

# Drop the Labels!

## *The New Generation's Plea*

D. WESLEY HAIN



SOME REFER TO THEM IN generational terms—such as Generation X or Millennials. Others follow the popular phrase of “young adults” and restrict their usage there. Whether it’s bulletins in our church pews, the posters hanging on the bulletin boards, or even the resolutions on the General Synod floor, our dominant language encourages us to choose labels to describe the younger folks in our midsts. But are these labels assisting us in our ministries with/to/by/for people in these age ranges? Or is our ever increasing postmodern society—and church—bringing us to new understandings?

Generation X is approximately those individuals born between 1965 and 1980 (ages 23–39). Millennials are those born between 1981 and 2000 (ages 3–22).<sup>1</sup> Both groups were formed in the postmodern world. Both groups are extremely diverse—ethnically and culturally. And both are weary of our current labeling processes, which continue to be based on our modernistic understandings. While postmodern folks believe in multiple and simultaneous realities, modernity adheres to the notion of universals. While post-modernity allows for multiple self-identities and journeys, the modern model appears to follow the assumption that all people follow along singular, predictable stages of development.

Consider the mindset of Gen Xers. The cohort now known as Generation X were first called “Slackers” and “Whiners”—obviously negative descriptors placed upon a misunderstood group of preteens and teenagers. Later they were called “Baby Busters”—a phrase born of Baby Boomer conceit. More recently the phrase “Generation X” appeared with an “X” accurately signifying the inherent variance within this new postmodern generation. They were without generalizations. They were just an “X.” But the damage apparently couldn’t be—and perhaps never can be—undone. Generation X, while apparent-

ly the phrase most accepted by this generation, remains to cause some Gen Xers to clench painfully as it continues to conjure up images of those people who were “slackers” concerned solely about their next high or “whiners” depicted in movies such as *Reality Bites*. Even for those who avoided the early impressions of what they were *supposed* to look and sound like, the label is resisted. Why? Simply put, they hate being labeled by us. They primarily consider themselves part of the human family, not black or white; sexual, not gay, straight, or bi; political, not Republican or Democrat; and spiritual, not Christian, Buddhist, Reformed Jewish, or United Church of Christ. “Don’t try to label me” remains a popular sentiment among this generation. Ironically it is remarks just like this one that serve as a good indicator that a given person belongs to this generation.

Millennials appear to be following suit. Like Generation X, they too were defined in reference to their predecessors—first being called Generation Y—and they also resisted the connotations that they were simply an extension of those who came before them. Nothing can be further from the truth. According to Strauss and Howe, authors of numerous books concerning American generations:

[Millennials] are striking out in new and distinctly un-X-like directions. In recent years, nearly every youth indicator has taken a strikingly positive turn. The old youth angst, cynicism, and alienation are all giving way to a new confidence about the future and a new trust in parents and authorities. Rates of youth crime, school violence, teen pregnancy, suicide, and the worst forms of substance abuse are all heading down, while measures of teen optimism, achievement, and sense of peer solidarity are all heading up.<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of these differences, however, Generation X and Millennials are akin in their postmodern understandings and both are filled with the diverse realities postmodernity offers. Whether Millennialists will accept a solitary label to describe their versatility remains to be seen. The prospect, it appears, would be unlikely.

What about “young adults”? That’s a good label, right?

Young adults is a phrase reflective of the church’s long-standing model that categorizes the body of Christ into predictable and consistent units. It belongs to a system beginning with age-reflective categories that we’ve all seen and heard for years: children, youth, young adults, and adults. A beckoning question, however, is how effective is this system in our new postmodern world?

Consider the assumptions based on this model. First, its logical—and modern-based—pattern incorrectly suggests that generations are still developing along predictable and consistent measures. Children mature into what we consider all youth to look and act like. Our youth will one day look and act like our current young adults. And young adults are maturing towards our understandings of what adulthood should depict. Second, it risks patronizing usage and/or interpretation. Try telling a 35-year-old—who came from a divorced home, was a latchkey kid who helped to raise his/her siblings, who now works a professional job, is married or partnered, and has his/her own children in high school—that s/he is *still* a “younger” version of adults. In their mind, they are already adults and the other nonchurch-related institutions are affirming their “adulthood.” Why would they listen to a church telling them they are not quite adult but a “young” version of adult?

Finally, this model that begins in age-defined categories takes an even stranger turn when one eventually reaches adulthood. When we reach adulthood we then find ourselves being invited into categories divided along the lines of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Materials for adult men and women remain educational staples. What gender are you? You go to this Sunday school class! Sexual minorities continue to be discussions more often than persons, with only certain

bodies being designated “Open and Affirming” spaces. You’re gay? Here’s the church for you! National teams or local churches can be developed along ethnic lines. These are odd messages to send to our postmodern sisters and brothers and ones that need to be reconsidered! These individuals spend their

entire “childhood, youth, and young adulthood” believing they are part of one human family with equally respectable and appreciated differences. Then BOOM! For the first time in their lives they are expected to pick a group. But it’s “safe space,” we declare. “Who said we ever thought things were dangerous?” would seem to be a frequent reply. While Gen X and Millennialists are carefully considering the Christian faith over other equally valid faiths, our churches are still trying to divide them further into what they appear to consider arbitrary categories. If you’re this age, this gender, this color, or

this sexual orientation, you go in here! It’s a system based on modern categorizing and I fear its failing us as we reach out to people under age 40.

So what can we do? How can we appropriately and respectfully minister to/with/by/for these individuals? Start with a realities check. Not a “reality” check but a “realities” check. What happened between the Baby Boomers and Generation X wasn’t simply another developing body of people coming into our world and its understandings. By the 1970s the world’s reality changed. No! Not simply changed or evolved, but shifted! Modernity strongly shifted into postmodernity and we all begin to fathom this brave new world. Unlike the recognition of mere generational differences within a given worldview, a paradigm shift requires a remarkably different approach in ministering, worshipping, and educating. Consider, for example, the last time we experienced a paradigm shift: the medieval era shifted into the age of reason and enlightenment over 250 years ago and thus sparked what we now call modernity. Reflect for a moment on how long ago that was, how different the world was in the medieval era versus the age of reason, and how many changes have occurred in our collective lives since the beginning of modernity. We’re not dealing

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with just younger versions of Baby Boomers, the GI Generation, or the Silent Generation here. These folks are different—strikingly different—and our modern-based models and programs are losing effectiveness. Something completely new is happening and its reshaping our whole idea of what church is. According to Robert Webber, author of *Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship* and *Ancient-Future Faith*.

The modern world view of the enlightenment is crumbling, and a new world view is beginning to take shape. Christian leaders are again facing changing cultural patterns. Some will insist on preserving the Christian faith in its modern form; others will run headlong into sweeping changes that accommodate postmodern forms; a third group will cautiously seek to bring the framework of unchanging Christian truths into the dawning of a new era.<sup>3</sup>

All courses are valid in their own right. All are ways forward in some fashion. One certainty remains, however. There's no turning back history. We've entered a new place and time and the ever-growing

body of our members (those born after 1964) are about to break free from our categorizing systems. What happens now depends on all of us. We need to be intergenerational thinkers working together as believers in the faith while we strive to recognize just how diverse our most basic understandings and assumptions are between the age groups. It's a huge shift for an institution often known for careful approaches toward even minor changes. But, for the church to survive, new understandings must be reached and new discussions need to occur. In the meantime, build some bridges with folks of all ages and seek to make healthy and faithful transitions in our churches. Seize our immediate future as we embrace our rich history that brings us to this juncture. And please try to drop the labels . . . we don't need them anymore.

1. You can find a +/- difference regarding these dates. Most stay within a range of five years on either end or both ends.
2. Neil Howe and William Strauss, "Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation." *Q&As from Howe and Strauss*, Life Course Associates. June 20, 2003. <<http://www.millennialsrising.com/qa.shtml>>
3. Robert Webber, "Paradigm Thinking," *Worship Leader Articles*, Institute for Worship Studies. June 19, 2003. <<http://www.instituteforworshipstudies.org/Resources/Articles/Paradigm%20Thinking.htm>>



For more information, order:

- *The Generation Driven Church: Evangelizing Boomers, Busters, and Millennials* by William Benke and Le Etta Benke
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D. Wesley Hain (aka Duane W. Romberger) is 35 years old and a 2002 graduate of Lancaster Theological Seminary. He has spent two years researching Generation X and leading workshops at local and national levels on Generation X and postmodern ministry. He currently lives in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, and can be reached at [dwromber@comcast.net](mailto:dwromber@comcast.net).

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