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FROM THE MIND OF A MILLENNIAL: HOW DID WE GET HERE, AND HOW DO WE MAKE IT BETTER?

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Millennials are a unique generation, largely caught between adolescence and adulthood. They are a generation that has grown up in changing times. Public opinion has changed drastically from year to year on a variety of subjects, and the Millennials have had a front seat for all of it. The Millennial generation is characterized largely as disenfranchised, having lived through a period of recession and constant war in the Middle East. They are a difficult generation to reach, as they largely spurn the religion of their parents and grandparents as antiquated. Pew Research did a study on religion in America and found that the percentage of people believing in God and claiming an affiliation with any religion has decreased, and they attribute most of the decrease to the Millennial generation.¹ This calls for a new strategy in apologetics. To understand what is needed to reach Millennials, we must understand the world in which they live.

While part of the group is entering college for the first time and recognizing a new level of independence, the older segment of the generation is leaving college and reeling from loss of independence, as jobs prove scarce, and many move back home. Millennials also find themselves caught between the sins of the fathers and the sins of the present. The leftover ideals of the '70s have found new life in the Millennials and have surged into a movement not even Timothy Leary could have foreseen — even without the LSD. Millennials find themselves out in a world where sexuality is no longer a question of discovery but a statement of self. The “establishment” their parents once resisted has become their weapon of choice. Instead of the battle cry being centered on keeping the government out of our lives, the cry is now for the government to regulate those with whom they disagree. The majority of these disagreements revolve

around religious issues. Millennials are being told there are two groups of people: those who are progressive and accept the changing moral standards and those who do not. To go against these new standards by saying abortion and same-sex marriage are wrong is to be misogynistic and homophobic. Christianity is now the *counterculture* in a culture where that title no longer carries a badge of honor.

Academic Antagonism. Being a Millennial myself, I can testify to the challenges of growing up in today's culture. As I entered college, I was warned by many well-meaning people that college would challenge my faith. Being the eternal optimist, I believed that my genuine thirst for knowledge and education would be enough to shield me from hardship. What I found in college was a different world. Every aspect of this world is designed to question the existence of God. The culture no longer hides its contempt for Christianity; it is open season on those with faith. It is a foregone conclusion in most academic circles that the intelligent among students will be those who do not espouse Christianity. College classes become a delicate balancing act between academic regurgitation and not betraying the faith that one holds so close.

Relational Rapport. Everyone's experience at college is different, and, to some extent, I put myself in positions to be questioned. Had I been going to college only to be accepted by my peers, I would not have chosen political science as my major. This is not to discourage anyone from going to college. This balancing act is not limited to college; in the world outside the Ivy League, you find the same hostility and prejudice. Speaking out against such norms as same-sex marriage and abortion can find you ostracized from coworkers and neighbors.

Whether we are in a college classroom, the diner down the street, or a windowless cubicle, our mission remains the same. Our goals are to reach the lost and hopeless with the love of Christ. That mission was never more real for me than when I was at college. Each day was another example of the hopelessness of life without Christ; my heart broke for my classmates who tried to fill the void with career ambitions, meaningless sex, and late nights of alcohol-induced escapism they could not remember. It was a depth of heartbreak I had not previously experienced. It was heartbreak that I knew the cure to, but found myself fumbling to administer it.

I do not think I am alone in this. Millennials are fighting a war they are often ill equipped to fight. We are told by the apostle Paul to put on the "full armor of God"² and by the apostle Peter to "always be ready to give a defense,"³ and these are still necessary instructions. The strategy for doing this, however, needs to change as the environment changes. We are in open conflict and have come late to the battlefield. The

church has become synonymous with racism, misogyny, bigotry, and ignorance. In short, we are losing the culture war.

Salt and Light. Reaching Millennials is a complex proposition. My experience with my peers was full of contradictions. My lost friends were both curious about the world and yet closed off to any serious discussion of Christianity. While superficial discussions over sushi were fine for a short period, deeper discussions were sidestepped quickly for safer topics. Stopping people on street corners and handing out pamphlets was met with similar distaste. In short, my experiences with my peers have led me to believe that direct confrontation often leads to a dead end. The most productive conversations I have had with my peers are through observation and questioning. These are the types of conversations that arise through their comments such as, “You are a Christian with homosexual friends?” “You don’t drink?” and “Why don’t you and your boyfriend just move in together?” When they come on their own terms, curious about the difference they see in me as compared to the rest of the world, then we can have deeper conversations.

Witnessing through day-to-day activity is difficult; it requires a level of dedication that takes us beyond our comfort zone. The burden is on Christians to be in the Bible, prayer, and church actively so they are constantly growing in their Christian walk. There is almost no way to predict what questions you will be asked. While there is nothing inherently wrong with admitting you don’t know and need to do research before fully answering their question, it is helpful to be able to be in the conversation right there and then while they are still curious. Once the curiosity wanes, it is more difficult to have the conversation. Studying the Word of God is essential not only to being the difference in the world but also to providing a defense of that difference.

I have not always been prepared for these conversations for one reason or another. To my shame, sometimes it is because I have not been diligent in studying why I believe what I believe. Because of my political science degree, I am comfortable discussing politics, philosophy, and social issues. I fall short when it comes to matters of science. It is a hard area for me to comprehend, but that does not mean I should ignore it. While evolution widely is presumed to be true, it is still a topic of discussion between Christians and non-Christians. Though it is a challenge for me, understanding the arguments on both sides helps me relate better to those with whom I wish to witness.

However, even after all this preparation and after numerous discussions, it is not abnormal for Millennials still to be adverse to the idea of going to church. When inviting my friends to church, even on days that there was free food available, I was often met with discomfort. A lot of excuses were given: not having nice enough clothes,

being struck by lightning upon entrance, not wanting to get up early on a Sunday. Here small groups and in-home Bible studies can play an invaluable role in the next step of witnessing. Smaller Bible studies can provide solid Bible teaching without some of the stigma, right or wrong, that can go with church services. In these groups, nonbelievers can find a place where they connect and grow friendships with other Christians and ask questions about the Christian faith. It was a much easier sell to say, “Come with me to my Bible Study group on Thursday night. We have dinner together, do a quick Bible study afterward, then hang out.” Once a comfort level has been established with the small group, it is then a bit easier to get them into church.

Sowing Seeds. While it may seem like reaching the Millennials is an impossible task, it is helpful to remember that we do not actually save anyone. Believers share in the task of sowing and watering seeds, but it is Christ who brings in the harvest. It is easy to get discouraged when looking at the world and our current culture; it is sad to see a generation that is full of anger and disillusionment. Yet through this mess, God still reigns. As we make efforts (at times, clumsy ones) to reach the Millennial generation, God promises to use us. I may be slow to change and slow to learn, but God still uses my efforts to help those around me. It is a huge weight off my shoulders to know that my job is to be faithful in spreading His Word, and through God’s sovereign power, He changes hearts.

We need to pray for Christianity as those faithful followers seek to put new practices into place to reach this generation. We need to pray for the Christian Millennials, who find themselves in a war with far-reaching consequences. Our struggle is to be salt and light in a world actively trying to mold us into being like everyone else. Arm yourself with the teachings of Christ; root yourself in a body of believers. This war cannot be won by a cursory knowledge of our faith, nor without the faithful backing of a Christian church. There are challenges ahead, but with God, all things are indeed possible. —*Brittany Bland*

Brittany Bland recently graduated from California Polytechnic with a BA in political science. She is currently working on a career path to educate church laypersons about how the political system works.

NOTES

- 1 "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," Pew Research Center, November 3, 2015.
- 2 Eph. 6:10–18. All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.
- 3 1 Pet. 3:15.