Jolene Erlacher & Katy White

# Mobilizing Gen Z

William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

## Challenges and Opportunities for the Global Age of Missions

*Mobilizing Gen Z: Challenges and Opportunities for the Global Age of Missions*

© 2022 by Jolene Erlacher and Katy White. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission from the publisher, except brief quotations used in connection with reviews in magazines or newspapers. For permission, email permissions@wclbooks.com. For corrections, email editor@wclbooks.com.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from the *ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®)*, Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from The Message, copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress, represented by Tyndale House Publishers. All rights reserved.

Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA | www.frontierventures.org

Cover: Mike Riester
Interior Designers: Mike Riester and ProjectLuz.com

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-314-6 (paperback)
978-1-64508-316-0 (epub)

Printed Worldwide

26 25 24 23 22 1 2 3 4 5 IN

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022942260

William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

# 1 Cultural Shifts

In 1985, my (Jolene's) parents moved us from our family farm in the Midwest to language school in McAllen, Texas. One year later we moved to Mexico to begin our life as missionaries. Growing up as a missionary kid in the 1980s and 1990s, I experienced missions in a very different cultural and global context than what exists today. The worldview and perspectives of those going to serve as missionaries today, primarily Millennials (b. 1980–95) and members of Generation Z (b. 1996–2010), are often quite different from those of Baby Boomers (b. 1946–64) and Gen Xers (b. 1965–79), the generational cohorts that were the focus of mobilization efforts several decades ago. The concerns and priorities of individuals, churches, and agencies partnering with and sending missionaries today are evolving and adapting to new cultural realities in America and the West. Furthermore, the global context into which global missionaries are going to serve has changed dramatically over the past twenty to thirty years, with profound implications for mobilization efforts.

As we consider the challenges and opportunities that exist as we mobilize Gen Zers, it is critical that we understand the cultural climate that is informing their worldviews and capabilities. We will begin this chapter with a brief overview of some of the major cultural shifts that have impacted America, as well as many other parts of the world, in recent decades. These shifts are bringing to light new concerns, perspectives, and priorities regarding global missions that we must effectively navigate as we mobilize Generation Z.

## Postmodernism

Much has been written and discussed regarding postmodernism and its impact on our culture over the past several decades. Nonetheless, it is valuable to begin with a brief review as we consider the context in which young people today have been raised and educated. Our cultural climate, influenced by postmodern claims, has had a significant impact on the values and perspectives of Generation Z.


William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

In 1993, management consultant and author, Peter Drucker, wrote,

> Every few hundred years in Western history, there occurs a sharp transformation. Within a few short decades, society—its worldview, its basic values, its social and political structures, its arts, its key institutions—rearranges itself. Fifty years later there is a new world. And the people born then cannot even imagine the world in which their own parents were born. We are currently living through such a transformation.[1]

In his 2001 book *The End of the World … As We Know It*, Chuck Smith Jr. reiterates this reality, describing the culture quake occurring in America:

> We are living on a cultural fault line between two epochal periods. Under our lives huge sociological plates have met and created the disturbances we have felt in our everyday lives and culture. These two periods are the modern era and the postmodern era, and we are living in the transitional stage as the former gives way to the latter.[2]

The shift from the modern era to the postmodern era represents the cultural quake we have been experiencing. So, what exactly is postmodernism? Since entire books have been written in an attempt to answer this question, we will not discuss the topic fully here. However, we do want to summarize some of the key ideas that specifically impact young people and inform some of their concerns regarding global missions.

As its name indicates, the postmodern era follows the modern era, rejecting and challenging many of modernity's premises. The ideas of postmodernism have been around for over a century. Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher in the late 1800s who has been called the "patron saint of postmodern philosophy," said, "What, then, is truth … in short a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically."[3] At its foundation, postmodernism rejects the modern premise that there is absolute truth which can be known through science, reason, and broad cultural metanarratives or stories that legitimize truth claims.

In the 1960s and 1970s, postmodern thought began to move out of philosophy and academia into broad sectors of society, including primary, secondary, and postsecondary education, instigating profound changes in our culture. It is a "culture quake" that is still sending tremors and seeking to collapse deep societal values and beliefs. Researchers Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay explain:

1 Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*, 1.

2 Smith, *End of the World*, 12.

3 Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism*, 91.


William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

> A fundamental change in human thought took place in the 1960s. … It revolutionized social philosophy and perhaps social everything. … This revolution has … had profound implications for how we interact with the world and with one another.[4]

Many Millennials and members of Generation Z are "postmodern natives," having been raised and educated in a culture promoting the emerging postmodern values and views.

Pluckrose and Lindsay explain that postmodernism evolved in the 1990s into what they call "applied postmodernism," emerging as critical theories and driving the culture wars of the late 2010s. These emerging theories seek to deconstruct modern hierarchies and metanarratives, or ways of knowing and understanding the world, and assert truth claims regarding power, language, and oppression. Young people, finding themselves in this cultural climate, often approach missions with deep questions and concerns about the perspectives, approaches, and attitudes that informed global missions efforts in the modern era.

In 2015, political strategist Doug Sosnik wrote,

> The country is going through the most significant period of change since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Across the United States, we are seeing a convergence of economic, technical and demographic forces that is transforming every aspect of our lives."[5]

Sosnik reiterates what others have said—that "Years from now we are going to look back at this period of time and see it as a 'hinge' moment … a connection point that ties two historical periods in time, one before and one afterwards."[6] As we navigate this "hinge" moment in our culture, the implications for missions mobilization are significant.

## Polarization

In this moment of cultural upheaval, where truth claims are being questioned and asserted by competing voices, we are experiencing a deep polarization in our society. As values and views vie for power and place in the new cultural landscape, stakes seem high and emotions dominate. As individuals and "tribes," or groups within society, we often feel as though our truth claims, the metanarratives upon which we have based our lives and pursued meaning, are under attack. As a result, we ardently cling to and defend them.

4 Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 21.

5 Sosnik, "America's Hinge Moment."

6 Sosnik.



William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

In his book *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt explains how good people, with similar intentions, can be so divided. He explains that emotions, or intuition, reacts and responds, then tries to find reason to support its response. We make moral judgments, justifying that our intuition is correct. Our moral reasoning is not always focused on reconstructing the actual reasons why we ourselves came to a judgment; but rather, we reason to find the best possible arguments for why somebody else ought to join us in our judgment. Haidt indicates that "we make our first judgments rapidly, and we are dreadful at seeking out evidence that might disconfirm those initial judgments."[7]

> "If you want to encourage people's thinking, you have to first engage their intuition, passion, and emotions."

Haidt offers encouragement that can be helpful in this volatile context for those of us seeking to engage a new generation of missionaries and together discern how God is leading us in a new season. He explains, "Friends can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves: they can challenge us, giving us reasons and arguments that sometimes trigger new intuitions, thereby making it possible for us to change our minds."[8]

Haidt indicates that we cannot change people's perspectives by utterly refuting their arguments. If you want to encourage people's thinking, you have to first engage their intuition, passion, and emotions. This process can occur as we coach, mentor, and lead others relationally. In part 3 of this book, we will look in depth at how relationships and coaching help Gen Zers to discern what is true and to find ways to engage effectively in God's global work.

### Tolerance

Another result of the recent cultural shift is the rise of moral relativism, or the view that right and wrong are subject to a person's individual choice. Author and speaker Jonathan Morrow says, "Moral relativism hasn't just crept into the worldview of Gen Z, it is now the majority opinion."[9] In this context where views on truth and morality are relative, tolerance has emerged as one of the highest moral values in our culture, especially for younger generations.

*Tolerance* is often defined differently now than it was in the past. Whereas it once meant seeking to understand and respect others, even if we disagreed

7 Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 55.

8 Haidt, 55.

9 Morrow, "Gen Z Volume 2 Launch Experience."



William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

with them, today it requires individuals to accept, affirm, and even celebrate all views as equal and valid. Morrow defines this as "false tolerance," which views tolerance as agreement, as opposed to "true tolerance," which views all people as equal, but not all ideas and behaviors as equal.

The prevalence of "false tolerance" can create tension for young people today as they develop their personal beliefs and convictions. They are hesitant to embrace or voice beliefs that might contradict someone else's opinion or point of view for fear of being seen as "intolerant." Social media and "false tolerance" have given rise to a powerful form of public shaming today, often referred to as "cancel culture" or "call-out culture."

While public shaming is not a new method of reinforcing cultural norms or moral values, this newest form is extremely powerful given its visibility and reach. Cambridge Dictionary defines cancel culture as "a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you."[10]

Young people today are hesitant to say or do anything that could get them "cancelled," thus impacting their ability to engage with others. This influences their views on evangelism and missions. Barna reports that half of practicing Millennial Christians (47%) "agree at least somewhat that it is wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith." The report goes on to explain that while "Gen Z teens were not included in this study, their thoroughly post-Christian posture will likely amplify this stance toward evangelism."[11] Despite their hesitations regarding evangelism, Barna reports that the majority of young practicing Christians "believe that part of their faith means being a witness about Jesus … and that the best thing that could ever happen to someone is for them to know Jesus."[12]

What it means to share one's faith or be a witness may look different for young believers today than it did in the past. Gen Z intuitively understands the tension that exists as they seek to maintain relationships that allow them to influence and engage with others in a context that promotes moral relativism, "false tolerance," and a cancel culture. They need godly wisdom as they seek to discern what reaching their world with the truth of God looks like both locally and globally.

10 Cambridge Dictionary, "Cancel Culture."

11 Barna, "Almost Half of Practicing Christian Millennials."

12 Barna.



William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.

Thank you for reading this preview.
To purchase a copy of this book, visit:

**https://missionbooks.org/products/mobilizing-gen-z**

William Carey Publishing. Copyrighted content.