysomething" life in light of these new social and cultural variables. The news about this age group is mixed. On the troubling side, by measures of both belief and practice, emerging adults are less religious than all other age groups. Smith, Robert Wuthnow, and others contend that emerging adults often lack purposeful engagement with Christian formation. Disrupted by the transitions and distractions in their lives, many in this age group diminish the faith commitments and practices that defined their childhood and adolescent years.[15] This is perhaps most visible in declining church participation, a reality that leaves emerging adults untethered to supportive Christian community at this formative stage of life.[16]

Other challenges are equally daunting. Emerging adults have been described as "morally adrift," devoid of clear boundaries for right and wrong outside of personal opinion.[17] Others highlight their tendency to engage in risk behaviors such as reckless driving, binge drinking, and drug abuse.[18] Many point to their sexually permissive and promiscuous relationships, evidenced by a "hookup" culture concerned chiefly with personal gratification.[19] Some indicate that emerging adults view this stage of life as a decade set apart for pleasure and personal exploration, ignoring the missional call of vocational responsibility.[20]

In all of these areas, many identify a pervasive pattern of individualism, a primary reliance on what Smith has labeled the "sovereign self."[21]

Yet despite these troubling indicators, there are also some very hopeful signs. For example, various authors have identified among emerging adults a renewed passion for social justice and compassion for the downtrodden. According to journalist Colleen Carroll, many desire to bring the redemptive power of the gospel to bear on a broader range of personal and social issues.[22] In addition, some authors point to a renewed desire among Christian emerging adults to forge connections with the traditions of the Christian faith. Both Carroll and Robert Webber, for example, have described a trend among young professionals to embrace traditional liturgical forms and strict moral and doctrinal creeds as a counterpoint to the diffuse permissiveness of contemporary American culture.[23] Furthermore, many are indeed seeking mentors to nourish and guide their faith journeys. As they begin the process of evaluating former commitments and developing new ideals, emerging adults desire guides who will support their growth, challenge and critique where needed, and cast a vision for the future.[24]

Undoubtedly, there is exciting promise and potential for emerging adults to bring renewal to the church and the world. They are primed at this time of life to consider new ideas and dream about future possibilities. Emerging adults tend to be idealistic, energetic, and passionate about their pursuits. Many great revivals and missionary movements throughout history, in fact, were birthed through the irrepressible zeal of emerging adults.[25] They tend to be what Andy Crouch has called "culture makers," people poised to immerse themselves in creative opportunities for connecting gospel truths to a variety of cultural contexts.[26] Of course, this energy and enthusiasm can be misguided and can disorient older church members who desire continuity and stability. However, when tethered to the internal compass of biblical truth and directed by encouraging mentors, this passion can serve as a potent force for spiritual renewal. Part of our calling as mentors to young adults is to unleash some of this "potential energy" into channels through which the kingdom can infiltrate church and world to the glory of God.

We therefore see emerging adulthood as a time of formidable challenge and yet great opportunity. Our backgrounds are in college and young adult ministry. We have spent most of our professional lives working on college campuses. For more than a decade, we have both been teaching undergraduates and graduate students, including a large number who desire to minister among the members of this age group. We have seen emerging adults abuse their newfound freedom, falling victim to sexual struggles, substance abuse, and relational chaos. We have seen students swayed by intellectual currents

that erode the foundations of their faith. We have observed the development of cynicism in which joy and enthusiasm is stripped away by recurring patterns of callousness and apathy. Yet we also find a longing among young people today to find mentors who will listen to their stories and walk alongside them as they embrace new challenges. We have been amazed at their willingness to address the monumental challenges of our day: caring for orphans, setting up barriers to human trafficking, building relations with villages in developing countries, and embracing leadership challenges in churches worldwide. Amid all of the disruptions, distractions, and cultural distortions, we have witnessed deep spiritual transformation that awakens and sustains a passionate pursuit of Christian discipleship.

Living in the midst of such activity, in roles that privilege us to watch these tensions unfold in the lives of emerging adults, we are prompted to ask two central questions. First, what does the gospel have to offer emerging adults as they are formed through the adult transition? Second, what do emerging adults shaped by the gospel have to offer to the church and the world?[27] In other words, we want to discern how emerging adults can be spiritually formed within communities marked by a countercultural biblical and theological narrative. We also want to propose how emerging adults' gospel-shaped lives can offer truth, healing, and hope to the body of Christ and to the larger world.

Despite the critical nature of this life stage and a host of new cultural challenges, emerging adult spiritual formation has been largely neglected as a topic of purposeful inquiry. Books related to Christian education and spiritual growth tend to focus on children and youth, the groups over which the church possesses more "comprehensive" influence. Books written on issues related specifically to emerging adult faith tend to fall into three main categories. First, popular books written to emerging adults provide sage wisdom regarding issues of character, use of time and money, relational intimacy, and biblical faithfulness.[28] Second, books written about the "next generation" furnish sweeping portraits of the cultural changes influencing emerging adults in the "postmodern era." Based largely on examinations of cultural and philosophical trends, these works help us think more carefully about the ways in which the church relates to emerging adults growing up in cultures distinct from those of previous generations.[29]

Third, a growing academic literature grants us incisive analyses of cultural and demographic trends as well as faith development stage theories for emerging adults. Recent sociological works, such as Smith's *Souls in Transition* and Wuthnow's *After the Baby Boomers*, provide quantitative and qualitative perspectives on emerging adult church attendance, denominational affiliation, beliefs, spiritual practices, and cultural patterns related to dating,

marriage, consumerism, and entertainment.[30] Those with more of a psychological orientation, including Sharon Parks's *Big Questions*, *Worthy Dreams*, James Fowler's *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, and Arnett's *Emerging Adulthood*, focus on documenting the changing internal worlds of emerging adults.[31] These sociological and psychological works provide us with critical data about the institutional and internal dynamics of emerging adult life in the twenty-first century.[32]

With this present work, we seek to fill a gap in the existing literature. We desire to provide a "practical theology" for college and young adult ministry, one that combines important scholarship, a Christian theological vision, and attentiveness to concrete ministry applications. With an eye to the link between theory and practice, we look specifically at the formative emerging adult issues of spiritual formation, identity, church involvement, vocation, morality, relationships and sexuality, and mentoring. In each area, we describe present reality as a starting point for understanding the matrix of forces shaping the transition to adulthood in today's culture. We also seek to interpret these conditions, specifying some of the key factors underlying these trends. Finally, turning to Scripture, theology, and other academic disciplines, we provide Christian perspectives on these issues and delineate key postures and practices designed to facilitate spiritual formation in these areas. By providing descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic insights on these topics, we hope to better equip college and young adult ministers, professors, pastors, student development professionals, parents, and laypeople in their work among emerging adults in this formative life stage.[33]

In chapters 1 and 2, we address spiritual formation during these formative years. Chapter 1 looks at the current landscape of emerging adult spiritual formation, documenting the widespread spiritual "slump" at this time of life and tracing the personal, cultural, and theological barriers that challenge growth in Christ. One of those challenges stems from the default faith position Smith has called "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," a perspective defined by vague moral goodness, an appeal to personal fulfillment, and a God who is distant and called on only in times of trouble.[34] Chapter 2, therefore, sets forth a vision of emerging adult spiritual formation that confronts this imposter religion at each point. Proposing an approach that seeks inner transformation, costly discipleship, and embodied disciplines that facilitate communion with God, we hope to cast a vision for emerging adult formation that describes the contours of the "with God" life at the cusp of adulthood.[35]

In chapter 3, we look carefully at the evolving nature of emerging adult identity formation. As social movements through the past fifty years have largely liberated people from ascribed identities, emerging adults today are

offered an almost unlimited array of possible life choices.[36] Attaining adult identity is now a highly self-directed process, where allegiances to institutions and family are often relinquished in the pursuit of individualization. However, with fewer prescribed social roles and with increased pressure to become one's own person, anxiety multiplies. In this chapter, we describe a Christian perspective on identity formation, highlighting both the individual and cultural processes by which a strong identity is formed. At this time of life, emerging adults move beyond authority-bound structures and begin owning and internalizing faith commitments. Yet this process, we contend, is fostered not by complete autonomy and separation from authority structures but within "communities of truth" that bestow Christian identity on emerging adults.[37] We draw from the biblical narrative of Daniel to emphasize two dynamic processes, refusal and engagement, as important directives in fostering this kind of Christian identity.

Having advocated for the critical importance of authoritative community in developing Christian identity, we turn in chapter 4 to a consideration of the church. Christian leaders and academics have spoken a great deal about the detachment of emerging adults from faith communities. While some blame local churches and others focus their attacks on emerging adults themselves, the result is clear: a loss of corporate spiritual formation. In this chapter, we look at the research documenting emerging adult disengagement from the church, noting diverse sources and consequences of this troubling reality. We then look biblically and theologically at the critical importance of corporate Christian formation, describing the key components of an "ecclesiological vision" for emerging adults. Finally, we offer practical suggestions for emerging adults and for churches seeking to enhance their focus on this formative period of life.

Since the church is missional by its very nature, this ecclesiological vision is inextricably linked to the development of Christian vocational commitments during emerging adulthood. Chapter 5, therefore, looks at the development of a sense of calling and life purpose at this critical stage. The cultural priority given to personal exploration and self-actualization in these years tends to make this a journey linked tightly to personal identity and fulfillment. The vast proliferation of options and choices has further complicated the vocational journey and challenged commitment and contentment along these lines. In this chapter, therefore, we seek to provide a Christian vision of vocation and calling that is grounded in God's redemptive purposes and in his providential hand in emerging adults' lives. We then demonstrate the critical importance of such a vision for assisting emerging adults in vocational discernment.

Closely related to vocational discernment is consideration of the moral framework within which an emerging adult makes life choices. This is our

focus in chapter 6. As in other domains, the cultural elevation of individualism has worn thin any communal fabric of morality to guide emerging adults. The resultant posturing of morality for most twentysomethings is a reliance on moral intuition attributed to early childhood socialization, coupled with a consequentialism that regards wrong only that which causes harm to another. Rarely does the current cultural ethos compel emerging adults to curb self-interest for the sake of the common good or for missional service in the world. In this chapter, we provide a moral formation framework that attempts to move beyond both permissiveness and a legalistic reliance on rules. Instead, we commend a virtue-centered approach that promotes habituated dispositions of the soul linked to the larger Christian narrative. We then conclude by offering five pathways as viable means of deepening moral formation among emerging adults.

Linked to issues of both faith and morality, chapters 7 and 8 explore emerging adult romantic relationships and sexuality. Most emerging adults envision themselves eventually settling into a monogamous marriage relationship. However, the strategies to secure this hope can be full of devastating misadventures. Chapter 7 traces historical and cultural shifts in the ways intimate relationships are structured. Looking particularly at the increasingly sexualized nature of the emerging adult "hookup" culture, we also explore the influence of delayed marriage and cohabitation on the shape of such interactions. With this background established, we then outline the broad strokes of an emerging adult sexual ethic that grounds virtuous sexuality in the covenant relationships manifested by God and his people and by the "one-flesh" union of husband and wife. Chapter 8 then looks more specifically at how leaders can help emerging adults navigate such relationships by exploring their histories of attachment and sexuality, by gaining a deeper awareness of such issues as singleness, dating, cohabitation, and early marriage, and by understanding the relationships between physical, social, and spiritual intimacy.

As we consider the various themes mentioned in this book, chapter 9 will provide a concluding framework for effective mentoring among emerging adults. After delineating the challenges to forming mentoring relationships with emerging adults, the proposed framework describes mentoring as facilitating postures of (1) "remembering"—looking back on God's faithful past action in history and in their own lives, (2) "attending"—looking around and within for God's present work in their lives and in the world, and (3) "envisioning"—looking forward to a future that is anticipated both in their sanctified imaginations and in the examples of those already demonstrating adult faithfulness. Since emerging adulthood represents an important "hinge" moment, attention to past, present, and future can provide a holistic sense of God's

work in their lives and a growing capacity to locate their stories within the broader story of God.

In the end, therefore, we hope to provide guidance both for Christian thinking about emerging adulthood and for walking alongside emerging adults in their faith journeys. In many ways, we hope to say something substantive about what it means to be spiritually formed *into adulthood*. Within the life span, the twenties represent what one author has called "the stem cell of human development, the pluripotent moment when any of several outcomes is possible."[38] It is an important moment in which beliefs, perspectives, and habits are being etched within the soft wax of life. We desire the gospel to make its stamp before the wax has hardened. So we ask the following questions: What are the unique opportunities and challenges that emerging adulthood provides for the process of spiritual formation? How can emerging adults enter deeply into processes of formation that will serve as gateways to lives of growing faithfulness and conformity to the image of Christ? How can mentors shepherd emerging adults as they construct paths of meaning, purpose, and mission in these formative years?

Ultimately, we hope that the answers to such questions will furnish a compelling mandate for ministry to emerging adults, one that takes seriously both the perils and the promises of this life stage. Emerging adulthood can be a wonderful "runway" enabling individuals to take off into a life of productive service for the kingdom of God.[39] For others, it can be a very difficult and lonely journey, accompanied by depression, anxiety, diffused identity, failed intimacy, vocational "false starts," and stagnation. We hope that the perspectives offered in these pages will provide a window into the very meaning of adulthood in Christian perspective and also provide wisdom for emerging adult mentors in college, church, and world.

1 | Faith

The Emerging Adult Landscape

The terrible thing, the almost impossible thing, is to hand over your whole self—all your wishes and precautions—to Christ. But it is far easier than what we are all trying to do instead. For what we are trying to do is to remain what we call "ourselves," to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be "good." We are all trying to let our mind and heart go their own way—centered on money or pleasure or ambition—and hoping, in spite of this, to behave honestly and chastely and humbly. And that is exactly what Christ warned us you could not do. As He said, a thistle cannot produce figs. If I am a field that contains nothing but grass-seed, I cannot produce wheat. Cutting the grass may keep it short: but I shall still produce grass and no wheat. If I want to produce wheat, the change must go deeper than the surface. I must be ploughed up and re-sown.

C. S. Lewis[1]

F ine." That seemed to be Jim's go-to reply when asked about his spiritual life. Twenty-seven years old and a former student of David's, Jim had spent the previous hour excitedly recounting some of his key accomplishments since graduation. After a transitional year at home, he had completed a master's program, started a new romantic relationship, and landed a job with a great salary and benefits. He was beginning to think seriously about

marriage and looking forward to the prospect of buying a house in one of the city's better neighborhoods. He noted repeatedly that he was enjoying his new freedom and attempting to make the most of each day, soaking in all that the city had to offer: concerts, museums, parties, and sporting events. "It's been a whirlwind," he remarked, "but I'm loving every minute of it."

Jim's eager posture dropped significantly, however, when asked about his faith. "It's fine," he noted, stating that he still held firmly to his college-age beliefs. Jim had been a solid disciple of Jesus as an undergraduate, involved in various ministries and eager to share his faith with others. In the years after graduation, he had not been able to find a good church, and he didn't know many people who attended church on a weekly basis. He said that he still read his Bible, though not with the regularity that marked his college days. Graduate school had been so intense that he found himself unable to get involved in ministries or evangelism. "I still believe the same things," he suggested without prompting. "I still have my faith. I just don't have a ton of time to give to it right now, but that day will come again soon. I'm doing fine."

"Fine." That word, in many ways, seems an apt description of the spiritual formation landscape during the years of emerging adulthood.

The "Religious Slump" of Emerging Adulthood

While each story is unique, Jim's account is certainly characteristic of larger trends. Research on emerging adulthood is fairly consistent in proclaiming this to be a stage marked by widespread religious decline in the areas of belief, behavior, and the subjective inner life. On the cognitive level, there appears to be a moderate erosion of basic belief in the orthodox tenets of the Christian faith. While 78 percent of 18- to 23-year-olds claim to believe in God without reservation—certainly a sizable majority—this represents about a 7 percent drop when compared with American teenagers. Furthermore, this decline is actually sharper among those who spent their teen years within the church. Conservative Protestants, for example, see an 8 percent decline in belief in God while mainline Protestants see a more precipitous 17 percent decline.[2] In every religious tradition, emerging adult belief in God is also lower than belief in God for those over the age of 30.[3] Fewer emerging adult Protestants see God as a "personal being involved in the lives of people today" while a growing number identify God as "not personal, something like a cosmic life force."[4] Basic belief in God's existence and personal involvement, therefore, reaches its lowest point in the years after high school.

When it comes to more specific beliefs, the drift from orthodoxy is still pronounced. A declining number of conservative and mainline emerging adult Protestants believe in a divine "judgment day," and fewer believe in the existence of angels and divine miracles. Members of this age group are also more likely than any other to disavow Jesus's sinlessness and to doubt his bodily resurrection.[5] Among evangelicals, those between the ages of 18 and 30 are significantly less likely to view the Bible as the literal Word of God and more likely to approve of homosexuality than their older counterparts.[6] While other beliefs—such as the reality of life after death and the existence of heaven and hell—seem to remain fairly stable or even increase from the teen years through older adulthood,[7] the larger picture indeed demonstrates what sociologist Christian Smith identifies as "general shifts away from certainty about God . . . and definite belief in other traditional, 'biblical' teachings."[8]

Even when basic beliefs remain intact, there is widespread recognition that religion declines in subjective importance during the emerging adult years. When comparing 18- to 23-year-olds with those between the ages of 13 and 17, the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR) found significant declines in the percentage agreeing that faith was "very important" in daily life, coupled with a strong increase in the number claiming that faith was either "not very important" or "not important at all."[9] Perhaps even more telling, these declines were quite sharp among those affiliated with conservative and mainline Protestant churches. Among conservative Protestants, the move from the teen years into emerging adulthood was marked by a 13 percent drop in those claiming that faith was "very or extremely important" in shaping daily life (down from 70 percent to 57 percent). Mainline Protestants saw an even greater decline of 16 percent during this transition (down from 49 percent to 33 percent). According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the declining perceived importance of religion is also evident when comparing emerging adults with those in older groups. While 59 percent of those over the age of 30 see religion as "very important," 45 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 29 state the same. Even among the religiously affiliated, those over the age of 30 were 9 percent more likely to see religion as "very important" than religiously affiliated emerging adults.[10]

Despite these moderate changes in belief and in the subjective sense of religion's importance, scholars across the board agree that Christian *practices and institutional participation* are far more likely to decline even when beliefs remain intact. In addition to widely publicized declines in church attendance, to be discussed in detail in chapter 4, a host of other spiritual disciplines become less prominent in emerging adults' lives. Looking at professing Christians, the NSYR identified declines between Christian adolescence and emerging adulthood in the

frequency of daily prayer, Bible reading, Sabbath observance, religious singing, reading of devotional materials, and personal evangelism.[11] Among conservative Protestants, for example, a mere 10 percent in this age group read the Scriptures daily, down from 16 percent in adolescence.[12] Comparing emerging adults to their elders, the Pew Forum found that 34 percent of religiously affiliated emerging adults read Scripture weekly, compared to 41 percent of those age 30 and above. Similarly, 58 percent of religious emerging adults pray daily, while 66 percent of those 30 and over do the same. Another independent study found that, while 46 percent of older, religious adults take part in devotional practices, only 33 percent of religious emerging adults do the same.[13] The erosion of Christian beliefs, therefore, is coupled with a similar erosion of Christian behaviors. Smith estimates that about 50 percent of emerging adults remain stable in their faith commitments and practice while 40 percent decline and 10 percent increase in commitment, leading him to assert, "Emerging adults are, on most sociological measures, the least religious adults in the United States today."[14]

Yet there is a psychological component to this as well. In light of these figures, it is perhaps not surprising that a growing number of emerging adult Protestants, on a very personal level, feel distant from God. In a recent study, only 35 percent of conservative Protestants in this age group indicated that they felt "extremely or very close" to God, down from 48 percent among teenagers in this same group. Mainline Protestants experienced an even larger decline. While 40 percent of mainline teenagers felt "extremely or very close" to God, only 22 percent of emerging adults felt the same. Such statistics are important because they reveal not only a decline in religious belief and practice but also a waning subjective sense of God's presence in their lives. Speaking of the comprehensive cognitive, behavioral, and affective declines in these years, Smith concludes, "Some or even many American youth go into something of a religious slump during these years."[15]

Interestingly, while such data reveal troubling declines in measures of faith during emerging adulthood, other research presents a far more positive picture of spiritual interest among members of this age group. A number of studies seem to indicate that spirituality is on the rise among emerging adults. In an ongoing analysis of the spirituality of collegians, for example, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA discovered that students across diverse institutions have "very high levels of spiritual interest" and desire to spend ample time "exploring the meaning and purpose of life." According to this research, four out of five students claim that they "have an interest in spirituality" and that they "believe in the sacredness of life" while two out of three state that "my spirituality is a source of joy."[16] Fifty-eight percent indicated that integrating spirituality into their lives is "very important" or

"essential."[17] In addition, this research seems to indicate that increasing numbers of college students are engaged in a "spiritual quest," a broader search for meaning, purpose, and inner peace.[18] While women generally rate higher in spiritual interest than men in these areas, these studies seem to point to a generalized intensification of spiritual awareness during this stage of life.[19]

The explosion of spiritual interest, such authors suggest, is a result of many age-specific events. Separation from parents, in and of itself, can spark spiritual reflection since emerging adults gain a deeper sense of responsibility for their own lives and spiritual commitments.[20] In addition, as Alyssa Bryant and Helen Astin have discussed, the new experiences and challenges of emerging adulthood also foster spiritual awareness.[21] Many are confronted for the first time with worldviews and lifestyles different from their own, sparking questions about truth. Others, faced with vocational decisions, begin reflecting on their purposes and contributions in the world. Some lose parents or grandparents, heightening reflections on eternity. Collegiate exposure to national and global issues awakens concerns for justice and equity. Some even argue that changes in the brain during emerging adulthood—including synaptic pruning and continued myelination in the prefrontal cortex—enhance the physiological possibility of deep spiritual reflection and interior processing.[22] While many of these researchers would concur that measures of religious practice and church involvement decline during these years, they would argue that this simply represents a revised and perhaps evolving perspective on faith. Many speak of this generation of emerging adults as "spiritual but not religious," caring more effectively for their interior lives even as they eschew doctrinal creeds and formal participation in religious practices.[23]

Yet while such analyses reveal a purported uptick in spiritual interest, optimistic generalizations can be misleading. Estimates are often inflated because the ever-broadening definition of "spirituality" used by social scientists makes it almost inevitable that they will find heightened spiritual interest among emerging adults.[24] Since definitions of spirituality are generally quite vague—more akin to caring about one's "inner, subjective life," finding life meaning, and cultivating a greater sense of "connectedness to one another and to the world around us"—emerging adult interest in spirituality may not indicate much more than a growing self-awareness and exposure to new ways of thinking.[25] There is very little in these definitions that would tether spirituality to any personal conviction or commitment, much less an external faith-based narrative. As sociologist Tim Clydesdale points out,

> Asking incoming American college freshmen whether they "have an interest
> in spirituality" is like asking a soldier in a trench whether he has an interest

in world peace or an arguing spouse whether she has an interest in honest and loving communication. To learn that most agree should not surprise us in the slightest. The critical questions are whether indicating interest in religious and spiritual life, world peace, or loving communication makes a difference in present activities and long-range goals, and to what extent.[26]

Furthermore, accounts of widespread spiritual interest seem to be exaggerated. Sociologists do acknowledge that emerging adults are the age group most likely to speak of spirituality apart from religious involvement, but they claim that only a small minority of emerging adults fit the "spiritual but not religious" mold.[27] Among members of the broader population, one study estimates that 10 percent may qualify as "spiritual but not religious."[28] Smith suggests that 15 percent of all emerging adults are spiritually "open," meaning that they are "not personally very committed to a religious faith but are nonetheless receptive to and at least mildly interested in some spiritual or religious matters."[29] Another 15 percent qualify as "committed traditionalists," finding spiritual meaning and purpose in a formal commitment to a specific faith.[30] The majority of emerging adults, however, view both spiritual and religious matters as of marginal importance in their lives.[31] Smith's assessment is important: "So yes, some emerging adults, including students in college, are interested in spirituality. But for a good number of them, that simply means doing traditional religion. And for another chunk of them, that means they simply do not want to say that they are positively not interested in spirituality. Yet others may say whatever about matters spiritual but in fact are simply too distracted by other affairs to care very much."[32]

Smith's final statement here is important because it demonstrates that most emerging adults are characterized not by religious hostility but rather by a growing apathy and indifference to the life of faith. In their recent survey of 1,200 emerging adults between the ages of 20 and 30, Thom Rainer and Jess Rainer found that only 13 percent considered any type of spirituality to be important in their lives.[33] Similarly, Smith found that emerging adults were largely unconcerned about religion. Since matters of faith are considered "not a big deal" and "not something of central importance," such topics rarely come up in conversations with friends.[34] In fact, he notes, religion has

a status on the relevance structures or priority lists of most emerging adults that is similar to, say, the oil refinery industry. Of course, people know it is there, and it is important in some removed or distant way. Most people are glad someone is out there taking care of that business. But you really don't have to think much about it or personally get involved in it, unless it happens to be a personal interest. Religion for the most part is just something in the background.[35]

Overall, then, emerging adults are not antagonistic toward the Christian faith. For most, it would seem, faith is something "neither hot nor cold"—a tasteless product that has been pushed to the periphery of life.[36] Before we construct a positive approach to emerging adult spiritual formation, we must identify some of the reasons for this malaise.

The Sources of Spiritual Decline

The marginalization of spiritual formation among emerging adults is of course a function of many variables, but a few stand out as central to this age group. First, there are a host of new distractions emerging at this time of life that can easily de-center faith commitments. Because emerging adults are often living independently for the first time, there are a number of new life skills required in their attempt to "stand on their own two feet."[37] While tasks such as setting up bank accounts, paying bills, registering for classes, studying for exams, writing research papers, learning to get along with roommates, and preparing for job interviews may seem fairly commonplace to older adults, emerging adults can find them quite overwhelming. Though the cultivation of the spiritual life may still remain important in a theoretical sense, these other tasks can appear more urgent on a daily basis. In addition, since completion of these tasks often generates immediate feedback and both financial and psychological (identity-related) rewards, it is easy to see why they might rise to higher levels on the emerging adult priority scale. As one study summarizes, "Emerging adulthood brings with it a host of responsibilities (e.g., work, school) and opportunities (e.g., increased autonomy) that simply and subtly crowd out religious participation."[38]

In his analysis of younger emerging adults in the year after high school graduation, Clydesdale largely confirms this perspective. Most of these individuals, he suggests, spend the bulk of their time and energy on "daily life management," juggling personal relationships, personal gratifications, and personal economics. In such a context, he suggests, faith commitments are placed in a "lockbox," stowed away for safekeeping until later in life. These emerging adults may maintain their religious beliefs, but they are unlikely to cultivate personal faith practices if these interfere with their other life concerns. As he notes, "Teens view religious faith and practice as largely irrelevant to this stage in their life cycle. Religion is something they did as 'kids' and something they will probably do again as 'adults.' But, for now, teens tune out religion—at the very moment when they make decisions that can affect the rest of their lives and during the very time when they are individually establishing patterns of

everyday living."[39] Referring back to the Higher Education Research Institute study, he notes, "I do concur that most teens are on a quest during their first year out, but that quest is to successfully navigate interpersonal relationships and manage everyday life (like eating, working, attending class, doing laundry, and having a little fun). Religious and spiritual identities are peripheral to that quest and stowed in an identity lockbox for a later point in the life cycle."[40] Because religion does not seem applicable to the all-consuming flow of daily life, faith is set to the side and rarely engaged, critically examined, or applied to the decisions and practices of life. According to Clydesdale, faith is neither "abandoned" nor "pursued," but rather "safely stowed."[41]

The distractions of emerging adult "tasks" are easily matched by the concomitant distractions of "fun." At this time of life, entertainment options abound and permit easy access. During those hours not taken up with jobs, schoolwork, or other life tasks, there are ample opportunities for play via video games, television, movies, parties, concerts, and sporting events. Since these events are often reserved for weekend evenings, as Smith suggests, they certainly detract from the opportunity to take part in weekend church activities. In addition, since the church is often opposed to some of the entertainment options preferred by emerging adults—especially those involving drinking and parties—it is quite common for emerging adults to simply decrease (or privatize) their religious commitments so as to limit the felt discontinuities between faith and lifestyle.

In fact, lifestyle choices at this age seem to be closely related to the decline in faith commitment. Such choices can have multiple faith-eroding results. Some emerging adults will compartmentalize their lives, continuing religious participation in their "Christian life" even while living contrary to their beliefs in other venues. For others, moral choices will move them to redefine Christianity in order to bring it in line with their chosen behaviors. For still others, Christianity will be put on the shelf with the intent that it may be reclaimed once the fun is over. And, of course, others will abandon the faith altogether because it seems to interfere with new ways of living. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests, disobedience can actually obscure Christ and dull spiritual sensitivity.[42] There is, in other words, a moral component to Christian commitment that poses particular challenges in the "anything goes" culture of emerging adulthood.

Emerging adult lifestyles can also present challenges to the attentiveness required for spiritual formation. Sleeping habits tend to be quite poor at this time of life, leading to a host of difficulties in sustaining focus.[43] In addition, emerging adults are perpetually distracted by internet browsing and social networking, now present everywhere and at all times on laptops, tablets, and cell phones. Managing their friendships and other relationships through social

networking has become a "24/7 life activity," a daily project that is always beckoning for their attention (and producing guilt if neglected). Nicholas Carr has demonstrated that the internet shapes the brain in ways that promote distractedness and inhibit depth of focus and concentration.[44] Because of the constant flow of sensory stimuli, hyperlinks, and intruding messages from the outside, the brain increasingly becomes habituated to perpetual skimming and browsing. Smith concurs: "All of these relationship-managing activities and private communication distractions seem to make it difficult for emerging adults to pursue tasks that require full concentration or patient dedication."[45]

To borrow Steven Covey's language, it seems that emerging adulthood is often consumed with matters that are "urgent and important" and "urgent, but not important."[46] Such tasks have deadlines, and they offer immediate rewards for their completion (or punishments if not completed). They also tend to provide a sense of growing adult identity, competence, and personal validation. Because many of these tasks are new, they also take longer than they will at a later time of life. It is easy to see why some who are overwhelmed with these activities retreat to the "not urgent, not important" forms of entertainment that are readily available.[47] It is quite common for emerging adults to solidify "work hard–play hard" rhythms in which they give full time to their responsibilities during the day and then use evenings and weekends to "blow off steam." Such rhythms leave little room for the dimensions of life "that are not urgent, but are important," including those related to the spiritual life.[48]

For many emerging adults, this perspective is actually linked to their own subjective impression of the uniqueness of this life stage. With a clear sense that the typical adult responsibilities of marriage, parenting, and a stable career are coming, many view the emerging adult years as a time to have fun and explore all life has to offer. The twenties, for many, provide a limited window of full freedom prior to the responsibilities required once one "settles down." As Smith notes, "Rather than being settled, most of them understand themselves to be in a phase of life that is free, fluid, tentative, experimental, and relatively unbound. They want to enjoy it while it lasts. . . . They want to acquire independence and the ability to stand on their own two feet. But most of them also do not want full adulthood to come too quickly."[49] Because of this, deep investment in spiritual formation appears to detract from the ability to live life to the full. The opportunity costs are just too high. Many therefore feel that intentional spiritual development can be put off until later and picked up as a task when they are no longer free to pursue their own interests unencumbered by other responsibilities. At that point, after they have gotten all of the fun and life experience out of their systems, they will assume traditional adult roles, including participation in a local church and

attentiveness to the life of faith. For now, however, the twenties are unofficially labeled as "my time."

The disruptions characterizing this fluid and exploratory time of life are also critical forces working against faith commitments. The sheer scope of change in emerging adulthood often serves to disrupt the spiritual rhythms and continuity of the high school years. Rates of moving to a new residence reach their peak in the early twenties. Living situations (and roommates) change with great frequency. In addition, the average college student changes his or her major (and therefore potential career direction) three times during the undergraduate years. Furthermore, the average emerging adult in America holds seven to eight different jobs between the ages of 18 and 30, following a circuitous path to career satisfaction. Coupled with the ins and outs of friendships and romantic relationships, it is little wonder that psychologist Jeffrey Arnett calls this time of life as the "age of instability."[50]

While transitions can be beneficial in many individuals' lives, life disruptions tend to correlate negatively with strong religious commitment. As habits and routines are broken in the midst of transition, it often takes great effort to reestablish healthy spiritual patterns in these new settings. Finding a new church home, for example, can seem like a monumental task, especially if one is not sure he or she will be staying in an area for an extended period of time. On a smaller scale, spiritual practices, such as prayer, Bible study, fasting, solitude, and silence, can also drop off in the midst of transitions. New schedules often shake established habits. The stability of previous mentoring relationships (parents, youth pastors, etc.) gives way to an ever-shifting assortment of adult influences. New living arrangements mean accommodating new roommates and their particular life patterns (or lack thereof!). Importantly, the rapid and incessant changes characterizing emerging adulthood can have the psychological effect of discouraging any formation of life patterns, habits, and rituals. In other words, the effort needed to establish spiritual rhythms, congregational investment, and other practices may not appear worthwhile when emerging adults anticipate yet another impending transition in the near future. Many reason that it is fruitless to establish meaningful spiritual patterns until a later time when their lives will (presumably) be characterized by greater stability. When all of life seems "temporary," it is daunting to generate a way of life characterized by the faithful routines of the spiritual life.

In addition, as Smith indicates, these disruptions in housing and career also connect emerging adults to new social networks with people who may expose them to new (and potentially less spiritual) life patterns. For those growing up in Christian homes, the move to a new setting—college or career— will likely expand the range of contacts to include those with more diverse

backgrounds, beliefs, and moral standards. In such new contexts, the sense of what is "normal" or "acceptable" can rapidly change as one is socialized into a new and ever-widening sphere.[51] The need to secure quick friendships in a new setting can easily lead to less discriminating choices. In addition, because of the increased depth of friendships at this time of life, linked now more than ever to the sharing of opinions and worldviews, these new relationships hold tremendous sway over emerging adults' shifting perspectives and orientations in the world. Whereas parents may have been able to constrain spheres of influence during the teen years, the world certainly opens up during emerging adulthood to include a far greater diversity of thought and practice. Those without strong foundations can quickly find themselves swept away.[52]

One caveat is important here, however. While disruptions seem to challenge the cultivation of faith, college is not as "disruptive" as some might think. Christians often blame colleges for the faith declines of emerging adults, assuming that the combination of liberal teaching, the loss of parental oversight, and the loose moral culture of the campus creates a perfect storm hastening the demise of strong faith. It is true that many scholars over the years have indicated that college serves as a ripe setting for the dissolution—or at least the liberalization—of faith.[53] However, while this may have been true for the baby boomer generation, more recent research reveals that those not attending college are actually more likely to experience a faith decline. Far more students indicate that their faith was strengthened rather than weakened during their college years, despite the fact that religious practices uniformly decline in these settings.[54] Even the practical involvement in religious activities declines less for those in college than for those who have never attended. While 64 percent of those enrolled in four-year higher-education institutions curtail their church attendance, 76 percent of emerging adults who never enrolled in college do the same. Regular church attendance among college students has been higher than noncollege attendees at least since the 1980s. In addition, while 13 percent of traditional college students renounce all religious affiliation during these years, 20 percent of those not enrolled in college do the same.[55]

While some of the collegiate spiritual "advantage" may have to do with expanding ministries on campuses, it may also, ironically, demonstrate students' lack of intentional intellectual engagement. Studies have shown that fewer students in recent years state that they are attending college in order to gain a "meaningful philosophy of life." Far more are now attending so that they can "be very well off financially."[56] Defined as "practical credentialists" rather than "intellectual explorers," they are less apt to be lured away by godless philosophies than they are to breeze through the college experience with little intentional reflection on faith.[57] The search for a marketable degree

generally means finding courses that will provide the best "applicable" training with a minimal investment of thought and reflection.[58] "Religious faith," these researchers argue, "is rarely seen as something that could either influence or be influenced by the educational process."[59] In addition, since many do not have a strong theological background when entering college, they likely fail to identify antagonistic perspectives when they arise. While college may liberalize social and political positions and cultural values, the classroom doesn't appear to be a major barrier to faith. Thus, while there is a decline in religious involvement from the teenage years to the years of emerging adulthood, it does not appear, on the whole, that college is a significant factor in the slump. "Simply put," state sociologists Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, "higher education is not the enemy of religiosity."[60]

While these various factors all contribute to a diminished emphasis on spiritual formation, it is also true that this malaise may be a function of the type of faith embraced during the teen and emerging adult years. In other words, the forms of faith adopted in these years often have little natural connection to an ongoing process of spiritual formation. As Smith has posited, the majority posture among emerging adults still appears to be what he has termed "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," otherwise known as "divinely underwritten personal happiness and interpersonal niceness."[61] Those influenced by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism view God as a distant creator who desires humans to be nice and fair to one another and who intervenes in human experience only when called on to bestow blessings or resolve problems. The purpose of life is happiness, self-fulfillment, and a degree of goodness sufficient to earn entrance to heaven.

From the moralistic angle, as Arnett and others have expressed, most emerging adults equate religious belief with some version of the Golden Rule, treating others as you would like to be treated.[62] Churches, accordingly, are defined as "elementary schools of morals," institutions dedicated to instilling a generalized ethical code while also urging belief in the God who established it. Christian faith, in this sense, has little to do with embracing a particular narrative of God's redemptive action in the world or of cultivating an individual and corporate identity with the people of God. It is instead an insipid call to niceness, to living as well-behaved citizens in this world (with a potential hope of heaven after death). While Smith's research is focused on a broad cross section of emerging adults, it is clear that this position describes many who would self-identify as believing Christians as well. Kara Powell and her colleagues recently discovered that many college juniors who were youth group graduates, when asked to define what it means to "be a Christian," stated that the faith's central characteristic was "loving others." Thirty-five percent did not even mention Jesus in their answer.[63]

This kind of perspective makes it challenging to articulate a continued need for spiritual investment beyond the teenage years. If all of the moral "life lessons" are learned in one's childhood, then emerging adulthood constitutes a kind of "graduation"—teenagers have already learned all that they need to know. By the time they reach their twenties, therefore, they can live on the basis of moral intuition, basic principles of Christian goodness etched in their minds through teaching in their youth. Aside from the need for periodic reminders, the only reason to reengage Christianity comes when it is time to inculcate these same principles in their children. These beliefs (believing in God, believing we should be nice to others, and believing we should be happy) certainly affirm emerging adults' identities as mainstream Americans because they represent core American values, after all. Such a civil religion, however, does not facilitate any continued movement in the direction of spiritual formation.

Importantly, this perspective means that many emerging adults see the actual content and stories of the Christian faith to be relatively unimportant in the ways they live out their spiritual lives. Since a healthy moral framework is all that matters (and since emerging adults seem to believe that right and wrong are easily determined), the distinct theological perspectives offered by different denominations or traditions are viewed as trivial minutia reserved for obscurantists or religious professionals. The stories of the Bible and the doctrinal content of the faith are therefore just meaningless husks enfolding the pure kernel of morality—the common principles of goodness at their cores. Like many of their school subjects, religious content is merely to be learned, affirmed, and stored away. As Smith helpfully suggests, "Most emerging adults have religious beliefs. . . . But those religious ideas are for the most part abstract agreements that have been mentally checked off and filed away. They are not what emerging adults organize their lives around. They do not particularly drive the majority's priorities, commitments, values, and goals. These have much more to do with jobs, friends, fun, and financial security." In short, "Religious beliefs are cognitive assents, not life drivers."[64]

The "therapeutic" side of this emerging adult faith also sets up barriers to ongoing spiritual formation. In these years, faith is often perceived as a lifestyle-enhancing appliance, a means of making a better life and meeting one's needs. God, in this sense, is still primarily viewed as what Smith called in an earlier book a "combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist," on call and waiting to supply things that will enhance personal happiness.[65] Such a perspective creates a number of challenges. First, faith itself can be viewed as merely a tool of personal happiness. If it is true that within Moralistic Therapeutic Deism "the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself," the potential for self-worship is quite high. What is even more

dangerous here is that emerging adults can be swayed to use God as the currency needed to purchase personal idols.[66] They can begin to think that they want God in their lives so that they can get a good job with a good income, find a great spouse, be free from depression, and have someone around to help solve their problems. They come to the place where, as Larry Crabb puts it, they "see Christ as a savior from pain, not from sin; as a responsive benefactor rather than a Holy Lord."[67]

Ultimately, this leads to a path in which happiness becomes far more important than an unwavering and sacrificial submission to God and his kingdom. Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a religion that promises personal assistance in making life better while making few if any demands on emerging adults in terms of identity, lifestyle, and purpose. Whether the desire is for more material possessions, better relationships, or heightened academic and vocational prestige, the key is that their loves have been turned away from God's kingdom (and particularly away from him) and toward the created kingdoms of this world. As Smith puts it, "Promoting an instrumentalist legitimation of religious faith may be effective in attracting adherents in the short and medium run. But it certainly comes at a long-term religious cost: faith and practice become redefined as instrumental therapeutic mechanisms to achieve personal goals that are probably not themselves formed by the religious traditions."[68] This therapeutic vision often means that the individual can determine which parts of the faith to keep or discard, ultimately crafting a God in his or her own image. Instead of placing oneself within an established religious framework, many now view religion as a "symbolic toolbox," a collection of ideas and practices from which they can select the components that "work" best.[69] Therefore, many emerging adults are not formed by the Christian faith into the image of Christ but are rather forming a faith that will shape them into their own image of happiness.

The therapeutic mind-set may also serve as one reason many in this age group leave the faith during these years. If emerging adults grew up thinking that Christianity was designed to secure blessings, life disappointments may cause them to discern that faith is an inadequate tool along these lines. If the Christian life was expected to eliminate doubts and to secure a good career, financial success, and a happy family, then failure in these areas may be enough to indicate that Jesus "didn't work." If Christian friends or spouses or leaders fail them, they may convince themselves that Christianity's promises ring hollow and that they instead better seek their own path to true happiness, healing, and fulfillment. Expectations formed earlier in life obviously set the stage for such disappointment, but it is often in emerging adulthood that the supposed pragmatic benefits of Christianity may unravel, leading to disillusionment and detachment from the faith.

Finally, when linked with the "deistic" aspect of this faith, Moralistic Thera-peutic Deism removes the sense of a personal God with whom one is related in the process of spiritual formation. If God is simply an absentee landlord over the universe without active involvement in people's lives, spiritual for-mation becomes nothing more than a personal project of self-improvement, lacking both the relational connection to God and the divine empowerment of the Holy Spirit in the process. More likely, Christianity becomes a religion concerned chiefly with obedience to biblical principles that can be used to carve out a better life. Obedience to biblical principles is obviously a good thing, but it can also be done without a personal, relational connection with the living God. If we possess the advice manual for how to live a good life, spiritual formation is simply a matter of adherence to the principles rather than genuine transformation. In the name of Christianity, we fall into the same pattern as the Pharisees, to whom Jesus stated clearly: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39–40).

It is important to recognize that the faith exemplified in the lives of emerg-ing adults is not merely an imposed mutation of the Christian faith result-ing from external, life stage, or generational challenges. Instead, as Kenda Creasy Dean has indicated, emerging adults are in many ways a reflection of the recent perspectives and priorities of our churches.[70] In our attempt to remain relevant and to compete with broader cultural forms, we have often neglected the hard work of teaching, shepherding, and mentoring students in the context of true Christian discipleship, serving instead as purveyors of cheap grace, the cult of niceness, and a God (butler?) who exists merely to meet felt needs. As Smith has insightfully suggested, the Moralistic Therapeu-tic Deism of emerging adulthood in many ways demonstrates the "cultural triumph of liberal Protestantism."[71] The core doctrinal values of Protestant liberalism—democratic sensitivies, the centrality of ethical action, pluralistic tolerance, a distant God, and resistance to rigid theological conviction—de-scribe well the key features of contemporary emerging adult faith even among self-described conservatives. Because these ideals have become so much a part of the American cultural and religious mainstream, they are readily imbibed into emerging adults' Christian framework.

At the same time, conservative Protestantism can also be implicated in forg-ing aspects of this tepid religious vision. Embedded in the broader American cultural context, the evangelical emphasis on personal faith, removed from the dictates of confessional authority, can evolve into the autonomous sub-jectivism of emerging adult faith. Emphases on piety and holiness—with an

attendant lack of theological rigor—can be reduced to moralism that sees faith as important only in its pragmatic influence on life conduct. The therapeutic mind-set has certainly been strong within evangelical and charismatic contexts as well, placing firm emphasis on God's blessings in both this world and the next. While conservatives may see Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as an enemy, it is all too often an enemy that is nurtured "within the camp." In the end, we must at least entertain the idea that this anemic version of Christianity is arising not only because the din of the world has dulled emerging adults' hearing but also because they have been listening so well to the diluted faith we profess.

In addition, conservative Protestant emerging adults may fail to pursue spiritual formation because of the historical trajectory of the faith. As Jeffrey Greenman suggests, the strengths of evangelicalism can also serve as spiritual formation "weaknesses" if they are not carefully tethered to the fullness of the faith. Evangelical biblicism, while extremely helpful in maintaining a solid foundation of faith and practice, can also lead to an inappropriate rationalism or a false denigration of traditional spiritual practices. Evangelical crucicentrism (cross-centeredness), while anchoring us helpfully to the message of the gospel, can become skewed if it leads to antinomianism (a sense that grace frees us from moral law) or neglects the Holy Spirit's role in transformation. Evangelical activism, while providing a tremendous push in the direction of service and mission, may blind us to the need for contemplative practices such as prayer, solitude, and silence.[72] While these indeed represent what Smith terms "cultural mutations" of evangelicalism, they are easily identifiable patterns in many congregations, schools, and ministries around the country.[73]

Finally, evangelical soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) can fail to generate incentives toward spiritual formation. Many emerging adults may feel that their spiritual health is ensured simply by virtue of having "accepted Christ" and prayed a prayer for salvation and the forgiveness of sins. As Dallas Willard has suggested, however, when all of the emphasis is placed on a single "decision" for Christ, some may not even see the need for formation as long as the heavenly account has been settled. The language of salvation therefore loses its natural connection to the language of sanctification and spiritual formation. The truth of justification, Willard notes, must always be accompanied by the joint reality of spiritual regeneration, the reality that the soul has been renewed and reborn.[74] In other words, not only has the soul been saved but a new kind of life has also been birthed within the individual, a life "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3) that is to be developed and nurtured. As those who "participate in the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4), that life is designed to develop and grow, from glory to glory. We must find ways to help emerging adults

connect their concepts of salvation and spiritual formation, of justification and sanctification, and of grace for salvation and grace for transformation. Spiritual formation is not an optional add-on to salvation for advanced saints but a logical consequence of the reborn soul that has found its true home.

The combination of the cultural, age-based, and theological challenges mentioned here makes it clear that emerging adulthood represents challenging soil in which to plant. As in the parable of the sower, some seed will fall along the path because emerging adulthood is not envisioned as an appropriate time of life to engage spiritual issues. Some will be choked out by the lure of wealth and the distracting cares of this world, so new and overwhelming at this time of life. And some will also remain shallow, the fruit of a tepid form of "nice" Christianity that cannot withstand life's hardships and persecution. In many ways, this context has produced exactly what C. S. Lewis described in the quotation opening this chapter, the attempt "to keep personal happiness as our great aim in life, and yet at the same time be 'good.'" True Christian spiritual formation is quite literally impossible in such a context. We must develop a posture of formation that attends to both the external challenges posed by cultural shifts and the internal theological challenges posed by false gospels and the imposter religion of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. In the end, we must help emerging adults catch a vision for true spiritual maturation, one that is rooted in the gospel and penetrates to the depths of the heart, rather than mere external observance. As Lewis reminds us, change must go "deeper than the surface." To produce a spiritual crop, the emerging adults in our midst "must be ploughed up and re-sown."[75]