

Articles

Candy Machine God, or, Going to Church without Going to Church: Millennials and the Future of the Christian Faith

Chad Lakies

Abstract: In this article, I try to give background to some of the sociological data that describes the relationship between Millennials and the church. Since the modern American religious context has for some time been described as therapeutic, I explore this to help explain recent work which characterizes Millennials as embodying and desiring this form of religion. The result is that the problem lies not so much with Millennials but the church itself. From there, I try briefly to suggest how the church became merely therapeutic and what the church might do to recover faithfulness.

I Am One of Them

I am one of them. By all rights, I should still be “out there” and not “in here.” But somehow I managed to get in here and I still cannot quite explain “why” other than to credit all things to God—as it should be. I’m a Millennial. I’m a Christian. I go to church every Sunday. In fact, I’ve even started a church. And after that, I started a collective for young adults within the confines of a very large church. And now I’m writing from my office as a professor of theology at a private Christian university. I’ve worked with Millennials now for more than a decade. And I still don’t know what I’m doing. I still can’t quite explain how I got here.

But I know where I am. I am in the midst of a church that is desperate to reach others like me. This is a colossal challenge that the church faces. And I know that as a writer, my audience is full of people looking for the magic answer. I don’t have it. I hope, however, that what I will say is helpful. But what I promise is that I will indeed complicate the issue before I offer anything helpful. I need my readers to “see” the present situation concerning Millennials with different eyes. I am someone who was on the outside but is now on the inside reflecting back on the outside trying

Chad Lakies is Assistant Professor of Theology at Concordia University in Portland, OR. He stumbled into starting a church in midtown St. Louis that came to be known as CRAVE, a ministry that also operates a coffeeshop by the same name. Later on he co-founded a collective for young adults called theOpen within the confines of a much larger congregation—Concordia Lutheran Church in Kirkwood, MO. Chad plays drums, love reading, and has recently become a father. He and his wife Bethany live with their daughter Anabel in Vancouver, WA.

to help others look at their situation with a sensitivity that is honest about where we stand and about what the future might really hold. There are no slick strategies here; perhaps only a painfully candid account of our present condition with some constructive thoughts of how to move forward with the help of God.

Millennials and the Church: Where Are We?

There are two ways that we can talk about the relationship between Millennials and the church. One is simple; the other is more complicated. On the one hand, we can simply say that Millennials are simply *not* in the church. They have left. They have abandoned the church. It seems the church has lost them. David Kinnaman's work in *You Lost Me* suggests the problem lies with the church and its failure to make disciples.¹ But the descriptions he gives for those who have left the church perhaps betrays that disciple making is probably not quite the whole of the problem.² Nevertheless, Kinnaman offers various reasons Millennials feel the church has lost a connection with them: they feel the church is repressive, anti-science, shallow, and closed off to those who might have doubts and questions.³ Dan Kimball has similarly characterized Millennials in *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, noting reasons that echo Kinnaman's as well as additional ones for why Millennials are not participating in the life of the church.⁴

On the other hand, however, there are plenty of Millennials still in the church—well, sort of. Aside from those who faithfully go every Sunday (perhaps they deserve an article since they might be an anomaly) there are those who are in church every now and again getting some form of religion. But their relationship with the church has already been conceived of provocatively as tenuous.

In a landmark longitudinal investigation which probed the religious life, attitudes, and practices of American young people, Christian Smith, the lead researcher behind the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR) has produced three substantial volumes that tell us a great deal about the spiritual lives of young Americans.⁵ His first volume, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, gave us a stark and surprising look at the shape of their faith.⁶ Through interviews and critical reflection, Smith derived what he saw as a new kind of faith emerging in their lives. This new faith saw God as distant but benevolent. Ultimately, God was interested in helping humanity but he was not busy interfering with things. God was understood to be there when we needed Him, ready to help whenever we called upon Him. This distant God reflected a kind of deistic faith.

Furthermore, in this new faith, the goal of life was to be happy. Happiness was attained by following the rules, being a good person (keeping the peace, being amiable and kind, not judging others, perhaps helping others out occasionally), and not getting in trouble or being a bad person. This kind of rule-following structure exhibited a familiar moralism present within American culture.

And one further notion emerged as characteristic of this new way of faith of American young people. Since the goal of life is happiness, God is called upon when there is trouble or a need. In such moments, God is required to intervene. God is expected to meet our needs and take care of us. The idea of the therapeutic enters in at this juncture concerning just what God is for. And thus religion takes on a character that is rather utilitarian or instrumental. Smith went on to call this new faith

of modern American teenagers “moralistic therapeutic deism.”⁷ Describing this new faith, Smith writes, “what appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.”⁸ Moralism, then, is the assumed means for attaining the happiness that is life’s goal—being a good person, it is believed, has positive consequences.

Smith’s work ought to be rather disturbing for those in the church who are concerned with engaging Millennials. Already the faith of Millennials, at least for those who are connected with the church—even if only marginally—looks like something other than the biblical faith. Yet Smith adds a twist to the issue that demands our close attention. Smith goes on to observe the new faith that America’s young people are now practicing is actually being handed down by their parents. “Our religiously conventional adolescents seem to be merely absorbing and reflecting religiously what the adult world is routinely modeling for and inculcating in its youth.”⁹ This is a remarkable point. Smith implies that the faith of America’s adults is nothing other than moralistic therapeutic deism.¹⁰ How else could it be the tradition that is now being inculcated into America’s youth? However, that is just what he and his research partners were told by those they interviewed: what they believed came from their parents. “The vast majority of the teenagers we interviewed, of whatever religion, said very plainly that they simply believe what they were raised to believe; they are merely following in their family’s footsteps and that is perfectly fine with them.”¹¹

How then do we account for the fact that the faith of those in American churches is supposed to be “Christian,” yet Smith is arguing that it is somehow not Christian at all, but rather moralistic therapeutic deism? A closer look reveals Smith’s argument is more nuanced than that, as one might expect from a sociologist. He argues that we ought to understand moralistic therapeutic deism as “parasitic” upon the more substantial faith traditions we find in American religion. Thus, we will find Christian moralistic therapeutic deists, Jewish moralistic therapeutic deists, Mormon moralistic therapeutic deists, and even nonreligious moralistic therapeutic deists.¹² This helps us understand at least how moralistic therapeutic deism is sustained but not much regarding where it comes from. I will say more about this below. For now, I want to press further regarding the consequences of what this means for how we think about the relationship of Millennials and the church.

If moralistic therapeutic deism is being sustained by the more established religious traditions in American—and one must include here, as Smith does, Christianity—then as a phenomenon, this situation ought to be quite unsettling. As reflective practitioners, we ought to ask some questions about ourselves and our own ministries—in fact, it should cause us to ask questions about the church itself. For it seems that moralistic therapeutic deism can be understood to be utilizing the tradition of Christianity passed down in and by the practices of the church to perpetuate itself instead. If this is the case, are we unwittingly aiding and abetting the invasion of this parasitic new faith within American culture? Kenda Creasy Dean, one of the researchers involved in the NSYR sharply articulates the issue for us. Based on the evidence from the NSYR, she is able to conclude that American young

people indeed have a faith and that, contrary to what seems to be popular opinion, they do not have much of a problem with faith or the church. “We have successfully convinced teenagers,” she writes, “that religious participation is important for moral formation and making nice people, which may explain why American adolescents harbor no ill will toward religion.”¹³ This may seem all well and good. Young people are in church. Is that not where we want them? But Dean raises a further point, causing us to reflect on just what difference it makes that they are in church. Following from Smith’s point that moralistic therapeutic deism is parasitic on traditional religions and thus can be said to be “supplanting Christianity as the dominant religion in American churches.”¹⁴ Dean recognizes that we face a paradox. “For most of the twentieth century,” she notes, “we studied the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents in order to answer the question, ‘How can we keep young people in church?’ Today, our question is more pressing: ‘Does the church *matter*?’”¹⁵ We might frame this point differently by asking, “Are our young people, when they show up to church, actually coming to ‘church’ at all?” Smith and Dean paint a picture of a church that reveals a church that no longer looks like the church. Dean goes on to frame the issue more concretely.

The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people focused primarily on “folks like us”—which, of course, begs the question of whether we are really the church at all.¹⁶

Millennials and the Church: How Did We Get Here?

If Dean’s indictment is not depressing enough, the reader will not be glad to know that the church has been accused of embodying a ministry of mere therapy for some time now. But it gets worse—it was foreseen that the church would become a merely therapeutic institution as early as the middle of the twentieth century. With such forethought, one might think the church could have done something to stop it. And yet here we are. Let us explore how we arrived here and some of the critiques of the church as a therapeutic institution.¹⁷

A prophetic voice came to us through the late sociologist Philip Rieff in the mid-1960s proclaiming that the future of religion would not be one of decline as many “secularization” thinkers had supposed. Rather, it would be a future in which religion would take on a different form. Far from fading away into a pure secularity, Rieff predicted religion would more and more take on the character of therapy. It was only a matter of time, Rieff posited, for the age was already ripe for the emergence of religion as therapy.¹⁸

Assuming the disenchanting worldview of the fact/value distinction¹⁹ and its governing social stratification of a public and private realm, Rieff pointed up two characters who iconically represented those two realms: the bureaucrat and the therapist, respectively.²⁰ The bureaucrat is that engineer of processes, as well as persons, who stands under the authority of some bureaucratically organized sociality and who is responsible for using his skills to produce what the bureaucracy demands. The public lives of all individuals, Rieff suggests, are characterized by their

participation in some form, either under the authority or in the role of, a bureaucrat. With this life comes the demands and pressures on everyone to fit in, meet a quota, and measure up. In order to cope with such demands and pressures of life in the public realm, there is the therapist, whose realm is the private. The therapist is the one to help us overcome our sense of guilt and failure, to release us from the pressures and demands of the public realm by helping us to see that such demands are illusory, thus leaving no reason for guilt or sense of failure. The therapist is to make us all feel better again, to breathe a sigh of relief, to strengthen us—if only temporarily—to face our public responsibilities again.²¹

Rieff's final conclusion about how the church should respond to this change in the social landscape is what hits home for us. "What, then, should churchmen do?" Rieff asks. It seems the answer is quite clear: "[B]ecome, avowedly, therapists, administrating a therapeutic institution—under the justificatory mandate that Jesus himself was the first therapeutic."²²

Following Rieff, contemporary sociologists of religion, as well as theologians, have characterized American religion, and Christianity in particular, as characteristically therapeutic. In the year after Rieff's bombshell was published, the classic work by the eminent sociologist of religion Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, was released. Berger further cemented the perception that religion had become therapeutic, saying that in order for religion to be considered "relevant" to individual lives (as a matter of religion's maintaining a plausibility structure), it must be acknowledged as useful. Thus, he argued,

the religious institutions have accommodated themselves to the moral and therapeutic "needs" of the individual in his private life. This manifests itself in the prominence given to private problems in the activity and promotion of contemporary religious institutions—the emphasis on family and neighborhood as well as on the psychological "needs" of the private individual.²³

In the late twentieth century, as the spiritual marketplace expanded at a frenzied pace, Wade Clark Roof also observed this same sort of instrumental approach to religion. "[W]hat was once accepted simply as latent benefits of religion, for example, personal happiness and spiritual well-being," Roof tells us, "we now look upon more as manifest and, therefore, to be sought after and judged on the basis of what they do for us."²⁴

One might say that Protestant Christianity has been guilty of this sort of therapeutic religion for more than a century. In his account of the rise of pietism, D. G. Hart concentrates on how Protestant Christians fashioned the faith to serve practical concerns. "Even since the First Great Awakening, in fact, American Protestants had been eagerly downplaying the mysterious and ceremonial aspects of Christian devotion in order to make the gospel relevant to individuals, families, and society."²⁵ In part, Hart is giving us a history lesson, telling us something about how churches were winning adherents after disestablishment and also about the rise of the historically "interesting" mainline and evangelical distinction which has defined so much of American religious history for much of the last half of the twentieth century. His effort is not so much to trace how Protestantism became therapeutic. Yet his work does give us some insights. Since he is investigating what he calls "the lost

soul of American Protestantism,” which he identifies in the rise of pietism through the movement of revivalism into the rootedness of pietism in both mainline liberalism *and* conservative evangelicalism, Hart’s argument makes a substantial point about just how extensive the influence of pietism and its effects are within American Christianity, even into the present. And those effects are of interest when tracing the therapeutic. For example, reflecting on the influence of Billy Sunday and those like him, Hart notes, “the overriding importance of figures like Billy Sunday and his forebears was to make Christianity so practical that any hint of religion’s irrelevance was proof at best of its inferiority, if not a sign of infidelity.” Hart continues, “Protestantism had rid itself of most of Christianity’s theoretical obstacles to be the practical solution to the everyday problems of average Americans.”²⁶ Sunday and his forebears were the beginnings of mainline Christianity. Evangelicalism was equally interested in practical concerns Hart tells us.²⁷ While their focus and application of these concerns went in a different direction²⁸, the door was open to the immanent frame in which theology was set to work and within which a therapeutic application of the Gospel would be made, heard, and embodied.

L. Gregory Jones takes notice of this lack of an eschatological perspective, which renders the life of the church and its message as concerned with only the here-and-now. He is critical of the great weakness this brings to the church’s proclamation, making the church susceptible to the invading cancer that is the therapeutic culture in which the church finds itself—one concerned only with finding ways to cope, “get through” life, be happy, get along amiably, live peacefully, etc. Without an eschatological perspective, the church’s immune system to a therapeutic perspective which subversively creeps in from the outside, the church will unwittingly adopt such a message and begin to proclaim it as its own, supplanting the Gospel with worldly therapy, just as Rieff predicted. And in fact, Jones says, this is exactly what has happened. Thus Jones writes of the psychological captivity of the church.²⁹ Describing this captivity he observes, “Protestant liberals evacuated the gospel of eschatological content, deprived it of its ability to interrogate us, and transmuted it into (at most) banal truisms such as ‘God loves you.’”³⁰ But we should not reserve this critique for liberals alone, lest conservatives think they are safe. Let Jones’s analysis be an equal-opportunity criticism. Consider the regular Lutheran proclamation heard in sermons or in the liturgical rite of Absolution. In order to communicate forgiveness, it is thought sufficient to offer this truism: “It’s okay. Jesus died for your sins.” With the church trafficking in such banalities, no longer is the word of God able to confront us. It is just used to make us feel better. And thus the imagination of hearers is shaped to understand that God is just the kind of God who only wants our happiness, our well-being, our flourishing—and, of course, the way that those concepts are defined is just the way we would define them as moralistic therapeutic deists, or better put, Americans.

The result of this psychological captivity, Jones tells us, shows up clearly in a description of American religion in a 1993 *Time Magazine* article: “Some of today’s most influential religious leaders are no longer theologians but therapists.” Jones proceeds to highlight how this is visible in the church.

Such a diagnosis is stunningly accurate. Even so, the therapeutic shaping of the church in the United States is both more pervasive and more pernicious

than we have wanted to admit. The church's captivity to therapy is not just a reflection of the influence of James Dobson or of M. Scott Peck or of any version of the self-help/codependent/twelve-step recovery programs. Our deeper problem is that psychological language and practices have become more powerful than the language and practices of the gospel, not only in the culture but within the church. As a result, we have translated and reduced the gospel into psychological categories. Such reduction has altered it to be captive to psychology and psychological accounts of God, the world, and the nature and purpose of human life.³¹

It is one thing to critique the church as therapeutic however. It is another to show concretely how this is taking shape in the church's life.

In a confession that ought to be imitated by many of us church leaders, the preacher and homiletician John W. Wright wonders why his own preaching does not seem to be connecting with his hearers. After all, his only intention was, like most preachers, to preach faithfully. What Wright quickly came to realize was that his hearers' ears and imaginations had been tuned to perceive, desire, and expect something else from him than what he was delivering. Formed in the crucible of American religion—the immanent and practical sort which we have been describing—his hearers had learned to desire a particular kind of religion when they went to church: therapy.³²

The key idea for Wright—and this should apply to the rest of us—is that he *believed* he was delivering the goods, proclaiming the grace and forgiveness of God. And indeed, many of us believe we are delivering the goods, while unwittingly we are captive to the very therapeutic culture within which our churches and our congregations exist. We're captive to finding ways to make the Gospel message relevant to the lives of hearers in various manners—preaching and otherwise. If we were to examine delivery of the message and its packaging (think context, that is, the worship service), these are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of revealing our captivity in this regard. But the consequences are monumental. Wright describes our social context as providing something of an imperative for preaching in a manner that is therapeutic (which our other church practices simply support), thus resulting in a sense of obligation or a response to “demand.”³³ Wright thus describes therapeutic preaching—a practice that embodies therapeutic religion in general—as comedic. Comedies, as we all know, are stories that everyone likes. They are feel-good narratives meant to evoke humor and release in the soul. For Wright, comedic preaching has a task. It is meant to ensure “relevance by translating the biblical text into the [interpretive] horizon, convictions and experiences that each member possesses.” Wright continues,

The end result is to provide a biblically based answer to the questions and needs that an individual brings into the sanctuary/auditorium through fusing the biblical text into the experience of the hearer...Preaching to fuse the horizon of the text within the horizon of the hearers addresses tensions that already exist in life but works through them. The tension-release allows people to feel challenged from the fact that the tension was addressed, but confident that it can be surmounted. The sermon successfully seals the text as an answer to the question that already exists in the horizon of the hearer.

Hearers come away energized, fed from the preached Word, soothed and ready to come back again next Sunday to consume more of the product that the Scriptures have to offer...[T]he comedic hermeneutic of preaching leads to believers who share the identical convictions of the society but possess a value-added dimension—Jesus in one’s heart or a personal relationship with God or some other life-enriching experience that helps one to exist as a member of the society as it is.³⁴

Therapeutic preaching, the best exhibit of the church’s captivity to and embodiment of therapeutic culture that we noted above, is being fostered in Millennials by the church itself. In fact, it is practices like these that cause reflective practitioners like Kenda Creasy Dean to ask confrontational questions that wonder if the church is even the church anymore, or if, in light of its therapeutic (or psychological) captivity, it is something else.

Wright is helpful for reiterating just how the church came to be the kind of institution that it is, fostering the kind of people that it makes. “American Christianity has provided a resource for the development of such a therapeutic homiletical rhetoric. The Puritans built their regular sermon around the covenant of grace, in which an individual moves from a negative state (sin) to a positive state (salvation) by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.” He observes further,

This narrative can undergo simple modification without disturbing its fundamental structure. All that needs to be done is to translate the terms of these states into contemporary therapeutic language. The negative state (sin) can easily become individual feelings of alienation, and the positive state (salvation) translates easily into an expressivist language of self-fulfillment. Rather than grace as the forgiveness of sin, God’s grace becomes God’s empowering presence in a personal relationship that helps individuals overcome the experiences of disquiet that come from living in the culture.³⁵

The language of forgiveness of sins, which constitutes much of the content of preaching, is still very present in the church. It is indeed theologically appropriate and orthodox language. And yet this very language still plays the part that Wright is pointing out in his argument—that the biblical message is meant to help satisfy the personal needs of those who come to church. Preaching to forgive sins then really amounts to preaching a soteriology of self-fulfillment. The gospel becomes a message that is meant to help hearers cope with the stresses of their life, to offer strength in hard times, to help them feel better about their lot in life. This is, in the end, the message that Millennials are receiving from the church. No wonder they imagine God to be what Peter Steinke calls a “giant Prozac or sweetener” or a “candy machine God” in the sky who is only interested in helping us, making us feel better, and ensuring our happiness.³⁶ For that is, in fact, what we in the church have taught them.

Millennials and the Church: Passing on a Therapeutic Faith

But how exactly can we say that the church has effectively taught this to Millennials? Granted, we have already construed American culture as therapeutic. Furthermore, we have already noted, following Christian Smith that moralistic therapeutic deism is “parasitic,” unable to survive on its own, and so it leeches life

off of established religious traditions like Christianity. Yet, it *is* passed on via these traditions. How does this *passing on* work? One word: liturgy.

In order to account for the formation of Millennials (and their parents, since Millennials learned much of their faith from their parents, both inside and outside the church), it is important to account for that passing on in terms of liturgy. Liturgy, however, has normally been reserved for an understanding of social rites that are strictly “religious.” However, in what follows, I will use the term more broadly in order to account for the formation of Millennials both inside and outside of the church to show how the “tradition” of the therapeutic is passed on.

To do this, I borrow from the insightful and creative work of James K. A. Smith. He has helpfully and suggestively broadened the use of the term “liturgy” to account for formative phenomena in the secular sphere. But let me start at the beginning of his argument.

Smith wants to us to pay greater attention to the *formative* aspects of liturgy. He does this for numerous reasons. First, he wants to point out that in many spheres of our lives we are engaged in activities that we would most likely describe as informative or educational (like going to school) but that he would argue also inevitably have a formative aspect to them.³⁷ Furthermore, Smith will argue that these formative aspects are primary. While we are indeed being *informed*, there is a great deal more *formation* happening.³⁸ So if you’re attending a college that is known to be a “degree mill,” you’re not only getting *information*, but also a certain kind of *formation* such that your participation in the life of the institution is shaping you to embody certain values oriented around a market economy driven by movements of production and consumption.

To get at this sense of how *formation* is happening more often than we realize, Smith proposes an anthropology that conceives of human beings as *homo liturgicus*. That is, human beings are liturgical animals.³⁹ What Smith means by this is not something that is radically new. Rather, he is merely drawing on the wisdom of the church to remember that we are creatures of habit, desire, and love. We are formed through means, rituals, rites, ceremonies.

For Smith, it is important to understand human beings as being oriented by a kind of ultimate love. Another way of saying this is to describe human beings as, in a way, fundamentally religious. Everyone has a god. Our ultimate love (or god) is “that to which we are fundamentally oriented, what ultimately governs our vision of the good life, what shapes and molds our being-in-the-world—in other words, what we desire above all else, the ultimate desire that shapes and positions and makes sense of all our penultimate desires and actions.”⁴⁰ There is a story involved here that sets out for us what we should construe as the good life. And in our world, there is a plurality of competing stories in this regard. For the purposes of this paper, the primary story we are taking note of is that of moralistic therapeutic deism for Millennials, which construes the “good life” as being happy, living at peace, getting along amiably, and so on. This story is, of course, in competition with the story of the biblical narrative, which construes things differently.

Smith pushes further, pointing out that stories that set forth a vision of the good life become operative in us by creating dispositions and motivating actions. These emerge as efforts to reach that desired end.⁴¹ Most of this simply happens

automatically, as a matter of our biology. Smith points this out by recognizing research in the cognitive and neurological sciences, but also notes that these findings are only corroborating what has been known by the church and philosophers for millennia.⁴² In other words, it is simply normal for us actively to pursue visions of the good life. Exercise might be an example. But shopping might be another. And the more we do this, the more these actions become ingrained in us as dispositions to the extent that we are habituated toward certain ends rather than others. We are aimed and directed in the world in certain ways rather than others. Our imaginations and perceptions of the world—that is, how we see things and the way we *think about* the world—are contingent upon the liturgies within which we participate. For the liturgies in which we participate are always upheld by a community—another way of saying that community is “institution.” The community embodies a tradition in its life through practices that carry its story, through which is known the “good life.”⁴³ One might think specifically here of the church as just the sort of community to which Smith is referring, and that would be correct. He is using the term “liturgy” after all.

But a central notion in Smith’s argument is that we should take notice that the church is *not* the only place where such activities take place. Rather, Smith argues, they are taking place all around us. Or rather, *we are engaged in them always, already*. And thus, we are constantly being formed. As liturgical creatures we are being habituated into certain ways of being-in-the-world. One example would be, for our purposes, a therapeutic way of being-in-the-world.

Liturgies, for Smith, shape us because all liturgies are constellations of rituals and practices that are meant to aim us toward some ultimate end or *telos*.⁴⁴ They operate according to a story. And as humans participate in them, that story becomes implicit in their lives. It functions as something other than what we think *about*, but more like what we think *with*. It gives us an identity and orients our living and doing. Thus, as we noted above regarding the church’s captivity to therapeutic culture and specifically the felt obligation of a preacher to address felt needs, we see an example of how the story that is implicit in the therapeutic is operative in the embodied practices of the church without the church being explicitly aware of it. The preacher *believes* he is delivering the goods. The preacher *desires* to preach faithfully. Simultaneously, the preacher *feels* obligated to preach a sermon that will speak directly to the felt needs of his hearers and bring people back next week. This felt obligation is the implicit story of the therapeutic at work in the life of the church due to the effects of the “secular” liturgy of therapy at work in the world outside the church. To the extent that all us of who participate in the life of the church also live and breathe in the world, we have comingled the two worlds and unwittingly the “secular” liturgy has infected the “sacred.”⁴⁵

Thus, the therapeutic has become parasitic on the sacred liturgy of the church and by means of the church’s practice is passed down and perpetuated. Millennials who confess that they have received their faith of moralistic therapeutic deism from their parents are indeed telling the truth, for the church embodies that faith within its own life. The example of preaching above provides a strong example of how this is the case.

Millennials and the Church: What to Do

In the years that I have been working with college students and young adults, I have heard older adults say regularly that they are confused about why there is a great deal of current attention given to the “problem” of Millennials and their circumstances. Some ask me when Millennials are going to grow up and just join with the rest of the church in “grown-up” worship. Other older adults simply think that there is something wrong with young people altogether and that any problems they seem to have—with the church or otherwise—cannot be blamed on anyone but them and them alone.⁴⁶ Each of these instances denotes the vast discontinuity between Millennials and those who have come before them. Millennials are difficult to understand, and yet the issues that they face, like the ones I am trying to raise here in terms of their relationship with the church—while complicated and, indeed, indicting the church at large—are not beyond our grasp. I am thankful for some who are trying to show older adults that Millennials are worth our time and concern.⁴⁷ Neither should we simply dismiss them and their problems, assuming that they are just going to grow up and join us (clearly we should now be aware that something is wrong with “us” too!); nor should we assume that their problems are somehow only their fault and leave them to handle things on their own. If we do that, they might simply be looking for help from the candy machine god.

Nevertheless, I see hope in my work with Millennials. At the same time, I harbor some trepidation about the future of the church. Let me express that hope and trepidation in the form of a few questions to try to pique your imagination, and then suggest some ways we might foster better ministry in, with, and amongst them.

What if Millennials intuitively sense that the church is just another therapeutic institution, thus leading them to wonder what difference the church makes over and against the plethora of other similar institutions that presumably do therapy better? Why should they feel that they need to go to church? What if Millennials intuitively sense the discontinuity between the story we think we—as the church—are telling and the story they know we are *actually* telling (that is, the therapeutic story)? What if, for the Millennials who still find themselves in church, we are fostering in them the therapeutic faith that I have been describing here without knowing it? What if all that I have said is true and we are terribly afraid to admit it? And if it’s true, what do we do?

I mentioned in the first section that Kinnaman suggests the church’s inability successfully to connect with and maintain a connection with Millennials has to do with a problem in its ability to make disciples. But he suggests in his first chapter that there is something more to this issue. He alludes to relationships, and I think he is right. Particularly important, he notes, are intergenerational relationships. This should not come as a surprise. The church really does not have a problem making disciples at all, however. It is making faithful disciples. It is just not making the kind of disciples it wants to make. This is the issue we have been dealing with throughout most of this article. The church has been making disciples of moralistic therapeutic deism. *But it wants to make faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.* And in some sense, the church really does not have a problem with intergenerational relationships, at least to the extent that moralistic therapeutic deist disciples are being

made. That is, in fact, what Millennials seem to say has happened. They confess that they received their faith from their parents, the *older* generation.

So it seems that what necessarily needs to happen is a recovery of faithfulness that permeates the entire body of Christ. And it must work like a leaven within the whole loaf. Such is the effect of moralistic therapeutic deism; so must be the effect of the true and faithful teachings and proclamation of the biblical narrative. To the extent that such a recovery of faithfulness can happen, intergenerational relationships will be rightly ordered to the extent that they pass on the tradition of the church and engender its life in those who are younger.

Here are some brief suggestions. I have explained the problem, which is big enough and was necessary for us to “see” in order to grasp the full depth and breadth of our situation. The point was to show that we are not just trying to understand some set of features of “what it’s like” to be a Millennial so that we can cast our ministry endeavors and packaging in a way that would attract them. That would only be to play into another form of cultural captivity, and we have clearly shown that we have a big enough problem on our hands that there is no need to add another.

First, in order to recover the biblical narrative, we must resist the image of Christ as the quintessential “nice guy” and “buddy” and “friend.” Rather, drawing from the richness of our own Reformation tradition and the narrative of Scripture itself, we must allow once again the Word of God in Christ and the proclamation of Him in its various means to confront us. It is not a means of making us feel better. God does not particularly care whether or not we are “happy.” Luther captures it best when describing the kind of effect that the word of God ought to regularly have upon us: “[I]n reality, the Word of God comes, when it comes, in opposition to our thinking and wishing. It does not let our thinking prevail, even in what is most sacred to us, but it destroys and uproots and scatters everything.”⁴⁸

What this will do is allow us to move forward operating with a counter-narrative in play that orients us toward “goods” that will instill within us different dispositions. Let me say this another way. In the liturgy of the Christian church, a great deal of formative work is *supposed* to be happening that aims us toward the life that God desires for us. This life is not oriented around our own needs and happiness; rather, it is oriented toward our neighbor, as God in His care for humanity reaches down through us to enact the work of Christ in the body of Christ, the church—that is, *us*. And so, in and through the church, God is caring for creation, and our works are put to work for the service of neighbor and care for creation. But what is *actually* happening, as we have observed, is that we are being shaped according to the parasitic narrative of the therapeutic, in part, perhaps, because the members of the church who participate in its liturgies are utterly unaware what the meaning of those liturgies ought to be. Toward what should they actually aim us? How is the narrative communicated? Is it communicated at all? Or has the church become so concerned with getting the cognitive-propositionalist aspects of our confessional and doctrinal positions correct that we have lost touch with the narrative that our liturgical practices (even the didactic ones) are supposed to engender in us?

We are supposed to be made a particular kind of people. And, in fact, that is happening. But again, we are not being made the *right* kind of people. If for example, your congregation does not know what the *nunc dimittis* is, this is a

catechetical problem that is to be laid at the feet of pastors. For this liturgical element is utterly narrative in nature—as is the *Te Deum*.⁴⁹ As is the entire liturgy itself! Yet if this narrative is not living, if it is not somehow apparent, if there is just a *blind* going through the motions (for sometimes going through the motions is good—think habituation), then the effect is up for grabs. If you're not telling the story, your liturgy is probably *doing something else*. Context is necessary. And it is up to the shepherd to actually be doing the shepherding in this regard. We are storytellers. So tell the story. Provide the counter-narrative. Narrate your people through the story. Take advantage of your captive audience when God gathers His people for worship and uses your voice to proclaim His story over them to make them His people. Be clear about what you are up to as a people. For it is the community's collective story that gives the church its unique identity. And it is that story that God works in His people through His chosen liturgical means—which His people passively suffer⁵⁰—that they come to embody collectively in the world as a way of being in contradistinction to the therapeutic narrative which we have critiqued above.

Second, regarding intergenerational relationships, it is important to encourage and foster these at every level. As a Millennial myself, I wish I had more of these. Strangely, on the one hand, I have found myself in too many relationships where older adults—particularly Christian leaders (pastors even)—are asking *me* for direction. While in a certain way I feel privileged to be listened to, the relationships have not been the sort where I am simply consulted, but leaned upon, burdened even, by an adult leader who carries a responsibility of leadership in the church but is not personally equipped to fulfill the role in which he or she is serving. This makes me feel awkwardly out of place as I serve alongside those whom I consider to be veterans in the church. On the other hand, my wife and I certainly feel blessed in the relationships that we have with younger people where we enjoy mentoring them, embodying for them a vision of what a life of service in the kingdom might look like and helping them to imagine what their own future might be. On the one hand, I certainly feel *called* to serve where I am with young adults and college students. But I am really unsure if there is anyone in my life that I could call a true mentor, someone to whom I am apprenticed, someone who has selflessly invested in me as a young person. At one time, I had this, to be sure. I would not be who I am without the influence of some very key people. Their investment in my life is invaluable and I thank God for them. Nevertheless, my current experience seems somewhat out of order. And it often seems the same for the young people I serve.

Intergenerational relationships are lacking. David Kinnaman notes this as he brings *You Lost Me* to a close.⁵¹ Richard Dunn and Jana Sundene have written a remarkably helpful text that offers good, practical advice on what being a mentor to a young adult looks like.⁵² Indeed, intergenerational discipleship is necessary. How else can we foster a way of being-in-the-world where *faithful* Christian discipleship can be demonstrated, embodied, set forth as the “good life,” and fostered in the lives of younger Christians such that they, at later points in their own lives, might also pass it on to younger Christians? This is the only way we can perpetuate a healthy and faithful Christian faith for the future, especially in a world that threatens to constantly compete for our allegiance.

Third, do not—and I cannot say this strongly enough within our culture of fast food drive-throughs and instant gratification—DO NOT expect to see much fruit from your labor any time soon. You might see glimpses here and there. But understand that the story I told above about how we arrived in our present state was not a story about a phenomenon that took place overnight. It was a cultural shift that we can look back upon and perhaps understand with some sense of clarity today, but it crept up upon us and it happened over a period of generations. As James Davison Hunter has noted, cultural change is a slow accretion.⁵³ What is inevitable for all of us as we serve God in seeking to reach all people with the Gospel, including Millennials, is that we remain faithful, regardless of whether or not we see some kind of “evidence” of “success.” In the case of the kind of faithfulness we have been discussing, a faithfulness which will indeed entail confrontation because it entails a counter-narrative to the therapeutic, we may very well experience the opposite of what we have envisioned as success—a vision by which we have been captivated. Rather, we must ultimately be prepared for people to turn away. And just as the faithful disciples of Jesus were instructed to do, in such times we do best to move on to those who will hear. What we ought to do is envision an eschatologically oriented sense of success that will be measured according to a logic of faithfulness to the biblical narrative and the ecclesial practices that foster the Christian life and nurture it in a scope as broadly understood as spanning the formative moments that run between cradle and grave.

Conclusion

I have tried here to offer a perspective on the relationship between Millennials and the church that I have not found in my own reading in the literature. I have also tried to expand the vision of what reflective practitioners are exposed to in the literature on Millennials. There is not much help for getting a grasp on how the church and Millennials have come to have such a complicated and tenuous relationship. But then again, there is not much of an indication that the church itself is in trouble, except for the hints offered by those who have worked with the National Study on Youth and Religion. Still, the hints are only hints. I have also tried to provide the background to give teeth to some of their suggestive statements. Furthermore, I have tried to construe the phenomenological means by which we are formed to be the kinds of religious people studies like the NSYR say we are, and how we perpetuate those problems into later generations. Following from all of this, I have tried to offer some ameliorative suggestions for how the church might learn from all this how to move forward in its relationship with Millennials (and with anyone). It is my desire never simply to be critical, but also constructive. I have tried in this final section, however briefly, to be that.

Endnotes

¹ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 28–31.

² For example, in the section where he discusses the gaps in disciple-making, he names “relationships” as one of those gaps. See Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 28–29. I will suggest later on that relationships might be the central issue. And without the connections that are necessarily derived from relationships, the formative energies by which disciple making happens will never take hold.

³ See Part II of *You Lost Me*. Unsurprisingly, this view from *inside* the church resonates from the view offered by those *outside* the church which Kinnaman captures in his previous work, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

⁴ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

⁵ The three which emerged from the NSYR include: Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005); Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2009); and Christian Smith, et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011). The first two volumes are most congenial to our concerns here.

While this research focused on the lives of American teenagers, those teenagers are now today's young adults. Even though this paper is focused on Millennials and generally is concerned with young adults when using that term, sociologically, we should not be opposed to considering these teenagers of the NSYR as a part of what we mean when we think of Millennials. Millennials (or Gen Xers or Gen Yers—whichever you prefer, it seems), as Robert Wuthnow suggests, are the 20- and 30-somethings of our world. See Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2007), 2, 6. Having been conducted (at least the first wave) in 2001–2003, the teenagers of the NSYR are rightly considered Millennials today. And what can be known about them ought to stand for us as representative of a larger population than just teenagers, as the researchers of the NSYR will go on to suggest, and which I explore below.

As I continue, my assumption is that the teenagers who were the focus of the NSYR are still representative of the young adults that are the concern of this paper. The information that emerges about their lives and their faith is thus presently valuable for understanding young adults and their relationship to the Christian faith and the church. The authors of *Souls in Transition* work with the same assumption and their finding are beneficial. See particularly chap. 7 of that volume.

⁶ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 162.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 164. See also Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 148.

⁹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 166.

¹⁰ Indeed, this seems to be one of the implications that has not yet produced much reflection from those within the church. I hope to offer a bit of that below.

¹¹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 120.

¹² *Ibid.*, 166.

¹³ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), 6.

¹⁴ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 171.

¹⁵ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 9. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷ I transition here to focus more strictly on the “therapeutic” as a problem in the church in general.

Indeed, this is a larger problem from which a phenomenon like moralistic therapeutic deism can gain some social traction. While moralistic therapeutic deism was noted by Smith and his researchers to be a problem amongst American young people, they also note that as those individuals get older there *may* be some dilution of moralistic therapeutic deism. Yet it is not clear what is replacing it. See Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 155–56. Nevertheless, as my argument proceeds, we will see that the presence of a distinctly therapeutic church still remains, thus fostering a faith which might not quite be moralistic therapeutic deism, but a faith which is essentially therapeutic nevertheless.

¹⁸ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (1966, repr., Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006).

¹⁹ The late missiologist Lesslie Newbigin helpfully pictures for us the consequences of the fact/value distinction: “First, it created the dichotomy between ‘fact’ and ‘value’ which underlines the division of our society into a public world of facts which we know and a private world of values in which some people are free to believe. Cultural anthropologists, looking at our ‘modern’ culture and comparing it with other human cultures, tell us that this public/private dichotomy is unique to our culture. Its heart is the separation of ‘facts’ which are true for everyone and form the substance of public truth which every child is expected to understand and accept as a condition for living in society, and a private world of personally

chosen values. In this society, therefore, there is no logical possibility of moving from a factual statement ‘this is the case’ to a value judgment ‘this is good.’ For if purpose is rejected as a category of explanation, this gap must be unbridgeable, for we do not know whether a thing is good or bad unless we know the purpose for which it exists. It may be good for one purpose but bad for others. ‘Good’ and ‘bad’ can only be expressions of personal opinion.” Lesslie Newbigin, “The Bible: Good News for Secularised People,” (lecture, Europe/Middle East Bible Societies Regional Conference, Eisenach, Germany, April 1991), www.newbigin.net/assets/pdf/91bgn.pdf (accessed September 28, 2011).

²⁰ Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, xxvii–xxviii.

²¹ Others make use of these same characters. See also Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1985); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1984). The character of the bureaucrat is changed in these authors, who prefer to use the term “manager.”

²² Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 215.

²³ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967; repr. New York: Anchor, 1969), 147.

²⁴ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1999), 78.

²⁵ D. G. Hart, *The Lost Soul of American Protestantism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸ It is well known that one of the distinguishing differences between mainline Christianity and evangelicalism is in their application of the Gospel. Mainliners in general aligned with the Social Gospel. Evangelicals in general aligned with a personal application exhibited in a “born again” Christianity.

²⁹ L. Gregory Jones, “The Psychological Captivity of the Church in the United States,” in *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neo-Paganism*, ed. Karl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 97–112. See also, Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 35–69.

³⁰ Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness*, 65.

³¹ Jones, “The Psychological Captivity of the Church in the United States,” 97–98.

³² John W. Wright, *Telling God’s Story: Narrative Preaching for Christian Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007), 9–12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 128–31. Wright refers to the division between the public and private realms that I mentioned above, noting the disjunctions and discontinuities these produce within the individual. He is following the work of Robert Bellah and Alasdair MacIntyre (see footnote 21). In the end, he traces the same story of the apparent necessity of religion becoming a therapeutic institution to solve the existential imbalances within individual lives.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 35, 37, 38.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 135–36.

³⁶ Peter L. Steinke, *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010), 16. Steinke writes, “[T]he new god is like a giant Prozac or a sweetener. God will help you improve yourself, give you tips on reducing stress in your life, and offer a Scripture-based set of coping skills with satisfaction guaranteed.

Satisfaction as redemption is what theologian Shirley Guthrie had in mind in his critique of the ‘candy machine God.’ God has become a dispenser of goodies to indulge our appetites, champion our causes, or steady our nerves. But Guthrie believed that the Holy One had more important things to do that spend time doting on our transient happiness. Guthrie announced frankly, the candy machine doesn’t exist.”

³⁷ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2009), 17–19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 56–62.

⁴³ Smith is indeed borrowing from Alasdair MacIntyre here. See his *After Virtue*, 2nd ed.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 86.

⁴⁵ This phenomenon happens passively. The church has become infected from the outside. For example,

drawing from L. Gregory Jones's work in his article, "The Psychological Captivity of the Church," he notes that psychological language has become so circumscribed in its meaningfulness in American culture that we are quite unable to hear words like "help" or "comfort" in ways other than therapeutically. Thus when they are read in church (like in Bible studies, and subsequently people are asked how such texts "make them *feel*") or preached in sermons, inevitably our consciousness has already been attuned to "hear" such terms and interpret them psychologically. Wright's own reflection on the reception of his preaching corroborates this phenomenon. His hearers were expecting to hear a particular kind of sermon, anticipating the delivery of a particular kind of religion.

⁴⁶ Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 11.

⁴⁷ See David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, chap 2; Chuck Bomar, *Worlds Apart: Understanding the Mindset and Values of 18–25 Year Olds* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

⁴⁸ *Luther: Lectures on Romans* (Library of Christian Classics), ed. Wilhelm Pauck (1961: repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 298.

⁴⁹ By making reference to traditional liturgical elements here, I do not count out my readers who might be employing more contemporary or modern elements. However, on all accounts—or better, to be an equal-opportunity critic again—what counts more crucially in all the practices in which the church engages is the contextual connection of those communal practices to the biblical narrative from which they should emerge and into which they should immerse the congregation as participants. If liturgical practices (of whatever sort: traditional, contemporary, modern, etc.) are not doing this, then they are failing at their primary task.

⁵⁰ Luther described the Christian life as a *vita passiva* wherein Christians suffer or undergo God's work. As the distinguished Luther scholar Oswald Bayer puts it, "when Luther says that the Christian life is 'passive' (*vita passiva*) he means that God is the active subject and that the Christian is the object of God's action. The Christian life therefore is *passive* in the sense that it *suffers*, it *undergoes* God's work and so passively receives it." Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 22.

⁵¹ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 202–05.

⁵² Richard R. Dunn and Jana L. Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adult: Life-Giving Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2012).

⁵³ James Davison Hunter, *To Change The World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2010), 33.