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A BIBLICAL CRITIQUE OF JEFFREY ARNETT'S THEORY  
OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Faculty of  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Doctor of Educational Ministry

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by  
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**APPROVAL SHEET**

A BIBLICAL CRITIQUE OF JEFFREY ARNETT'S THEORY  
OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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I dedicate this thesis to my amazing wife, Elizabeth, who has supported me through each and every stage of this process. Without her gracious and sometimes firm encouragement I would never have made it to the end. I pray that this effort will encourage our children to be who God has called them to be rather than what the culture tells them.

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## PREFACE

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has helped form and shape my faith over the last several years. I am blessed to have been able to learn from the many godly professors serving here over the course of my educational journey. Stuart Scott and Russell Moore have had a major influence on how I think about the intersection of life and faith and how the Word of God is sufficient for any situation. My parents have been godly examples and pointed me this direction through prayers and encouragement for years and I am so grateful for their steadfast support even in the darkest of times. This influence, along with my great desire to shape my own children in a way that will give them a foundation in the faith that prepares them for life has continued to drive me forward in finding a way to understand, evaluate and ultimately shape spiritual lives that ground them in God's Word.

Brian Honett

Dayton, Ohio

May 2016

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

J. M. Barrie created a world where adventure and excitement were ever present and parents and responsibility conspicuously absent. Peter Pan is a boy who refuses to grow up and take on the responsibilities of the world. Instead, he lives in Neverland with the lost boys going on all sorts of adventures with Indians and mermaids and facing off against his nemesis Captain Hook. Barrie himself refused to do much growing and was the subject of controversy precisely because the Victorian culture in which he lived was thoroughly confused by a man so obsessed with remaining a boy.<sup>1</sup> Now, however, more than ever, that desire to remain a boy is celebrated. Immature men with boyish behavior are idolized in sitcoms and movies—portrayed as living the good life and avoiding the shackles that marriage and family bring. The number one sitcom for the last several years has been *Two and a Half Men*—the story of a womanizing, drinking man and his sexual exploits. The show *Mike and Molly* portrays a couple in their thirties living at home with their parents for no apparent reason other than the lack of responsible behavior. Everything from commercials to movies, magazines, and television show men in the thick of their adult life longing for the life of their single friends, and show how in small ways those men can regain the ideal that has been lost by their maturing. Beer commercials are almost exclusively aimed at convincing men that one more brew will let them recapture the glory of their younger days. Three of the top ten grossing movies of 2014 were superhero movies which are traditionally targeted at young men: *Captain*

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<sup>1</sup>Anthony Lane, “Lost Boys: Why J.M. Barrie Created Peter Pan,” *New Yorker*, November 22, 2004, accessed April 11, 2103, [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/11/22/041122crat\\_atlarge?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/11/22/041122crat_atlarge?currentPage=all).

*America: The Winter Soldier, X-Men: Days of Future Past, and Transformers: The Age of Extinction.*<sup>2</sup> Another in the top ten was *Ted* where, according to IMDB, "John makes a Christmas miracle happen by bringing his one and only friend to life, his teddy bear. The two grow up together and John must then choose to stay with his girlfriend or keep his friendship with his crude and extremely inappropriate teddy bear, Ted."<sup>3</sup> The movie *The Five Year Engagement* celebrates a couple's dogged avoidance of actually getting married even after they are finally engaged. Some might argue that America, as well as much of the Western world, has become Neverland, a place where boys do not have to grow up and become men, or at least they do not need to do it as soon as their predecessors did. While their adventures may not be with Indians and mermaids and involve battles against Captain Hook, these modern day Peter Pans have virtual adventures through their video game consoles and the internet while battling against their parents and rules and responsibilities.<sup>4</sup>

Many slang names have emerged for this lifestyle: boomerang generation,<sup>5</sup> basement boys,<sup>6</sup> twixters,<sup>7</sup> and emerging adults.<sup>8</sup> Some of these young people have even

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<sup>2</sup>Box Office Mojo, "Total Grosses of all Movies Released 2014," accessed June 11, 2015, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2014>.

<sup>3</sup>*Ted*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1637725/plotsummary>, accessed March 30, 2015. The movie *The Five Year Engagement* celebrates a couple's dogged avoidance of actually getting married, even after they are finally engaged.

<sup>4</sup>Russell Moore, "Fake Love, Fake War: Why Are So Many Men Hooked on Internet Porn & Video Games," accessed April 16, 2013, [www.russellmoore.com/2012/07/23/why-are-so-many-men-hooked-on-internet-porn-video-games](http://www.russellmoore.com/2012/07/23/why-are-so-many-men-hooked-on-internet-porn-video-games).

<sup>5</sup>The boomerang generation has been addressed in a variety of media formats.

<sup>6</sup>Gary Cross, *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 2. He uses this term to describe young men who move back home to live in their parents' basement and mooch off of them.

<sup>7</sup>See the *Time Magazine* cover story from January 24, 2005 by Lev Grossman, "They Just Won't Grow Up," *Time*, January 24, 2005, accessed April 11, 2013, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1018089,00.html>.

<sup>8</sup>Jeffrey Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties," *American Psychologist* (May 2000): 469-80.

been said to be having a “quarterlife crisis.”<sup>9</sup> Michael Kimmel studies how young men in this stage operate and he terms this age Guyland. He argues that it is not an unusual land inhabited by a few strange creatures nor a land of arrested development among slackers but that it has become a fixed demographic.<sup>10</sup> He agrees with Arnett that this has become the norm. He sees it as a kind of suspended animation between boyhood and manhood. It is smack in-between the dependency and lack of autonomy of boyhood and the sacrifice and responsibility of manhood.<sup>11</sup>

The phenomenon of young people not completing the historical markers of adulthood has grabbed headlines,<sup>12</sup> but there is more to the story. Were this simply a cultural fad that quickly burned out<sup>13</sup> the appropriate response of the church would be to simply ignore it and move on. However, the emerging adult movement has not only

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<sup>9</sup>Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties* (New York: Tarcher, 2001). Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, *The Quarterlifer’s Companion: How to Get on the Right Career Path, Control Your Finances and Find the Support Network You Need to Thrive* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishers, 2005). *Quarterlife Crisis* was a *New York Times* best seller and has also led to the development of a companion website [www.quarterlifecrisis.com](http://www.quarterlifecrisis.com) along with the second book. This success has led to additional books following suit in this vein: Christina Hassler, *20 Something Manifesto: Quarter-Lifers Speak out about Who They Are, What They Want, and How to Get it* (New York: New World Library, 2009). Alexandra Robbins, *Conquering your Quarterlife Crisis: Advice from Twenty-Somethings Who have been there and Survived* (New York: Perigree Books, 2004).

<sup>10</sup>Michael Kimmel, *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 6.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>For example, see *Time Magazine*, January 24, 2005 in which emerging adults were the cover story. Other examples include Robin Marantz-Henig, “What is it about 20-somethings: Why are so many people in their 20s taking so long to grow up?” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2010; Simon Rich, “Your New College Graduate: A Parent’s Guide,” *The New Yorker*, May 24, 2010; Sharon Jayson, “Many Emerging Adults are not there Yet,” *The USA Today*, July 29, 2012; Melinda Beck, “Delayed Development: 20-somethings Blame the Brain,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2012.

<sup>13</sup>Several cultural issues have drawn the ire of conservative Christians over the years—including the influence of rock and roll, hair length for men, or even the use of contemporary instruments and music in worship. Conservative Christians have often overreacted to issues like these. However, the other has often been the case as well, such as slavery or abortion, where generally speaking, the Christian community was incredibly slow to act on the clear Word of God.

persisted, it has continually grown.<sup>14</sup> Knowing not only how emerging adults think and the context of their stage of life but how the Bible speaks to them during this life stage is vitally important for parents, the local church and anyone engaged in ministry leading young people ages 18 to 27.

While the legal age of adulthood has effectively not changed over the years, many “adults” move well beyond that age without taking on the roles that have traditionally marked a transition to adulthood.<sup>15</sup> The age of majority has been defined as

the threshold of adulthood in law. It is the chronological moment when a child legally ceases to be considered a minor. After attaining the age of majority, a person assumes control over their persons, actions and decisions. He terminates the legal control and legal responsibilities of parents or guardian. The age of majority is a legally fixed age, concept or statutory principle, which may differ depending on the jurisdiction. The age of majority may not necessarily correspond to actual mental or physical maturity of an individual.

The age of majority across the United States is primarily driven and defined by state law (though each individual is given the right to vote by federal law) and varies slightly. The states predominantly place that age at 18, though two states that place it at 19 and two place the age of majority at 21.<sup>16</sup>

Not only do the states place the legal responsibility for adulthood at

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<sup>14</sup>The term *emerging adulthood* was coined in 1996 and has led to several significant resources including a regular conference. The Sixth Conference on Emerging Adulthood met in Miami October 14-16, 2015. A peer reviewed journal, *Emerging Adulthood*, along with a host of journal articles in a variety of publications: most of these such as the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *The Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, and *The Journal of Youth Studies* have begun to carry more and more articles on the subject. Research studies and polls are cropping up more regularly now related to the interaction of emerging adults and their world. Clark University [http://www.clarku.edu/clarkpoll/pdfs/Clark\\_Poll\\_Peer%20Inst.pdf](http://www.clarku.edu/clarkpoll/pdfs/Clark_Poll_Peer%20Inst.pdf) and Rutgers have been involved in polls and studies of emerging adults. The sexual habits, along with drug and alcohol use have all been studied as they relate to emerging adults. For example see Karen J. Auerbach and Linda Collins, “A Multi-Dimensional Model of Alcohol Use during Emerging Adulthood,” *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 67 (November 2006): 917-25; Jason S. Carroll et al., “Generation XXX: Pornography Use and Acceptance among Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 23 (January 2008): 6-30. No matter what the venue, emerging adulthood has stayed in the forefront of the human development/psychology discussion for almost seventeen years.

<sup>15</sup>US Legal Inc., accessed March 30, 2015, <http://minors.uslegal.com/age-of-majority/>.

<sup>16</sup>United States Comptroller, accessed December 31, 2012, [http://comptroller.defense.gov/fmr/07b/07b\\_appendix\\_h.pdf](http://comptroller.defense.gov/fmr/07b/07b_appendix_h.pdf).

somewhere between 18 and no later than 21, it appears that biblically there is a precedent for this type of expectation. In Leviticus 27:1-7 the valuation of men who are over 20 and under 20 is differentiated. In the first chapter of Numbers, during the census, the men who were 20 and older are counted as a part of the nation. In Numbers 14:29 and 32:11 the curse of death is pronounced on those who would not go in to take possession of the land as the Lord had commanded them. Deuteronomy 1:39 says, “And as for your little ones, who you said would become prey, and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it and possess it.” The penalty for Israel’s rebellion against God was that the adults would not be allowed into the Promised Land, but the little ones whom the Israelites thought they were protecting in their rebellion are excluded from the pronouncement of that judgment. In Deuteronomy 24:16 the Lord makes clear that the children would not be punished for the fathers’ sin, nor the fathers for the children’s sin. Numbers 32:11 says, “Surely none of the men who came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob because they have not wholly followed me.” Together from these and other passages of judgment we see in the Old Testament that the Lord differentiated between children and adults, and it appears that the age at which that distinction was made was twenty years old. When a boy turned 20 he was a man and held to a standard of obedience to the commands of the Lord.

The traditional markers of adulthood such as marriage, children, and owning a home are now coming later in life. Adults are now putting off marriage longer than ever. In 1950 the median age of marriage in the United States was just 20 for women and 22 for men. By 2000 the typical age of marriage for women was 25 and 27 for men and the age for entering parenthood has followed similar patterns.<sup>17</sup> The average ages of both of

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<sup>17</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University, 2004), 4-5.

these have continued to increase and are now at 28.5 for men and 26.9 for women, according to 2010 census data.<sup>18</sup>

### **Factors Leading to Emerging Adulthood**

Why this dramatic rise in the typical ages of entering marriage and parenthood? Arnett believes there are four major shifts that took place through the 1960s and 70s that led to the current developmental stage of emerging adulthood—the technology revolution, the sexual revolution, the youth movement, and the women’s movement.<sup>19</sup>

The first revolution is the sexual revolution that accompanied the invention of the birth control pill, in combination with less stringent standards of sexual morality following the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s meant that young people no longer had to enter marriage in order to have a regular sexual relationship. Currently many young people have a series of sexual relationships before entering marriage, and most Americans do not object to this, as long as sex does not begin at an age that is too early (whatever that is) and as long as the number of partners does not become too many (whatever that is).<sup>20</sup> Even though Americans may not be clear in their own minds about what the precise rules ought to be for young people’s sexual relationships, apparently there is widespread tolerance now for sexual relations between young people in their late teens and 20s, particularly if it occurs within the context of a committed, loving relationship.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>US Decennial Data (1890-2000); American Community Survey 2010, accessed April 4, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/marriage/data/acs/ElliottetalPAA2012figs.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), loc. 269, Kindle.

<sup>20</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 6.

<sup>21</sup>I would certainly agree that there is a widespread tolerance, but it is not acceptable within the framework of a Christian worldview.

The second contributing factor to the creation of emerging adulthood was the technology revolution. The technology revolution is not related to computing power or personal electronic devices, but rather the manufacturing technologies that transformed the American economy. Because of extraordinary and rapid advances in technology, machines were now able to perform the manufacturing jobs that were once the backbone of employment in almost all developed countries.<sup>22</sup> This revolution led to a shift from a manufacturing economy to a service economy that required information and technology skills. The majority of jobs went from making things to using information in service based businesses. Because of the emphasis on information and technology this new service economy requires skills and technical training along with post-secondary education in order to obtain the highest paying jobs.<sup>23</sup>

The increase in the years devoted to pursuing higher education is another important reason for the rise in the typical ages of entering marriage and parenthood. An exceptionally high proportion of young people, about two thirds, now enter college after graduating from high school. This is a higher proportion than ever before in American history. Among those who graduate from college, almost 27 percent go on to graduate school the following year.<sup>24</sup>

The third movement that Arnett sees as a contributing factor of the creation of the period that allows for emerging adulthood is the women's movement. This movement during the 60's and 70's allowed for a wider variety of vocational and educational opportunities for women. They are no longer rushed from their parent's home into marriage, parenting and all that life entails. Before this point few women went

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<sup>22</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, loc. 293-95, Kindle.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Kelsey Sheehy, "10 Colleges that Lead to Grad School," *US News and World Report*, January 2, 2013, accessed April 5, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/the-short-list-college/articles/2013/01/02/10-colleges-that-lead-to-grad-school>

to college or remained single into their twenties. Now the occupations for women are almost limitless and the educational opportunities are as expansive in scope. There is no pressure to get married early and young and the opportunities to explore run late into their twenties.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, the youth movement has contributed to the rise of emerging adulthood. The youth movement denigrated adulthood and exalted staying young. The youth movement led in many ways to a fundamental shift in how young people viewed adulthood. Rather than viewing adulthood as something to be prized, a goal to be achieved, it has become something to be avoided for as long as possible. Most young people will eventually do adult things like getting married, having children, and settling into a career; they see these as things that will inhibit much of their current fun rather than something that will be life enhancing.<sup>26</sup> The shift has become about how the young people feel rather than any cultural norm or external force that can decide for them whether or not they are adults.

An embrace of the contemporary culture of consumerism feeds on stunted human growth and is fixated narrowly on living for today. This behavior is part of a larger cultural trend, not only driven by the youth movement, but a product of many factors including economic challenges and a desire to avoid the mistakes that their parents have made.<sup>27</sup> However, even for the emerging adults that find a way to meet their economic and social obligations and move on to young adulthood, particularly for men, youth is something to be captured and held as long as is possible.<sup>28</sup>

Arnett pinpoints four historical shifts that have made a large contribution to

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<sup>25</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., loc. 309-321, Kindle.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 325-41.

<sup>27</sup>Gary Cross, *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

this extended life stage, but in doing so he leaves out an examination of additional current factors that play a role as well. Tim Elmore addresses these factors.

For Elmore the first cultural shift relates to years of American affluence and social liberation during the 1990s. Even with an economy in flux more than 60 percent of college graduates have the luxury to return home to search their souls and experiment with jobs and relationships while living rent free—the concept that Arnett calls identity exploration in the areas of love and work.<sup>29</sup>

A second factor that is identified is damaging parenting styles that prevent kids from preparing for the real world. As American parents seek to provide the best for their children, protect them from all possible types of harm, and build their children’s self-esteem they leave those same children unprepared for the harsh realities of the world today.<sup>30</sup>

Media and technology are another factor that contributes to the stage of emerging adulthood, yet leaves individuals unprepared for real life. Problems on television can be solved in thirty minutes, people can add and remove friends in a moment on Facebook, and the Internet provides information and entertainment bent to their very will. None of this is like the hard work of interacting with community and individuals face to face on a regular basis.<sup>31</sup>

The higher educational system is another contributing factor. Arnett rightly identifies that the shift from manufacturing to information has created a need for training beyond high school and yet the current college system is flawed and often only prepares students for more education rather than the marketplace. It seems fewer and fewer

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<sup>29</sup>Tim Elmore, *Generation iY: Our Last Chance to Save Their Future* (Atlanta: Poet Gardner Publishers, 2010), 31.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

students are ready to make the jump from college to a regular working world.<sup>32</sup> While Elmore points to the higher educational system as a contributing factor to the problem, Arnett also sees it as a problem, but in a very different way. Arnett feels that it should be compulsory for the public to provide a free tertiary education as a universal entitlement for all people regardless of their resources. In doing so this would provide a safe haven for emerging adults to explore their identity and gain valuable knowledge and skills.<sup>33</sup>

Emerging adults today have been raised in a culture that values convenience more highly than commitment. To expect youth who have grown up valuing speed over quality and quantity over quality to make a transition to a committed adult relationship or a stable career rather than job hopping may be to expect too much.<sup>34</sup>

Some have lamented what has become of the current generation and others have applauded it. Books have been written on how to manage emerging adults<sup>35</sup> (20-somethings) effectively, especially in light of the fact that this generation has grown up with unwavering parental affirmation, participation trophies, and the idea that everything they do is perfect. Managing emerging adults is different than previous generations because of the focus on the self-esteem of this generation. They are less willing to take “unfulfilling” jobs, less willing to accept criticism and far more likely to change jobs than previous generations. All of this presents a unique task for those who are given the responsibilities of leading them. Statistics and popular culture show that the acceptance of this particular behavior has grown regardless of the extent of the academic discussion. A particular growth and acceptance of the self-indulgent behavior of twenty-somethings has taken place over the last almost two decades. In 1996 Jeffrey Arnett began using the

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<sup>32</sup>Elmore, *Generation iY*, 32.

<sup>33</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., loc. 3643, Kindle.

<sup>34</sup>Elmore, *Generation iY*, 33.

<sup>35</sup>Tim Elmore wrote *Generation iY* based in large part on his experience speaking and teaching companies how to effectively manage Generation Y employees.

term *emerging adult* to describe these individuals who he believed were neither adults nor adolescents. Arnett describes the journey that brought him to the creation of the term emerging adult:

The more research I did, the more I talked to people in their twenties, the less satisfied I became with describing their development in terms of the transition to adulthood. Yes, the transition to adulthood takes place during this period, but that term does not begin to cover all that is going on in their lives from the time they leave high school to the time they reach full adulthood. Calling it the “transition to adulthood” seemed to diminish it, as if it were merely a brief passage connecting the two more important periods of adolescence and young adulthood. And it lasts so long, at least from age 18-25 for most people and usually beyond, as long or longer than any stage of childhood or adolescence. Why shouldn’t it be regarded as a distinct period of life in its own right? I looked for existing theories that would provide a framework for understanding the transition to adulthood as a separate developmental period, but could not find anything satisfying.<sup>36</sup>

According to Arnett this stage of emerging adulthood is neither late adolescence nor young adulthood. Emerging adults are too different from their adolescent selves to be lumped together with them, and feel too different from their coming adult selves in order to be associated with them yet. It is a distinct period from what will come in their 30s when most will find themselves with a more enduring job, lasting relationship or marriage and even children. Emerging adulthood is a better description of how they see themselves. The term emerging captures the fluid, unstable and exploratory period of life in which they find themselves.<sup>37</sup> The stage of emerging adulthood is all about how they feel.

For Arnett this phase had become the age of in-between. With the explosion of growth in this category Arnett was searching for a way to categorize and describe these individuals. Over the past fifteen plus years what began as a simple term in a psychological journal has grown to be an accepted stage of development throughout the

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<sup>36</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), vi.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 637.

human development and psychology field.<sup>38</sup> The proposal is that the transition to adulthood should be examined in light of current societal trends, including that of boomerang kids; that the transition to adulthood is no longer concrete, achievable or smooth as it was 50 to 60 years ago.<sup>39</sup>

Christians are only now beginning to engage with this concept. There is limited literature on ministering to Generation Y<sup>40</sup> or emerging generations<sup>41</sup> and little that deals directly with emerging adulthood. While this material is beneficial and necessary it seems to put little focus on a consideration of whether this stage is appropriate and in line with biblical demands of life. It is important to engage in conversation about how to minister to individuals within the emerging adult age range, but also important to consider how to help those within that age range, and the parents of both emerging adults and children prior to emerging adulthood how to avoid embracing the unbiblical portions of this category. To do this requires parents, pastors, and spiritual mentors for emerging adults to carefully understand how Scripture views this stage and

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<sup>38</sup>There have been more than six conferences on Emerging Adulthood with the most recent taking place in Chicago, in October 2013 and October 2015. There is a Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood [www.ssea.org](http://www.ssea.org). Multiple books and journal and newspaper articles have been published on the subject. Sociological and developmental academic studies have been published in peer reviewed journals on Emerging Adults just as they have on children and teenagers. The *Christian Education Journal* has devoted an entire journal issue to Emerging Adults, 8 (Fall 2011) and a journal devoted entirely to the study of emerging adults *Emerging Adulthood* launched in March 2013.

<sup>39</sup>Alicia Victoria Patterson, "Emerging Adulthood as a Unique Stage in Erickson's Psychosocial Development Theory: Incarnation vs. Impudence" (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2012), 1-2.

<sup>40</sup>William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2000). These authors define Millennials as those born between 1982 and 2004. Strauss and Howe are credited with naming Millennials by Bruce Horowitz, "After Gen X, Millennials, what should next Generation be?" *USA Today*, May 4, 2012, accessed April 11, 2013, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/advertising/story/2012-05-03/naming-the-next-generation/54737518/1?loc=interstitialskip>.

<sup>41</sup>For example, see books such as Thom Rainer and Jess Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2011); Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults are Leaving the Faith . . . and How to Bring Them Back* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2010); Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley and Jason Hayes, *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches that Reach Them* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2009) just to name a few.

how to carefully prepare those prior it and help those within the throes of emerging adulthood to navigate it in a God honoring way.

In his book *Wandering in the Wilderness: Changes and Challenges to Emerging Adults Christian Faith*, Brian Simmons notes the overall lack of critical engagement and acceptance of emerging adulthood in the Christian world, in fact he calls them the group nobody really talks about.<sup>42</sup> There are a few books available dealing with faith formation for emerging adults.<sup>43</sup> However, it is important that strong faith formation begin prior to emerging adulthood.

Christian Smith conducted a groundbreaking study through the National Center for the Study of Youth and Religion and reported his information through two books: *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* and *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. These two books represent some of the first Christian engagement with the topic of emerging adulthood. The latter of these two books does begin to offer some critique of the spiritual state of emerging adults while the former does not. The thrust of Smith's books are to report the fact that it appears, particularly in the area of spirituality, that emerging adults have arrived at a state of moral therapeutic deism: central to having a happy life is living a "moral life that recognizes God is present, though he has little impact on daily life." Smith's books point to the magnitude of the failure of the Christian family and the church to prepare these young men and women to function on their own spiritually. This is a significant problem, and

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<sup>42</sup>Brian Simmons, *Wandering in the Wilderness: Changes and Challenges to Emerging Adults Christian Faith* (Abilene, TX: ABCU Press, 2011), 12.

<sup>43</sup>Carolyn McNamara Barry and Mona M. Abo-Zena, eds., *Emerging Adults' Religiousness and Spirituality: Meaning-Making in an Age of Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Richard R. Dunn and Jana L. Sundene, *Shaping the Journey of Emerging Adults: Life-Giving Rhythms for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012); David P. Setran and Chris A. Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013); Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011). These books also go along with others previously listed which deal with why emerging adults are leaving the church.

as Smith reports, is indicative of a larger problem:

If these emerging adults are lost, it is because the larger culture and society into which they are being inducted is also lost. The forces of social reproduction here are powerful. That so many emerging adults today are adrift in their moral thinking (though not necessarily in how they live, we think) tells us that the adult world into which they are emerging is also adrift. The families, schools, religious communities, sports teams, and other voluntary organizations of civil society are failing to provide many young people with the kind of moral education and training needed for them even to realize, for example, that moral individualism and relativism make no sense, that they cannot be reasonably defended or sustained, that some alternative views must be necessary if we are to be at all reasonable when it comes to moral concerns. Colleges and universities appear to be playing a part in this failure as well.<sup>44</sup>

Smith powerfully notes that emerging adults are adrift in their moral thinking and this is something that should be concerning for those tasked with leading them. A careful consideration of the foundation of biblical, moral thinking grounds emerging adults in the one who transcends this shifting stage and gives them the security to navigate a stage of life that can be both exciting and unsettling all at once.

While it is important to recognize that there is already a generation of young men and women operating within the stage of emerging adulthood who need help, and that moral therapeutic deism and the accompanying attitudes of emerging adulthood are a dramatic failure on the part of Christian families and the local church to train young men and women in their God given roles, this thesis will attempt to clarify the roles and responsibilities that young adults should be undertaking instead of embracing selfishness in the midst of emerging adulthood.

Much of emerging adulthood will be shown to be clearly unbiblical in the lifestyle it embraces when compared to the God given roles and responsibilities for adults from the selected biblical passages. Clearly the term emerging adult, like many terms in the modern world, does not appear within the pages of Scripture and will not be found in a concordance. How should the church respond? Should Christian parents simply hope

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<sup>44</sup>Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 61.

to survive this stage? How should young people act? When should they be ready to take on the mantle of adulthood? What does the Word of God have to say about the core characteristics of emerging adulthood?

While there are others who have taken up the standard of emerging adulthood, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett was the first person to use the term.<sup>45</sup> Not only was he the creator of the term, he promoted it heavily. He held conferences on emerging adulthood, began a website devoted to it and wrote extensively on the subject.<sup>46</sup> This thesis will look at the two primary academic books focusing on Emerging Adulthood. The first, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Tweens through the Twenties* was written exclusively by Arnett and summarizes and unifies much of what he had written in journal articles, blogs, and shared at conferences over the previous decade.<sup>47</sup> The second book, *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Arnett co-edited with Jennifer Lynn Tanner, who is the vice-chair of The Society for the Study of Emerging Adults. This book contains a collection of articles on a wide variety of subjects relating to emerging adulthood from experts in a variety of fields.

For Arnett five main features make emerging adulthood distinct as a developmental period from the adolescence that precedes it or the young adulthood that follows it. It is the age of identity explorations, especially in the areas of love and work; it is the age of instability; it is the most self-focused age of life; it is the age of feeling in-between, neither adolescent nor adult; and it is the age of possibilities when optimism is

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<sup>45</sup>The term was first used by Arnett in 1996 and does not appear in any literature prior to his usage. The academic community has regularly credited him with the creation of the term. He discussed why he created the term and the development of the theory of emerging adulthood in his book *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*.

<sup>46</sup>Arnett's writings have been published more than 27 times on the subject over the last 17 years. His personal website devoted to emerging adulthood is [www.jeffreyarnett.com](http://www.jeffreyarnett.com)

<sup>47</sup>Arnett has recently released a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of this book, and content from both books will be used throughout.

high and people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives.<sup>48</sup>

While Arnett and other social scientists have written a great deal about emerging adulthood, the church lags far behind. Christian Smith compiled some excellent source material that showed some flaws within the thinking of emerging adults and some such as Ed Stetzer and Thom and Jess Rainer have attempted how to reach out to emerging adults/Millennials. While these terms are often used interchangeably within the popular literature Arnett argues against the use of Millennial because it binds the characteristics to a generation rather than a specific developmental stage. These are not the characteristics of one generation but are here to stay he argues. For Arnett there is little reason to doubt that these experiences and feelings will remain for generations to come.<sup>49</sup> Whether it is a generational characteristic or a life stage that is a cultural reality here to stay, the church has to be prepared to interact on a firm biblical foundation with emerging adulthood.

To define emerging adulthood can be a difficult task because it is used in a variety of ways in the scientific community but there are also many other names used for the same generational characteristics by those in modern media. Generally speaking emerging adulthood recognizes the years (roughly) from eighteen to twenty five as a distinct period of life that differs in important ways from both the adolescence that precedes it and the young adulthood that follows it.<sup>50</sup> However, there is nothing magic that happens at age 25 and because of this sometimes Arnett refers to the stage as running from 18-29. It is in the late 20s that most toward settled adulthood.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>He has described these core characteristics in both of his key academic works *Emerging Adults: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* and *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. These traits also appear in most articles that he writes.

<sup>49</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., loc. 259-260, Kindle.

<sup>50</sup>Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Tanner, eds., *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 4.

<sup>51</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, loc. 342-349, Kindle.

This current generation, the Millennials, is really the first American generation to fit under the characteristics that define emerging adults, though there has been a long historical build up to this point. They are sometimes called the boomerang generation, talk of having a quarterlife crisis,<sup>52</sup> and are sometimes just derided as a people stuck in adolescence.

Arnett's factors closely mirror factors that Erickson used to define adolescence. Erickson says the sexually matured individual is more or less retarded in his psychosexual capacity for intimacy and in the psychosocial readiness for parenthood. The period can be viewed as a psychosocial moratorium during which the individual through free role experimentation may find their own niche in a section of society, a niche which is firmly defined and yet seems unique for him. In finding that niche the adolescent gains an assured sense self that bridges what he was as a child and what he is about to become, and reconciles his concept of himself and his community's recognition of him.<sup>53</sup>

In America today most young people wait until they have finished school before they start thinking seriously about marriage and parenthood, and for many of them this means postponing these commitments until at least their mid-twenties.<sup>54</sup> There has been a profound change in how young people view the meaning and value of becoming an adult and entering the adult roles of spouse and parent. Young people of the 40s and 50s were eager to enter adulthood and settle down. Perhaps because they grew up during the upheavals of the Great Depression and World War II, achieving the stability of marriage, home, and children seemed like a great accomplishment to them. Also,

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<sup>52</sup>Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner, *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties* (New York: Tarcher, 2001).

<sup>53</sup>Erik Erickson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1980), 119-120.

<sup>54</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 6.

because many of these young people planned to have three, four, or even five or more children, they had good reason to get started early in order to have all the children they wanted and space them out at reasonable intervals.<sup>55</sup>

According to Arnett the young people of today, in contrast, see adulthood and its obligations in a wholly different light. In their late teens and early twenties, marriage, home, and children are seen by most of them not as achievements to be pursued but as perils to be avoided. It is not that they do not want to marry, have a home and (one or two) children eventually.<sup>56</sup> Most of them do want to take on all of these adult obligations, and most of them will have done so by the time they reach age 30. It is just that, in their late teens and early twenties, they ponder these obligations and think, “Yes, but not yet.” Adulthood and its obligations offer security and stability, but they also represent a closing of doors—the end of independence, and the end of spontaneity, the end of a sense of wide-open possibilities.<sup>57</sup>

Historically there seems to have been little focus on developmental stages from child to adult until the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup> Prior to this time there is clearly recognition that there are both children and adults, but little concentration on how one gets from child to adult. Instead the focus seems to be on the roles of a child and the responsibilities of an adult:

Given the rigidities and formalism of Anglo-American written law, one would expect to find some chronological definition of when infant irresponsibility was judged to have ended and adult rights and duties were said to have been acquired. For centuries the common law, and until very recently American statutory and constitutional law, placed that age at twenty-one, which has traditionally been the

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<sup>55</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 6.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Winthrop D. Jordan, “Searching for Adulthood in America,” in *Adulthood*, ed. Erik Erickson (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1978), 190.

end of non-age.<sup>59</sup> This is not to say, however, that the law has been decisive and unambiguous in designating 21 (or 18), since there have always been considerable confusion and inconsistency on the matter. Indeed, the law has reflected a strong sense that individuals acquire capacities gradually, as well as the fact that in this culture at least, males and females acquire them at different ages.<sup>60</sup>

Although the rise of emerging adulthood is partly a consequence of the rising ages of marriage and parenthood, marriage ages were also relatively high early in the twentieth and throughout the nineteenth century. What is different now is that young people are freer than they were in the past to use the intervening years, between the end of secondary school and entry into marriage and parenthood, to explore a wide range of different possible future paths. Young people of the past were constricted in a variety of ways, from gender roles to economics, which prevented them from using their late teens and twenties for exploration. In contrast, today's emerging adults have unprecedented freedom. Not only do they have unprecedented freedoms, they are encouraged culturally to use these freedoms to "find themselves" and provided support from parents in many cases to do so.<sup>61</sup>

### **Thesis**

A careful biblical critique of Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood will give those charged with spiritually leading emerging adults and adolescents a firm foundation on which to build. This foundation will allow them to avoid the creation of the Moral Therapeutic Deism and relativistic thinking that marks out so much of the conscience and conduct of emerging adults today. Pairing the biblical critique with Arnett's careful analysis of the stage of emerging adulthood will prepare older believers to disciple younger believers in a proactive rather than reactive way.

There also appears to be some empirical support for the five features of

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<sup>59</sup>DoD 700.14-R, *Financial Management Regulation*, vol. 7B, appendix H, accessed December 31, 2012, [http://comptroller.defense.gov/fmr/07b/07b\\_appendix\\_h.pdf](http://comptroller.defense.gov/fmr/07b/07b_appendix_h.pdf).

<sup>60</sup>Jordan, "Searching for Adulthood in America," 190-91.

<sup>61</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 7.

emerging adulthood. In a series of studies, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses supported the coherence of the five features. Furthermore, emerging adults were found to be significantly higher on all factors related to the five features (and lower on Other-Focused), compared with older adults, and were distinct from adolescents on most factors.<sup>62</sup> The study does establish that currently emerging adults have a worldview that is distinct from both adolescents and adults, and that means that the local church must not live in denial, but prepare to engage in a meaningful, thoughtful way with all that emerging adulthood contains.

Jennifer Lynn Tanner (who is now the chair of the Society on Emerging Adulthood) writes,

The significant feature of this critical turning point is the changing nature of the relationship between the individual and society. Prior to emerging adulthood, the individual is dependent on and regulated by parents, teachers, and the laws of society. During emerging adulthood, the individual accrues experience and prepares for self-governance with variable amounts of support still available from parents (i.e. financial gifts) and institutions (i.e., college). As resources from parents decline and the emerging adult ages out of institutions that structure the development and goals of emerging adults, there is a push and a pull for emerging adults to make commitments to systems that afford them a way to support themselves. Thus, the earlier that support for development ends, the shorter the emerging adult period and the earlier young adulthood begins.<sup>63</sup>

This is a subtle but powerful admission—emerging adulthood is primarily created by the social support systems (think Erikson’s psychosocial moratorium) and parents who fund emerging adults in their self-focused pursuits. Without these support systems emerging adults would often need to make the same move from childhood to adulthood their predecessors have made for centuries. This admission means that emerging adulthood is less about human development and more about social constructs.

Scripture calls young men and women to live in community in a way that promotes

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<sup>62</sup>Arnett and Tanner, *Emerging Adults in America*, 14. They cite the Reifman et al. study using the IDEA: The Inventory of Dimensions of Emerging Adulthood.

<sup>63</sup>Jennifer Lynn Tanner, “Recentring During Emerging Adulthood,” in *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Lynn Tanner, 49.

the good of those around them; emerging adulthood promotes a lifestyle that calls individuals to focus on themselves and what they desire. In 2 Thessalonians Paul uses himself as the example of hard work, showing that he supported himself rather than depending on others. He demands that those who are busybodies and disruptive work to eat. He goes so far as to say that those who do not work do not eat:

Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we did not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. (2 Thess 3:6-12)

In 1 Timothy 5:8 Paul writes, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." This demands that all people work to provide for their family. While many emerging adults may not have families (a spouse and children) they certainly are called to work and contribute rather than depend on the support of others if it simply contributes to a pursuit of selfish desires. Deuteronomy 15:7-11 requires the support of those who find themselves in need. The implication here is that through hard work each member of the nation of Israel can care for their neighbors by the fruit of that labor. All people are to work to the glory of God.<sup>64</sup> Emerging adulthood can encourage job hopping in order to find work that is appealing and fulfilling. As Tim Elmore writes, "This generation wants meaning to come with their work. Young job seekers today want to work for organizations they believe in, to be part of a company that matters. They don't just want

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<sup>64</sup>Eph 6:5-9, Col 3:23-25, 2 Thess 3:10. The book of Proverbs repeatedly contrasts the hard worker and the value he has to the lazy sloth and the foolishness in that individual.

to make widgets; they want to know how those widgets will make the world better.”<sup>65</sup>

When they do not find work fulfilling they move on to new jobs. Meaning in life is important and finding a work that has value is vital for all people, but a thorough biblical foundation can allow a person to find meaning in work whether it is widget making, mundane, or exciting. An understanding of the glory of God and the fleeting nature of life gives emerging adults the ability to see beyond the menial immediate to the eternal impact of serving God faithfully regardless of the nature of their current work. It is this perspective that parents and disciplers must be prepared to help emerging adults see.

Scripture calls young men and women to find their fulfillment and identity in God while many emerging adults find their identity in work, fulfilling relationships, and happy life events. Hebrews 13:4 says, “Let marriage be held in honor among all and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.” First Corinthians 7 is another of the passages that call young men and women to be pure in relationships, and to remain committed to the person they marry, whereas emerging adulthood encourages a multitude of intimate relationships in order to determine what a person really wants and needs in a spouse and to delay marriage until that decision can be reached based on a wide body of life experience.<sup>66</sup>

### **Methodology**

Building a framework to understand and evaluate secular human development and psychology is important. David Powlison has developed a system that allows those who believe that the Bible is sufficient to interact in a positive and helpful way with theories and ideas that may have their foundation outside of the revealed word of God.

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<sup>65</sup>Elmore, *Generation iY*, 133.

<sup>66</sup>Heb 13:4; 1 Cor 7:1-38; Lev 18:20; Deut 22:22; 1 Cor 6:9, 18; Gal 5:19-21; Prov 5:15-23; Eph 5:5. Arnett argues that this is important in his section on love and work. Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 6-10, 73.

Powlison argues that the Christian faith has comprehensive internal resources to construct a Christian model of personality and change.<sup>67</sup> Second Peter 1:3 says, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence.” Scripture is sufficient for life; it has been given to us by God to guide our own conduct in light of the redemptive work of God throughout history.

The sufficiency of Scripture does not mean that it is exhaustive and containing all knowledge, but rather that it aligns a comprehensive system allowing for a view of man.<sup>68</sup> It is not a handbook or encyclopedia for all facts. In developing his epistemological priorities, Powlison asked two questions: “What are the epistemological priorities the Bible itself expresses? What priorities do we need in our time and place for the church’s welfare and to engage the therapeutic culture to which the church is called to bear witness?”<sup>69</sup> Using these questions he proposes a three-tiered approach. The first priority is to articulate positive biblical truth. The second is to reinterpret all models in light of the positive biblical truth articulated at the first level. Finally in the third level the model can be examined for truth to be learned with a confidence in the biblical foundation that has already been established.<sup>70</sup> This three-tiered approach allows for a positive, proactive engagement of emerging adulthood with confidence in Scriptural foundations.

Utilizing this three-tiered approach, this thesis will approach each of the five core areas by first articulating positive biblical truth—a sort of systematic practical theology. Then each area will be examined in light of the positive biblical truth to clarify

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<sup>67</sup>David Powlison, “Questions at the Crossroads: The Care of Souls and Modern Psychotherapies,” in *Care for the Soul* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 11.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 13-14.

and reinterpret any faulty thinking contained within. Finally each area will be examined for what positive truth can be learned from it. Having articulated positive biblical truth and examined problem areas we will be free to learn from the positives and observational truths contained within each of these core markers of emerging adulthood and be best prepared to engage in a way that prepares those prior to emerging adulthood and comforts, guides, and encourages those traveling through this life stage in a firmly biblical manner.<sup>71</sup>

### **Target Audience**

Clearly the information in this thesis would be helpful for anyone in the throes of emerging adulthood. It is important for them but even more key for three groups of individuals: parents (both of small children and emerging adults), church leaders, and Christian higher education professionals. Parents of small children need to understand the trends and temptations that their children will face as they grow so that they can create a solid foundation on which their emerging adults can stand against the tide. Parents of emerging adults need to understand the reality of the cultural tsunami that threatens to consume their children and be prepared to guide their children and encourage them on a daily basis as they face the daunting task of navigating this life stage. In order to do this parents need to not only understand the direction of emerging adulthood but how the Bible speaks to each of these categories. Church leaders will hopefully have emerging adults in their congregations. Even as this generation increasingly identifies themselves as independent religiously there is an opportunity for local churches to reach those in the midst of emerging adulthood with the love and hope of Jesus. How better to reach a population than to understand the deep desires and struggles that are central in their life and show them how Jesus touches each aspect of those struggles and provides

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<sup>71</sup>Powlison, "Questions at the Crossroads," 33.

hope and constancy. Finally, Christian higher education professionals are in the trenches, dealing with emerging adults every day. From conflicts in the dorm and classroom to application of teaching material they need to understand both emerging adulthood and the key scriptural applications that touch it in order to help those emerging adults make life application and create a well orbbed faith that impacts each and every facet of their lives.

## CHAPTER 2

### IDENTITY EXPLORATIONS

For psychologists, an identity exploration has traditionally been something that took place as a developmental task during the adolescent years. As Erik Erickson mapped out the life course of a developing human being he proposed a distinctive crisis for each stage of development, and for him it was during adolescence that an individual faced the crisis of identity vs. role confusion. Erickson made a prophetic statement more than forty years ago as he commented on prolonged adolescence typical in industrialized societies and a psychosocial moratorium that is granted to young people in such societies, “during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of society.”<sup>1</sup> This description now applies to far more young people, particularly those in the emerging adult age range, than when Erickson first penned it.

There has been a shift, however. If adolescence is the period from ages ten to eighteen and emerging adulthood is the period from eighteen to the mid-twenties, most identity exploration is now taking place in emerging adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Emerging adulthood is the age of identity explorations in the sense that it is during this period that young people have a greater freedom than ever before to explore various possibilities for their lives, particularly in love and work. These explorations are setting the stage for the more permanent choices they will make down the road in their adult lives. As emerging adults they are freer from their parents than they were as adolescents and many have left home;

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<sup>1</sup>Erik Erickson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton Publishing, 1968), 156.

<sup>2</sup>Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Tanner, eds., *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 8.

however, they have not yet entered the long term commitments of adulthood such as a long term career, marriage or parenthood. It is during these years that they have a great freedom, neither responsible to their parents nor committed to adult roles; they are free to try out various ways of living and different choices in love and work.<sup>3</sup>

Most identity exploration seems now to take place in emerging adulthood rather than adolescence. It was in adolescence that Erickson saw identity formation: the idea that a person develops some central perspective and direction, some working unity, out of the effective remnants of his or her childhood and the hopes of his or her anticipated adulthood, taking place.<sup>4</sup>

Although research on identity formation has focused mainly on adolescence, this research has shown that identity achievement has rarely been reached by the end of high school and that identity development continues through the late teens and the twenties.<sup>5</sup> By becoming involved with different people, emerging adults learn about qualities that attract them and the qualities they find distasteful and annoying. They also see how they are evaluated by others who come to know them well. They learn what others find attractive in them. In doing this they begin to see who they want to be in the future and whom they might want to spend a long numbers of years with.

In work, too, is a similar contrast between the transient and tentative explorations of adolescence and the most serious and identity-focused explorations of emerging adulthood. In emerging adulthood, work experiences become more focused on laying the groundwork for an adult occupation where adolescent jobs are often simply designed to provide for consumer needs of the teenager.

Many of the identity explorations of the emerging adult years appear to be

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<sup>3</sup>Arnett and Tanner, *Emerging Adults*, 8.

<sup>4</sup>Alicia Victoria Patterson, "Emerging Adulthood as a Unique Stage in Erickson's Psychosocial Development Theory: Incarnation vs. Impudence" (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2012), 40.

<sup>5</sup>Arnett and Tanner, *Emerging Adults*, 9.

simply for fun—a kind of play, part of gaining a broad range of life experiences before “settling down” and taking on the responsibilities of adult life. Play is learning for young (preschool and kindergarten) children and it is telling that emerging adulthood researches use such language to describe the learning process for people who are considered legally adults. There are opportunities for continued development throughout life, and fun is certainly a part of enjoying the good things that God has given to his people, but it seems that play as a developmental tool should be ending before the stage of emerging adulthood.<sup>6</sup> Those who are helping emerging adults find a biblical identity need to be able to help them find productive, responsible ways to build that identity throughout the twenties.

Emerging adults realize they are free in ways they will not be during their thirties and beyond. According to Arnett, although emerging adults become more focused and serious about their directions in love and work than they were as adolescents, this change takes place gradually. For people who wish to have a variety of romantic and sexual experiences, emerging adulthood is the time for it, when parental surveillance has diminished and there is as yet little normative pressure to enter marriage. Similarly, emerging adulthood is the time for trying out unusual educational and work possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

The identity moratorium offers emerging adults the license to experiment with various roles as they wish, without being expected to accept or carry permanent responsibilities or commitments. This experimentation of roles can vary widely, including everything from travel, schooling, military service, community service roles, or even just dropping out for a while.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>See the article by Kyle Snow, “Research News You Can Use: Debunking the Play vs. Learning Dichotomy,” accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.naeyc.org/content/research-news-you-can-use-play-vs-learning>.

<sup>7</sup>Arnett and Tanner, *Emerging Adults*, 9-10.

<sup>8</sup>James Cote, “Emerging Adulthood as an Institutionalized Moratorium,” in *Emerging Adulthood*, ed. Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Lynn Tanner (Washington, DC: American Psychological

While for Erickson the institutional identity moratorium may have extended to as long as twenty four among college students it is now common place for emerging adults to have access primarily to low paying jobs that make self-sufficiency difficult. Facing poor entry level job prospects, more and more emerging adults pursue not only post-secondary but graduate level education in the hopes of gaining access to better jobs by bypassing those low paying entry level positions. They do not want to climb the ladder starting from the bottom but rather insert themselves up the ladder through educational experiences.<sup>9</sup> Educational experiences of those now in their twenties mirror those who were in their late teens fifty years ago, which suggests that since Erickson first wrote about identity formation, adolescence has undergone a metamorphosis to produce a second age-period of relative dependency that is now called emerging adulthood.<sup>10</sup>

There is evidence, however, that a slow job market and challenges in the economy may not be the only reason that emerging adults are struggling to find jobs. Several surveys of employers seem to point to some other factors such as lack of preparation for interviews, over involvement of parents, and casual dress and behavior.<sup>11</sup> While they have the technological understanding and educational background for the careers their casual attitudes and attire can be off-putting for the human resource individuals that they come into contact with.<sup>12</sup> Education in and of itself does not bring the maturity that many employers are looking for. This is another important factor for those providing spiritual mentorship to emerging adults—even as they are growing and

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Association, 2006), 87.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 87-88.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>11</sup>Kelley Holland, "Why Millennials have a Tough Time finding Jobs," *CNBC*, March 28, 2014, accessed April 11, 2015, [http://www.cnbc.com/id/101531415?\\_\\_source=yahoo%7Cfinance%7Cheadline%7Cheadline%7Cstory&par=yahoo&doc=101531415%7CHere%27s%20the%20real%20reason%20mi](http://www.cnbc.com/id/101531415?__source=yahoo%7Cfinance%7Cheadline%7Cheadline%7Cstory&par=yahoo&doc=101531415%7CHere%27s%20the%20real%20reason%20mi).

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

developing maturity they have to recognize the importance of how they interact with individuals and how they represent not only themselves as individuals, but their faith as a whole community.

When the high school seniors of today are compared with high school seniors of the mid-seventies on a wide range of variables, from self-esteem and life satisfaction to loneliness and anti-social behavior they are no different.<sup>13</sup> However, Arnett sees the rise of emerging adulthood as normative, and this can provoke grumbling by the older generations because the later entrance into adult roles by emerging adults can be interpreted as selfishness, that identity explorations may be seen as widespread suffering, and the search for identity based work leads older adults to see emerging adults as slackers uninterested in real work.<sup>14</sup>

So, for Arnett and the proponents of emerging adulthood it is vital that a time of identity explorations be allowed in order to develop fully functional adults who are able to contribute to society. An individual who has fully realized who they are is the individual who makes a greatly valuable contribution to society, and it is necessary for us to allow this generation to develop their own identity.

### **General Critiques**

Before moving through a biblical critique on each of the key characteristics of emerging adulthood it is important to note a few things about emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is something that can only be described for industrial nations.<sup>15</sup> This is certainly true for those who are at the middle class or above in industrial nations,

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<sup>13</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Members of the Millennial Generation are not More Self-Absorbed than Previous Generations," in *The Millennial Generation*, ed. David Haugen and Susan Musser (Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2013), 27.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>15</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (May 2000): 473.

but cannot necessarily even hold true for those on the lower rungs of society in industrialized cultures. When it is a daily struggle for the basic necessities of life—food, shelter, and clothing, one has little time for identity exploration, being self-focused in love and work, and the other trappings of emerging adulthood.<sup>16</sup> The day is not spent discovering who you might be, but rather how to survive. Arnett writes admitting this fact, “Emerging adulthood is not a universal part of human development but a life stage that exists under certain conditions that have occurred only quite recently and only in some cultures.”<sup>17</sup> Even with this truth it is important for those within the United States and other developed countries to recognize emerging adulthood and build the firm biblical foundation from which to operate.

### **Biblical Truth about Identity Explorations**

Before plunging headlong into evaluating identity explorations, with a particular focus on love and work, it is key to a biblical worldview that one understands what the Bible says about identity as whole, and then what it says about love and work. We must do the hard work of interpretation and application from the Bible in a way that is consistent with it.

In many ways we cannot apply the biblical worldview to secular persons and so it is important to note as this critique of Arnett’s theory is developed, it is referring to individuals of biblical faith. Sinners will act, look, and behave like sinners, but the problem comes when the young men and women from within the church are encouraged (or choose) to embrace actions that are like those outside of the church.

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<sup>16</sup>Leo B. Hendry and Marion Kloep, “How Universal is Emerging Adulthood: An Empirical Example,” *The Journal of Youth Studies* 13, no. 2 (April 2010): 177-78. The authors do not disagree with Arnett’s observations about emerging adults within Western culture who are involved in higher education. They do not find, however, that emerging adulthood is a universal developmental stage.

<sup>17</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adults* (2004), 693-94.

## Biblical Identity

### Overall Identity in Christ

If emerging adulthood is the age of identity explorations, particularly in the area of love and work the first step is to positively identify the truth of who any person is in Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 the apostle Paul summarizes the identity of the believer, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” As Paul writes in this context, he is talking about changing one’s way of looking at things.<sup>18</sup> The whole sphere of being has been changed, and in that the whole aim and character of life. This is not a slight shift in perspective, rather a complete and radical transformation.

When a person becomes a Christian, he or she experiences a total restructuring of life that alters its whole fabric—thinking, feeling, willing, and acting. One set of conditions and relationships has come to an end or passed out of existence and another brand new set has already begun and has come to stay. Here Paul is clearly emphasizing the radical discontinuity between the pre- and post-conversion states of being—identity. Paul implies that a change of attitude toward Christ (v. 16b) brings about a change of attitude toward other people (v. 16a) and a change of conduct from self-pleasing to Christ-pleasing (vv. 9, 15), from self-centeredness to god-centeredness.<sup>19</sup>

Christians both see the world in a new way and become a new person when they are joined to Christ. Paul’s declaration here in 5:17 is the corollary to his earlier affirmations that Christians are being transformed (3:16, 18; 4:16–17)—and so much so that the believer becomes a new creation. Christians are not perfect people, the complete transformation of believers remain a future hope because all believers live in the tension

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<sup>18</sup>David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 286.

<sup>19</sup>Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2005), 433-34.

of the already but not yet, but for Christians they are so certain to be fulfilled that their lives are controlled by this new reality that still awaits consummation.<sup>20</sup>

### **In Love**

One important area in which emerging adults are exploring their identity according to Arnett is in the area of love (though his definition really seems to apply to relationships as a whole). Often what he describes could be better described from a biblical perspective as lust or infatuation since it has as much to do with the physical as it does any sort of emotional or spiritual connection. Now with marriage delayed for most people until at least their late twenties, the late teens and early twenties become a time for exploring their physical experience.

They clarify for themselves what kind of person they would like to marry by having involvements with a variety of people and learning what they don't want in a relationship as well as what they want most. With so many years stretching between the time they first begin dating and the time they marry, few young people now give much thought to marriage in high school or even college. Instead, through their teens and early twenties they pursue a pattern of what sociologists call "serial monogamy"—a series of love relationships, usually including sex.<sup>21</sup>

Emerging adults are truly involved in physical relationships on a widespread level—85 percent of never-married 18- to 23-year-old Americans have according to one survey "willingly touched another person's private areas or willingly been touched by another person in their private areas under their clothes." Among that same age group, 71 percent have had oral sex and 73 percent have had sexual intercourse. The average age for both first oral sex and first sexual intercourse is 16 years old.<sup>22</sup> Casual sex is also considered to be quite common during the emerging adult years—52 percent of emerging

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<sup>20</sup>Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 287.

<sup>21</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 73-75.

<sup>22</sup>Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 149.

adult males and 36 percent of emerging adult females reported engaging in casual sex.<sup>23</sup>

Young adulthood since the 1960s has been a time of relative sexual freedom and experimentation. What may be surprising, though, is how many young people (emerging adults) in a recent study, accept that hooking up—recreational sex with no strings attached, is the best arrangement available to them.<sup>24</sup> At one time sexual promiscuity co-existed with traditional forms of dating, and young people could maneuver between the two on their path towards serious romantic relationships. Now, it seems hooking up is all there is; relationships begin and end with sex. Hooking up has become the alpha and omega of emerging adult romance.<sup>25</sup>

Hooking up, also known as a casual sexual relationship has become today's culture of courtship. It is certainly true that not all women are hooking up in order to develop relationships, nor are all guys hooking up in the hopes of avoiding precisely the relationships that the women are seeking. Most actually want relationships but not quite yet. Eventually they will get married, but they delay that marriage in order not only to be financially independent but to enjoy these casual interactions and the autonomy of emerging adulthood.<sup>26</sup>

Even the confidence that they will one day get married is waning in light of current data. The marriage rate is set to fall to historic lows as early as next year. Demographic Intelligence predicts that by 2016 the marriage rate will fall to 6.7 people per 1,000.<sup>27</sup> The peak of that rate was in 1946 following World War II at 16.4 per 1000.

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<sup>23</sup>Hayley R. Leveque and Cory L. Pedersen, "Emerging Adulthood: An Age of Sexual Experimentation or Sexual Self Focus?" *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 21, nos. 3-4 (2012): 148.

<sup>24</sup>Rachel Kalish and Michael Kimmel, "Hooking Up: Hot Hetero Sex or the New Numb Normative," *Australian Feminist Studies* 26, no. 67 (March 2011): 137.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 137-38.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>27</sup>Brigid Schulte, "Why Parents Should Stop Hoping Their Kids Will Get Married," *The*

From the 60's to the 80's the number has varied from 8.5 to 10.8. This number has declined for reasons mentioned earlier, including the fact that emerging adults delay marriage because of economics, preference, and education. The decline in religion and rise of secularism has provided additional options for emerging adults including cohabitation and hooking up.<sup>28</sup>

If the marriage rate were to continue to decline at its current pace it would hit zero by 2042. While that may be unlikely, W. Bradford Wilcox acknowledges, "Marriage is in, some ways, in the worst place it's ever been. I don't think we're ever going to see a major upswing. But we may have reached a plateau. The numbers suggest we may be touching bottom."<sup>29</sup>

A series of "serial monogamy relationships, usually including sex" is the way that Arnett defines the identity explorations in love for the emerging adult. For him the emerging adult clarifies what they want and do not want in a relationship and the type of person they would like to marry during this exploration. While every individual seeks clarity about whom they want to spend their life with, to do so in a series of relationships including sex is in direct contrast to the biblical prescriptions of celibacy and purity in singleness and fidelity in marriage.

Hebrews 13:4 says, "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous." Here the author of Hebrews holds marriage in high esteem, demands fidelity in marriage and demands that the marriage bed be undefiled. Marriage is something that each person should consider "good." This is an active belief not a passive statement. Those who are immoral means those who, whether married or not, are sexually immoral. Those who

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*Washington Post*, May 17, 2015, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2015/05/17/why-parents-should-stop-expecting-their-kids-to-get-married/>

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

commit adultery refer only to those who are married.<sup>30</sup>

Though the kind of sin spoken of here in Hebrews 13:4 is lightly regarded among men in contemporary culture, and may escape detection or any temporal punishment now, certainly God will judge it. Similar statements are made in 1 Thessalonians 4:6, “God is the Avenger of all such, as we have also forewarned you and testified,” and in 1 Corinthians 6:9 where Paul writes, “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality,” where fornicators and adulterers are included among those about whom Christians are not to deceive themselves, as though they would “inherit the kingdom of God.”

First Corinthians 6:18 says, “Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.” In this area Paul was far ahead of first-century cultural assumptions in perceiving the sexual act as one of intimacy and self-commitment which involved the whole person; not the mere manipulation of some “peripheral” function of the body.<sup>31</sup> Paul uses the word *porneia* here which means a selling off or surrendering of one’s purity; promiscuity of any and every type.<sup>32</sup> Sexual immorality (*porneia*) is prohibited more than 25 times in the New Testament.<sup>33</sup> Clearly the new creature in Christ is called to a life of purity prior to marriage (and faithful conduct within marriage). Just prior to this in verse 13 of 1 Corinthians 6 Paul states that the body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord. Sexual expression has been designed by God for expression within the context of

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<sup>30</sup>Paul Ellingworth and Eugene Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the Letter to the Hebrews* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1983), 322.

<sup>31</sup>Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 441.

<sup>32</sup>*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, entry 1402, accessed April 15, 2016 <http://biblehub.com/greek/4202.htm>.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

marriage only. The reason for preserving purity and fleeing sexual immorality is based in the same thing that Arnett finds so important—identity. First Corinthians 6:19-20 says, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” The identity of the believer is one who is not their own, who has been bought with a price. Their body is not their own but God’s and He is to be glorified through their usage of their body.

In Proverbs 5:1-23 the father warns his son of the dangers of the forbidden woman. He illustrates the allure of sexual temptation and the devastating consequences of giving in to that temptation. Sexual temptation is nothing new, not for emerging adults or even for any of the recent preceding generations. One of the hardest paths for a young man (and frequently woman) to follow in pursuit of wisdom is the path of sexual morality in step with the biblical commands. Here in this passage the teacher expounds on his previously brief mention of the topic in 2:15-19, developing in length his teachings on the evils of adultery and the beauty of marriage.<sup>34</sup> D. A. Garrett describes the passage this way:

The Bible does not hide from or obscure the power of the temptation to illicit sex. In language that is refreshingly clear and direct without itself indulging in titillation, the text warns the reader of the debacle that awaits him should he succumb in this area and at the same time promises profound sexual joy to those whose hearts are chaste and loving. If the church is to do its duty, it must be no less clear in its teachings. To assume that nice, Christian young people do not struggle in these areas or to speak only in whispers and innuendo on the grounds that they are inappropriate for the Christian pulpit is no less than gross neglect of duty on the church’s part. Whether one is dealing with the ritual prostitution of a fertility cult, the ordinary prostitute on the street (or in a magazine), or the simple lure of extramarital sex, the temptations and dangers are the same.<sup>35</sup>

The teacher writes about the greatness of marriage in Proverbs 5:18-19, “Let

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<sup>34</sup>James E. Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, The Old Testament Survey Series, (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1995), 233.

<sup>35</sup>D. A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 93.

your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight; be intoxicated always in her love.” Here is a picture far different from the casualness of the hook up culture or an idea that promotes self-exploration via intimate relationships. The word used for joy here encompasses both sexual pleasure and the joys of sharing life together.<sup>36</sup> The sexual relationship is most fulfilling when those involved have shared the many experiences of life together. This makes the case not only for fidelity within the context of the sexual relationship but one for marriage at a young age.

The delay in marriage has been connected to a wider number of sexual partners and exploration, including cohabitation prior to marriage. Arnett writes, “The old rule about remaining a virgin until marriage is passé, but it’s unclear exactly what the new rules are. It’s OK to have sex before marriage, but at what age does it become OK to begin? It’s OK to have partners other than your future spouse, but how many partners?”<sup>37</sup> All emerging adults face the pressure from this cultural reality. Without a biblical foundation they are left unmoored.

Bradford Wilcox responds to the notion that, “selecting lifelong mates is difficult to do before you’re fully baked adults” by noting that there are often risks not acknowledged in the public and private conversations about the delay of marriage.<sup>38</sup> This makes it all the more important for Christian emerging adults to have an active discipleship relationship with someone who not only understands the cultural pressure that they are under, but someone who sees clearly the biblical call to purity and fidelity, and its importance in the picture of the relationship of Christ and His church. Combating

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<sup>36</sup>Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*, 235.

<sup>37</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., loc. 2112-14, Kindle.

<sup>38</sup>W. Bradford Wilcox, “True Love Need Not Wait,” *The Not Yet Report*, accessed April 11, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bradford-wilcox-phd/true-love-need-not-wait\\_b\\_3105874.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=weddings&ir=Weddings](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bradford-wilcox-phd/true-love-need-not-wait_b_3105874.html?utm_hp_ref=weddings&ir=Weddings).

this takes more than an abstinence pledge or a secluded Christian college, it takes a solid understanding of God's Word, relationships and accountability that spur them on to love and good deeds, and a desirable example of fidelity to the biblical call. This delay of marriage is not without its risks either, and may not be as rewarding as some imagine it to be. Emerging adults may in many ways not be "fully baked adults" and that is why it is so key for those who are able to speak with clarity into their lives regarding the matter.

Emerging adults who claim to be Christians cannot live a lifestyle that matches that of their non-Christian peers in the area of identity explorations in the area of love. To do so is in direct contradiction of the biblical commands contained in both the Old and New Testaments.<sup>39</sup> Even if their peers are living lifestyles that "explore identity" within the area of love, Christian emerging adults cannot embrace the lifestyle in physical relationships nor should they do so in a series of relationships that leaves others hurting and broken as they seek their own good. They are not their own; their bodies, souls, hearts and minds all belong to the Lord because they have been bought with a price. The observation that many young adults/emerging adults are unsure of who they want to marry or partner with surely appears to be supported by the data. The unfortunate part is that they are attempting to discover who that person is through sexual exploration, with the stamp of approval of many adults.

Rather than through intimate exploration with a variety of partners the church needs to be preparing these adults to find love in a well thought out, biblically appropriate manner. While there are certainly a number of factors that play into the cultural acceptance of this type of sexual exploration, including the sexual revolution and the rise of pornography and cultural desensitization to it, the church must ensure that the tacit approval of a blind eye is not turned towards this kind of behavior.

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<sup>39</sup>Heb 13:4; 1 Cor 7:1-38; Lev 18:20; Deut 22:22; 1 Cor 6:9, 18; Gal 5:19-21; Prov 5:15-23; Eph 5:5.

Rather than simply seeking to hold emerging adults accountable for this type of behavior (though clearly that also needs to be done) and creating pharisaical behavior, churches need to be proactively preparing children for a world of sexual temptation. A robust theology of marriage and relationships will help ensure that as those children enter adulthood (or emerging adulthood) that they understand the value of a purity prior to marriage, the destructive nature of sexual relationships outside of marriage, and the fact that intimate sexual relationships have been reserved by God for the confines of marriage only.

### **In Work**

Arnett not only argues that emerging adulthood is the age of identity explorations in love, but work also. As mentioned earlier, this means that emerging adults are pursuing meaningful work through transitory work relationships with a variety of employers. Emerging adulthood is the time for trying out unusual educational and work possibilities.<sup>40</sup>

The data clearly shows that many emerging adults are fully engaged in this work exploration<sup>41</sup> and that work (and educational) exploration contributes to them living at home longer and returning home more frequently than the preceding generations.<sup>42</sup> Among those emerging adults who are employed full or part time, 35 percent are living at home or moved back for a time; in addition 42 percent of emerging adults who say their job is a stepping stone to a career or just a job to get them by are living with their parents or have done so

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<sup>40</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 10.

<sup>41</sup>I would include the pre-work educational exploration as a part of this. Arnett acknowledges the longer educational road and includes this as a precursor to the emerging adult core concepts, but does little to assess the role that extended education plays in contribution. It seems to be that college and graduate work are another area in which these identity explorations take place.

<sup>42</sup>Kim Parker, "The Boomerang Generation," Pew Research Center, January 2012, 1-4, accessed April 8, 2015, [www.pewsocialtrends.org](http://www.pewsocialtrends.org).

in recent years.<sup>43</sup> Clearly a lack of direction in work is leading to emerging adults being financially dependent on their parents in a way that has not been seen in recent generations.

The question then becomes, “What does the Bible demand in the area of work from emerging adults.” The Bible has no stage for emerging adults; it simply separates adults from children. As has already been demonstrated, emerging adults clearly fit within the biblical construct of adulthood, so how should they be working?

The commands to work begin all the way back in Genesis 1:28 as God commands man and woman to fill the earth and subdue it. This implies a great deal of work for both the man and woman who were given that command. That command was given prior to the fall, and it logically follows that work will be even more important (and difficult) in a post fall, cursed earth where man will bring the forth fruit of the ground by the sweat of his brow. In an important sense people today are obeying that command of their Creator when they do their daily work, whether they acknowledge him or not. Work did not, therefore, arrive in the world as a direct result of the fall into sin (though sin did spoil working conditions). Work was planned by God from the dawn of history for mankind’s good.<sup>44</sup>

One can go back to the very beginning of the Bible to find the core identity of mankind in relationship to work. Genesis 2:15 says, “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” Man was created to work, in the Garden, before the fall. Work is not a result of sin, though it was radically changed following Adam’s sin. Adam was called by God to till and cultivate the garden so it would grow and bear an abundance of fruit.<sup>45</sup> Work means investing ourselves in

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<sup>43</sup>Parker, “The Boomerang Generation: Feeling OK about Living with Mom and Dad,” 7.

<sup>44</sup>Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 2161.

<sup>45</sup>Richard D. Phillips, *Masculine Mandate: God’s Calling to Men* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008), 179.

accomplishing things of value. Christians should be using their gifts, talents, and experiences to succeed in worthwhile while causes that (if they are married) provide for their families.<sup>46</sup>

When man was perfect God placed him in a paradise, but not on a vacation. He set him in the garden to “work it and to keep it.” It would not have been a happy place for Adam if he had had nothing to do but to smell the roses and lay back doing nothing: work was as essential to the perfect man as it is to us, though it was not of the kind of work which brings sweat to the face or weariness to the limbs.<sup>47</sup> “In the garden of grace, faith renews this happy service, and never wishes to be otherwise than occupied for her Lord.”<sup>48</sup>

Charles Spurgeon summarized the motivation to work in a Christian’s life this way:

Faith inclines a man to an industrious life. It suggests activity. I will venture to say of any lazy man that he has little or no faith in God for faith always— “worketh by love.” I lay it down as a thesis which shall be proved by observation that a believing man becomes an active man, or else it is because he cannot act, and, therefore, what would have been activity runs into the channel of patience, and he endures with resignation the will of the Most High. He who does nothing believes nothing—that is to say, in reality and in truth. Faith is but an empty show if it produces no result upon the life. If a professor manifests no energy, no industry, no zeal, no perseverance, no endeavour to serve God, there is cause gravely to question whether he is a believer at all. It is a mark of faith that, whenever it comes into the soul, even in its lowest degree, it suggests activity.<sup>49</sup>

With this firm emphasis on the dignity and normality of labor stemming all the way from Genesis, it is no surprise to find that Scripture strongly condemns laziness. Solomon writes in Proverbs 6:6-11 encouraging that regular, faithful work be the mark of life rather than laziness: “Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.” A

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<sup>46</sup>Phillips, *Masculine Mandate*, 186-89.

<sup>47</sup>Charles Spurgeon, “Everyday Religion,” in *Fire and Ice Sermon Series*, accessed May 29, 2015, [www.puritansermons.com](http://www.puritansermons.com).

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

worker should be consistent and diligent like the ant, rather than one in pursuit of constant leisure. Paul is equally blunt as he writes to the churches in the New Testament: “If anyone will not work, let him not eat” (2 Thess 3:10–12). There was clearly a problem within this church of lazy people depending on the kindness of those around them to meet their basic needs. Paul set a good example with his own work ethic, echoed throughout the New Testament and his provision for himself though he had the right to expect others to care for him because of his missionary and pastoral work (Acts 20:33–35; 1 Thess 2:9). Those who refuse to work, he insists, even for spiritual reasons, earn no respect from non-Christian onlookers by depending on others to pay their bills (1 Thess 4:11-12). Wage-earners, on the other hand, have the material resources of Christian service.<sup>50</sup>

The Bible gives no indication that some jobs are more worthwhile than others in God’s sight. The Lord calls craftsmen just as much as prophets (Exod 31:1-11; Isa 6:8-9). Amos was summoned from his fruit-picking to prophesy but with no suggestion that he was being promoted to a superior role (Amos 7:14-15). In much the same way Jesus called one tax collector to change his job and allowed another to stay (Mark 2:14; Luke 19:1-10). The important thing was not the nature of the occupation but the readiness to obey God’s call and to witness faithfully to him, whatever the job.<sup>51</sup>

In biblical times some people could not choose their jobs. Among them were hired servants and slaves (Exod 12:45; Mark 1:20; 1 Sam 8:10-13; Eph 6:5). The latter, especially, had to obey orders or suffer the consequences. In our modern context some people might find it impossible to view that type of work as a vocation at all. But Paul is absolutely sure that even forced labor is part of God’s calling and should be accepted as such without any restless attempts at change.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Elwell and Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2162, Eph 4:28

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 2163. 1 Cor 7:20-24.

Paul's writes to slaves and their masters in Ephesians 6:5-9:

Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.

Here he pinpoints the incentive that should motivate all Christians to do their work well—everything must be done for God. Those whose role it is to command and supervise should realize that they too have a Master, and those who have to carry out the orders must remember that they are really working for the Lord, no matter their specific tasks or earthly supervisors, working conscientiously at all times. Paul gets at both the external and internal in his commands. Work is commanded and no one is freed from the responsibility of work. Not only is work commanded, but it must be motivated by a heart that recognizes the work is for the glory of God and really for him regardless of the earthly supervisor.

According to Tremper Longman, at least fourteen proverbs relate idleness, either explicitly or implicitly, to poverty as the bitter end of the sluggard. It is not riches the lazy person lacks; it is food, the necessities of life. Longman says significantly, that the adjectives poor and oppressed are never used of the lazy person, even in his end state.<sup>53</sup> These words for “the poor” are used primarily of those who are poor by virtue of circumstances beyond their control. They are a special concern to the Lord. The lazy person also experiences unrequited craving. The lazy are not those who have few desires. Rather, their daydreaming leads to exaggerated desires, and exaggerated desires to a despair of realization.<sup>54</sup> Not only is work godly, God glorifying and commanded,

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<sup>53</sup>Tremper Longman II, *Proverbs*, Baker Commentaries on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 339-40.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

laziness leads to sinful desires and destruction.

### **Clarifying and Reinterpreting Identity Explorations**

Identity is of incredible importance. Believers and unbelievers alike have clamored for an understanding of who they are and why they are here throughout human history. Arnett, like Erickson before him seems to be seeking to establish a safe place and time for human identity exploration. While they disagree on the best age for that identity exploration to occur, it becomes clear that in their minds (and those like them) individuals must be allowed to search within themselves and through experiences in order to find the truth about who they are.<sup>55</sup>

On one hand Arnett argues that shifting economic realities in industrialized countries have contributed to the pursuit of identity explorations in relationship to work. A shift from manufacturing to knowledge based and informational skills has occurred. This shift led to more Americans than ever pursuing postsecondary education.<sup>56</sup> They pursue this education in order to obtain the best jobs in the new information based job market. Some emerging adults seem to languish, seeking a job that provides adequate pay to support themselves, or a joint household with a spouse and children. High paying manufacturing jobs are gone and the job prospects of emerging adults are grim if they have not pursued higher education.<sup>57</sup>

However, Arnett follows that argument with the caveat that the gradual entry of emerging adults into adulthood cannot be explained entirely, or even primarily by the difficult job prospects of the current economy. Rather, he admits that it has more to do

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<sup>55</sup>For Arnett these identity explorations in emerging adults are particularly focused in the areas of love and work. These two large categories allow him to frame his understanding of identity—at least in relationship to the external world.

<sup>56</sup>“Bachelor’s Degree Attainment tops 30 Percent for First time Ever,” February 23, 2012, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/education/cb12-33.html>.

<sup>57</sup>Jeffrey Arnett, “Suffering, Selfish Slackers? Myths and Realities about Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 27.

with their feelings toward adult responsibilities. While it can be satisfying to be on your own, the challenges of the mundane tasks of life—laundry, bill paying, going to work, are not offset by the positives of independence.<sup>58</sup>

Work is viewed differently in the Christian life though. As a Christian considers their vocational calling faith helps them to refuse the most profitable job if it requires a questionable morality. If the Christian could have huge piles of money made out of the drunkenness, the lust, or the ungodliness of men, he would refuse to put them among his earnings. Jobs which injure men's minds and hearts are not lawful callings before God. Dishonest gain is awful loss. Even while the Christian has things that restrict his pursuit of gain at any cost, he has the freedom to choose the job that brings him joy and God glory, whatever that may be. Yet even in this, the believer pursues employment deliberately chosen with a view to their suitability for it. Faith watches the design of God, and desires to act according to his intent. God has gifted each individual and the workplace is an opportunity for each person, created in the image of God, to employ those gifts in a unique way.<sup>59</sup> This also means that even in the midst of drudgery, difficulty and low pay the believer recognizes that they are doing God's work. This shift in thinking is particularly important for emerging adults who are often pursuing meaning in their work.

Martin Luther once wrote, "What you do in your house is worth as much as if you did it up in heaven for our Lord God. We should accustom ourselves to think of our position and work as sacred and well-pleasing to God, not on account of the position and work, but on account of the word and faith from which the obedience and work flow."<sup>60</sup> Again it is clear that identity in work flows from who God is rather than in what manner

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<sup>58</sup>Arnett, "Suffering, Selfish Slackers?," 27-28.

<sup>59</sup>Spurgeon, "Everyday Religion."

<sup>60</sup>R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2000), 79.

of employment a person finds themselves engaged. The job that an individual does is not nearly as important as the way that person engages in their work. One doing “godly” work poorly is not somehow better than the individual who labors at a menial task that provides for their family and works at it in a way that glorifies God.

The delay of marriage has been seen as a positive by those emerging adulthood because it allows for identity exploration in the area of love as well. The logic of this argument goes something like this: the longer marriage is delayed, the more partners an individual can have and they will therefore be able to best determine the type of person that will make them happy for a lifetime.

Unfortunately, the delay of marriage does not appear to have positive practical outcomes for most people. While college educated women still seem to be waiting the traditional two years after marriage there has now been a shift that the median age of first birth now lays before the median age of marriage.<sup>61</sup> This shift has dramatic consequences—children born outside of marriage are significantly more likely to be exposed to a revolving cast of caretakers and the social, emotional and financial fallout associated with family instability and single parenthood.<sup>62</sup>

Not only do the children of unmarried parents face challenges, those parents themselves face dramatic challenges. Single 20-something men are significantly more likely to report lower levels of satisfaction with their lives, to drink to excess, and to be depressed, compared to their married counterparts.<sup>63</sup> This leaves young adults occupying a foggy middle ground, somewhere between actively seeking parenthood and actively preventing pregnancy. The vast majority of unmarried 20-somethings say it is very

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<sup>61</sup>“The Great Crossover,” *The Knot Yet Report*, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://twentysomethingmarriage.org/the-great-crossover/>.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>“Summary,” *The Knot Yet Report*, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://twentysomethingmarriage.org/summary/>.

important to avoid pregnancy right now, but a third also say they would be at least a little happy if they did get pregnant. It is not surprising then, that among unmarried 20-somethings, more than 1.3 million pregnancies each year are unplanned, as reported by the women themselves.<sup>64</sup> The delayed marriage model poses some definite challenges to a positive, healthy life for both genders as they continue to pursue their identity in love.

### **Positive Truth**

Sometimes it seems to be human nature to hide our head in the sand when a problem presents itself. Arnett's observations about the behavior of young people in the emerging adult age range, particularly in the areas of love and work, can be incredibly valuable for the church as they seek how to shepherd young men and women through a challenging life stage.

The drive to understand who we are is core to the way that God created humanity. If a person has not been given grounding in that understanding, they will indeed seek to discover their identity in relationship to the world around them. There is a clear sense that people are not static. Someone is not the same "person" at the age of 18 that he is at 48. Growth and maturity are a naturally expected part of life; in fact the apostle Paul uses that growth and maturing process in the natural life as an example of how the spiritual life should progress (1 Cor 13:11). As young men and women grow and mature they will certainly solidify in their understanding of the type of work that brings them the greatest joy. They will also develop a more positive understanding of how to relate to the opposite sex.

The hook up culture combined with a delay in marriage has led to a prevalence

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<sup>64</sup>H. Brevy Cannon, "Delayed Marriage on the Rise: Good for College Educated, Tough on Middle America," *UVA Today* March 18, 2013, accessed Nov 23, 2014, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/delayed-marriage-rise-good-college-educated-tough-middle-america>.

of sexual encounters among college age students.<sup>65</sup> To live in denial of this reality is to ill prepare young men and women for the world they are entering. The church and Christian parents can neither assume that their emerging adult children will not participate in this type of behavior (more than 80 percent of young adults have), nor that because it is so common it must simply be allowed or at least tolerated.<sup>66</sup>

Clearly emerging adults have come to believe that marrying in their early twenties is too early, cutting them off from possibilities that they would otherwise be able to embrace. They believe that this is an age of unlimited possibilities and exploration that something as restrictive as marriage would interrupt. Local churches, parents, and pastors need to understand the underlying reasons many emerging adults desire the freedom of singleness. Arnett lists ten reasons that men give for not wanting to get married:

1. They can get sex without marriage more easily than in times past.
2. They can enjoy the benefits of having a wife.
3. They want to avoid divorce and its financial risks.
4. They want to wait until they are older to have children.
5. They fear that marriage will require too many changes and compromises.
6. They are waiting for the perfect soul mate and she hasn't yet appeared.
7. They face few social pressures to marry.
8. They are reluctant to marry a woman who already has children.
9. They want to own a house before they get a wife.
10. They want to enjoy single life as long as they can.<sup>67</sup>

These young men have clearly failed to see the benefits of marriage or even of a life lived outside of complete self-centeredness. Rather, they have made life decisions based on what caters most to their individual desires. This thought process (sin) is as old as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and leads to broken dreams and struggles rather than the pleasure and joy that is so often promised.

This means that more is needed than abstinence pledges or separated

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<sup>65</sup>Justin R. Garcia, Chris Reiber, and Ann M. Meriweather, "Sexual Hookup Culture," *The Monitor on Psychology* 44, no. 2 (February 2013): 60.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, loc. 2713-2722, Kindle.

male/female dorms at the Christian college. Emerging adults need more than a “how far is too far” talk or even an idea that sex is something amazing that is to be reserved for marriage. They have to understand why God has called them to this purity. They do need to understand that sex within marriage is amazing. They need to see practical examples in the local church and from spiritual mentors that they respect. These examples need to be both beautiful pictures of a loving, passionate, god-glorifying marriages and singleness that is dedicated in service to Christ and not marred by sexual innuendo, pornography and a series of physical relationships, no matter how monogamous each is. The Bible pictures singles that served the Lord faithfully through their entire life, and gives a beautiful picture of marriage rather than something that is the “old ball and chain.” When emerging adults are able to get beyond a list of rules and regulations they will begin to grasp the “why” and truly live life in a way that is glorifying to God and edifying to the church.

Some within the emerging adulthood camp find the freedom in the wide variety of dating relationships and sexual partners important because of experience, and personal values it allows to be embraced, even though they admit that it does have its challenges:

This is an important new freedom for emerging adults, since they now marry according to the timing they feel best fits their individual personalities and circumstances rather than rushing to get married because of the pressure of social expectations. However, like the other freedoms of emerging adulthood, this new freedom comes with a cost. Instead of being able to follow a clear cultural norm for when to marry, now the responsibility for deciding when to marry is on emerging adults themselves. And it may not be easy.<sup>68</sup>

A biblical worldview brings purpose and boundaries to this freedom—purity prior to marriage and fidelity within marriage.

To ignore Arnett’s observations of emerging adulthood behavior would be doing the young adults and children within modern congregations a great disservice.

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<sup>68</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 101.

They are exploring their identity, but their identity has become about themselves, about how they best feel that they can achieve the “American dream.” In an age of instability they pursue identity by being self-focused rather than God focused. This self-focus and instability will be discussed in the following two chapters. Emerging adults have been left in an age of in-between; much because adults have failed to give them grounding in what God expects life will look like. The adults of previous generations have wanted to avoid imposing their will upon the current generation and it has led to a generation of young people who can only create their own idea of what life should look like. Christian Smith describes what young people responding to his survey really want in life:

When we asked emerging adults what they wanted out of life, to describe their life goals and dreams. Nearly all of them replied with some version of the same essential answer: finish education, get a good job, marry, have children, buy a nice house with a yard, raise a family, become financially secure, drive reliable cars, enjoy family vacations, enjoy good relationships, maybe have a dog. In short, nearly all spoke sincerely as if they still believed in the American middle-class dream and greatly desired to achieve it.<sup>69</sup>

American emerging adults desire exactly what they have been taught to desire. Those things are not bad in and of themselves.

They desire to have an identity, something that God has created every person to long for. They seek to find that identity in love and work rather than in relationship to their Creator. The church should see this desire and understand that it is a God-given desire. The longing for meaning and belonging can be truly filled only within the community of believers and relationship with God. Outside of that the only thing left is what we see now with emerging adults, young people in the midst of trying to discover what fulfills them in love and work.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” This is a question that parents often ask their young children and that teachers ask their students. “What do you do?”

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<sup>69</sup>Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), loc. 69, Kindle.

This question is almost always one of the first questions adults ask each other when they meet for the first time. Those in spiritual leadership positions with emerging adults need to be prepared to help answer the former question so that one day they will have a clear answer for the latter. This does not mean that they will know right now. It is their job to figure it out, while all the time remaining true to the biblical calling to work for God's glory in each position that they hold, to work with integrity, and to remember that they represent God when they show up to work each day. Whether they have one job or a multitude throughout their emerging adulthood, those who approach each one with this understanding will do so in a way that brings value to their employer and glory to God rather than simply a paycheck or a little more experience for their burgeoning resume.

It seems that each of the five characteristics of emerging adulthood return back in some way to a search for identity. Maybe the biggest problem is that the church has not grounded children in their identity in Christ and these children then find themselves searching along with the rest of the culture. What has been lost may be what Paul feared as he wrote to those in the church at Philippi in Philippians 3:17-20:

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,

Here Paul warns against those who follow their appetites, whether sexual or food focused, and cautions against setting their minds on earthly things. This perspective correction is incredibly important for those in the emerging adult stage as they pursue their identity.

The important contrast that Paul makes is in verse 20 where he points out that their citizenship is in heaven. Immediately the thoughts of Paul's readers would have turned to an analogy with their earthly citizenship. They were proud of their Roman citizenship, but the analogy would have conveyed more. Philippi was an outpost colony,

and, interestingly, Paul was at the home base in Rome. Regularly they awaited news from the capital to know how to conduct their business. When Paul said that they belonged to a citizenship, he spoke directly to them. Though they belonged to a city, the political entity spanned several geographical areas. Similarly, the church was an outpost of an entity which had its own capital, heaven.<sup>70</sup> The Philippians were not to find their identity in being Romans, or a part of the empire; rather they were to find their identity connected to Christ and their heavenly partnership with Him that would be consummated upon his return.

### **Implications and Applications**

#### **Parents of Young Children**

Clearly emerging adults are seeking a grounded identity throughout this period, particularly as it relates to areas of love and work. However, they are often pursuing this identity in unbiblical ways. For parents of young children this presents a great opportunity to build identity before the children reach emerging adulthood. That identity will continue to be fleshed out throughout their lives. Parents of young children can help them begin to build an identity grounded in Christ in a number of ways. First they can begin with very young children by reading something like *The Jesus Storybook Bible* that gives them the big picture of God's love in redeeming his people. Young children can also begin with a catechism, such as the *Baptist Catechism for Young Children* or the *Westminster Catechism* in order to develop a broad base of knowledge on which they begin to build their identity and understand for what they have been made.

Young children need to see marriages that are built on faith and love. They need parents who regularly attend church and evidence physical love at home. They need to see husbands who pursue their wives and make them a priority. They need to see

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<sup>70</sup>Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, New American Commentary 32 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 143.

wives who lovingly care for their husbands and speak highly of them. They need to see these relationships that are not perfect but are consistent and constant in their love for one another. For children in single parent homes the local church becomes a vital part of this, a place to see healthy and loving marriages.

Not only do these children need to see marriages that picture passion and faithful love for one another, parents need to guide them as they grow and begin to seek out relationships of their own. Often relationships in the teenage years begin to resemble the hook up culture of the emerging adult years, possibly just without the sex. Parents need to help their children think about how and why they are engaging in divorce practice. This may not mean prohibiting dating during the teenage years, but it certainly means having straightforward, honest conversations about the feelings and desires that drive the dating practice. Parents must put wise constraints (such as the presence of an additional person or persons on any date) around these dating relationships, if they allow them, in order to keep from tacitly condoning what may become a series of monogamous, intimate physical relationships in the emerging adult years. Parents also need to be clear as their children grow about God's demand for purity in their lives and His purposes in making those demands. Finally, parents of young children need to ensure that their children are protected from the influences of pornography and its desensitizing effects through internet and phone filters and careful choices of media children are exposed to.

Emerging adults are seeking identity in work as well. Work is good and designed by God. Parents who consistently complain about work or their coworkers are giving their children a picture of work that does not match what God's Word says. Parents should be tithing regularly and allowing their children to see and participate in this act of worship so that they understand that each person works in part to support the community of believers and not for their own gratification. Children should be given chores around the house that develop in them a sense of contributing to the "community

of the home” without expecting something in return.

Parents should also be wisely helping their children explore the talents that God has given them and helping them understand how those gifts and talents may translate into a job later in their lives. This can be done this in several ways. Parents should avoid the “you can be anything you want to be” conversation and instead have realistic conversations about the gifting and the weakness that their children have so that they can see their strengths. Instead, they should give growing children opportunities to shadow adults in careers that may relate to their desires and giftedness. Parents cannot find their identity in work! They should remind children that their value and their identity should be found in Christ rather than in their work. Show them that a person works for God no matter their earthly employer and be grateful regularly in their presence for the job that God has given, even if it is not an ideal job.

### **Parents of Emerging Adults**

It is never too late to make a difference. If parents have failed to give their children a solid biblical foundation or encouraged them to seek their identity in unbiblical ways, these adults must confess this sin to God and their children, asking for their forgiveness. Much of the freedom available to discover identity throughout emerging adulthood comes through parental support, especially financial. It is important to remember that as one supports their child financially through emerging adulthood they also have a responsibility to guide and direct them in specific ways toward biblical living.

Parenting an emerging adult provides a unique opportunity for engagement in their lives. No longer does a parent have the power to dictate who or how they date, what jobs they take or in what ways they pursue their new identities. The parental role has now shifted primarily to discipleship. Since much of what emerging adults do is still at least partially funded by parental support parents have a responsibility to ensure that they are not financing an unbiblical lifestyle.

One must challenge their emerging adult to get involved in a local church in their new location. Their identity is not only in Christ, but in his body, the local church. Being grounded in this body will give them outlets to explore their God given talents apart from what they have known and among a new group of believers. It will give opportunity for guidance and direction from another group of people who truly care about them. It reminds them that they have been created for more than sustaining and fulfilling their own personal desires.

Emerging adults are trying to figure out who they want to spend the rest of their lives with, who they fit well with and what things they do not like in a spouse. Sending them off to a Christian college will not be enough to protect them from a hook up culture built around self-satisfaction. A parent should share the story of how they and their spouse met, dated and ultimately married. They must remind their children of God's desire for purity in their lives and the beauty of fulfillment in marriage. A parent must be open and honest about the struggles that marriage brings, and yet in that the picture of Christ and His church that is shown when we remain faithful. Having this incredible picture, seen not only in their parent's marriage, but in the local church will strip away the idealism shown in romantic media today and remind them that there is more to relationship than satisfying your own needs and desires.

Getting married young is not a bad thing. While the age of marriage continues to rise it is important that parents remind themselves and their emerging adult that they can be countercultural, and probably should be in many ways. They may not have things all together but can protect their purity and build a life together with a spouse when they marry at a younger age. This will bring challenges, but so does remaining single well into a person's 20's. Parents and emerging adults should read and discuss together articles such as "The Case for Early Marriage" by Al Mohler or Mark Regenerus's op-ed piece for the Washington Post "Freedom to Marry Young." These articles will provide a

starting point for discussions about why an emerging adult may be choosing to wait to marry, even if they are in the midst of a serious relationship they expect to lead to marriage one day. Every relationship for the emerging adult will not lead to marriage, but the parent has a responsibility to help the emerging adult to think carefully about the intentions that underlie their relationships—are they moving toward marriage or simply gratifying a need?

Emerging adults are trying out jobs to figure out what they will find fulfilling, what will give them satisfaction for life. They may be concerned about taking demeaning, underpaying, or low importance jobs. It is important as a parent to remind them that work is first and foremost for the Lord. Reading and discussing together the book of Proverbs will be helpful for both work and relationships. Proverbs calls for hard work and warns against illicit relationships. The website [www.workasworship.org](http://www.workasworship.org) has great content that can help promote discussions on how to work for God's glory even in a job the emerging adult hates.

### **Church Leaders**

Emerging adults need a place to serve, to explore their gifting and to be grounded in an identity. They are seeking, and the church has an amazing story and identity to offer them. Emerging adults may be in and out, they are in an unstable period marked by change. They may be attending school or moving for jobs. This means it is key to get them involved quickly within the life of the congregation. Certainly wisdom in places of service is important, but unlike more established members of the congregation, waiting a long time to allow them to get involved may ultimately mean they leave to seek another place to find their identity. The forming and changing of identity may mean that an emerging adult starts in one spot and finds it does not fit with them and desires to change. A church should be open and flexible to these changes; giving them options of places to serve.

Emerging adults need a Titus 2 relationship with an older member of the congregation. Leadership must have a plan in place to quickly provide opportunities for them to become part of families within the congregation, seeing those who are a little farther along in life engaged in ministry, leading families, and working consistently. They need this far more than they need a young professionals Sunday school class, hip worship music, or a high quality coffee service. Learning from these solid believers will help them understand that they do not have to figure everything out to live a life that pleases God.

### **Christian Higher Education**

Traditionally Christian higher educational institutions have been the place where people in their twenties found their mates, but there is little evidence that Christian emerging adults are marrying earlier than their unbelieving peers. This is important for those in charge at such institutions to recognize. It will be important to monitor relationships trends at the school in order to quickly engage any unhealthy and unbiblical trends. Many students will no longer be seeking a life mate, but just an opportunity to explore through relationships—policies will need to be created that provide a level of accountability from an authority to prevent a hook up and break up culture from developing. Simply attending a Christian school does not mean that students do not engage in improper relationships. Schools should find creative opportunities for relationship building with the opposite sex in ways that protect both parties.

Emerging adults need ways in which to serve and connect to community outside themselves. Regular service opportunities within the local community will help teach hard work for others, the glory of God, and humility. A church should utilize the incredible creativity and ingenuity of emerging adults to make the university itself a better place and create a sense of belonging and contribution among the emerging adults on your campus. Connecting with local businesses and providing a plethora of

internships/work opportunities can help them discover their gifting in work prior to graduation so that they have had opportunity to explore and move forward prior to graduation—this may help eliminate both the distaste for “menial” work and reduce the amount of job hopping which will help them grow with a company much sooner, which will ultimately put them in greater positions of authority sooner.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE AGE OF INSTABILITY

Emerging adults live in the midst of tremendous change. The only constant it seems for emerging adults is change. Their significant others in love relationships change regularly; they change jobs regularly and even change their living location on a regular basis. As they try to form a plan for their lives they are constantly working and reworking the plan. College majors change, they join the workforce and find they need more education to be competitive, they start and stop, move and reorient, all the time refocusing and refining their life plan.<sup>1</sup>

The high rate of residential change from the late teens through the mid-20s is reflective of the many profound changes that take place in the lives of emerging adults.<sup>2</sup> For most emerging adults, the first residential change comes at about age 18 or 19 when they move out of their parents' home, either to go to college or simply to be independent. Other changes soon follow. Those who attend college may move from a dormitory into an apartment after their first year or two. Many leave college after 1 or two years and when they do a residential change is likely.<sup>3</sup> Most American emerging adults cohabit at some point during their 20's, and residential changes may take place when they initiate cohabitation and when it ends. About 40 percent of emerging adults move back home at some point in their early 20's, usually for only a temporary period, after which they move

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<sup>1</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), loc. 440-44, Kindle.

<sup>2</sup>Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Tanner, eds., *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 9.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

out again. Some emerging adults move to a different part of the country or the world to pursue opportunities in education or work, to accompany a romantic partner, or simply to pursue adventure. The statistic on residential changes during the 20s is emblematic of the instability of emerging adults' lives.<sup>4</sup>

Even when they move out it is not necessarily forever. Early in the twentieth century, when marriage was the main reason for moving out and divorce was rare, young people usually did not return home once they had left. The rate of returning home was about 20 percent in the 1920s, which is as far back as records go. Now, with leaving for college or for independence the main reasons for leaving home, moving home again has become quite common, experienced by nearly half of today's emerging adults.<sup>5</sup>

Life is changing for emerging adults and the American education system contributes to the difficulties of these changes. There are more than 4,000 colleges and universities which allow emerging adults a plethora of opportunities to explore the wide range of occupational futures. They are able to keep their options open as they try out a variety of majors before they eventually choose a major. In contrast, University in Europe requires young people to enter with a major decided rather than taking general education classes for a couple of years while they decide what they want to do.<sup>6</sup>

Even amid the instability and uncertainty of their work in emerging adulthood, most of them remain hopeful that their identity quest will end in success and they will find a job that clicks with their perception of themselves. Arguably, they have a better chance of finding such a job than people did in the past. When people married and had their first child in their early twenties, men quickly experienced pressure to find a job that would enable them to support a family, and women experienced pressure to leave the

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<sup>4</sup>Arnett and Tanner, *Emerging Adults*, 9.

<sup>5</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University, 2004), 51.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.

workforce to devote themselves to caring for the children and running the household.<sup>7</sup>

Now with the postponement of marriage and parenthood into the late twenties, young people can use their emerging adult years to seek out satisfying work without the pressure of family obligations. For young women the range of possible occupations is suddenly vast, greater than it has been for any generation of women in human history.<sup>8</sup>

However, there is a dark side to the work prospects of emerging adults. With such high expectations for what work will provide to them, with the expectation that their jobs will serve not only as a source of income but as a source of self-fulfillment and self-expression, some of them are likely to find that the actual job they end up in for the long term falls considerably short of this ideal.<sup>9</sup>

While residential change seems to be the epitome of the instability and changing educational goals is a close second and the changes in love lives and work are also stressful triggers for emerging adults. Not only is the pursuit of identity within these areas important to emerging adults, but that pursuit creates instability. Significant others change, jobs change and unemployment may be something that looms regularly for an emerging adult.

In emerging adulthood the insecurities of adolescence diminish, but instability replaces them as a new source of disruption.<sup>10</sup> Arnett points to changes in life as creating instability for emerging adults and contributing to the extension of this period as those emerging adults seek to find more solid ground.

Young workers are not necessarily looking for stability. They have always been more mobile than the rest of the population. But the emerging adult has turned job

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<sup>7</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 160-61.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 162-63.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 163.

<sup>10</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., loc. 448, Kindle.

change into a lifestyle. Approximately 35 percent of the 20 to 29 year olds have been working at their present jobs for less than a year; in their thirties, the number is still at 18 percent.<sup>11</sup> Younger adults in their twenties have always “churned” through jobs, as the economists put it, more than older workers. Now, churning continues increasingly into the thirties. Another reason for the drawn-out career search is that emerging adults are looking for something much bigger than a way of earning a living. They are searching for meaning, for purpose, for a life mission, all of which, for good and not-so-good reasons, they believe should take the shape of a career.<sup>12</sup>

### **Biblical Truths about Instability in Life**

Life at any age is full of change, but God remains the same. These are truths that people of all ages, but particularly in the age of emerging adulthood need to recognize. Just as the Fall and Curse in the Garden of Eden brought radical changes to work and love relationships, it also drove mankind out of their home and into a transitory lifestyle marked by change. Sin has plunged humanity into a life of change and turmoil and that change will only stop at the return of Christ.

Scripture again and again points out the fact that God is unchanging. He is the rock within the storm, the One which does not change no matter what the circumstance: The prophet Malachi proclaims in Malachi 3:6 as he speaks for God, “I am the Lord, I do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob are not consumed.” In Psalm 102:27 the psalmist writes, “But you remain the same, and your years will never end.” James writes to his audience in James 1:17, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of heavenly lights who does not change like shifting shadows.” The author of Hebrews writes in Hebrews 1:12, “like a robe you will roll them up like a

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<sup>11</sup>Kay Hymowitz, *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 38.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 38-39.

garment they will be changed. But you are the same and your years will have no end.”

John writes in Revelation 1:4, “John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who was and is and is to come, and from the seven spirits before his thrones.” Later in the same chapter John wrote in Revelation 1:8, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

A God and Savior who are unchanging are the perfect answer to the instability of life, no matter the timing of that instability. Life will be full of change, there is no doubt, and that change will continue long after the years of emerging adulthood. The only constant, the only thing that any person can count on to remain the same is God. It is that stability that will carry emerging adults through the instability of their years.

As emerging adults look to the future they most certainly will face a lifetime of instability. Whether that instability comes from the more than eleven jobs they will hold before they are fifty<sup>13</sup> or the multitude of residential changes, they can have comfort that the rock that is Christ will be unchanging, unlike the shifting shadows of the present world.

Psalm 90 is a perfect expression of confidence in an unchanging God in the midst of a tumultuous life. This Psalm was written for their wanderings in the wilderness, just as the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 31 was written for their settlement in Canaan. This Psalm seems to refer to the story from Numbers 14. It appears that Moses penned this prayer to be used daily, either by the people in their tents, or, at least, by the priests in the tabernacle-service, during their wanderings in the wilderness.<sup>14</sup> In this prayer Moses comforts himself and his people with the eternity of God and their interest

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<sup>13</sup>“Number of Jobs Held, Labor Market Activity, and Earnings Growth among the Youngest Baby Boomers: Results from a Longitudinal Study,” USDL-15-0528, March 31, 2015, accessed April 11, 2015, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/nlsoy.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup>Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 874.

in him (vv. 1, 2). He humbles himself and his people with the consideration of the frailty of man in contrast to the eternity of God (vv. 3–6). He then submits himself and his people to the righteous sentence of God passed upon them (vv. 7–11). Finally, he commits himself and his people to God by prayer for divine mercy and grace, and the return of God’s favor (vv. 12–17). Though it seems to have been penned upon this particular occasion, it is very applicable to the frailty of human life in general, and, in that may be easily applied to the tumultuous years of each person’s passage through the wilderness of this world.<sup>15</sup> What a powerful message for emerging adults or anyone in an unstable period of life.

The Psalm begins with the confession that the Lord has proved Himself to His own, in all periods of human history, as that which He was before the world was and will be for evermore.<sup>16</sup> Not only has God always existed, He has always shown himself faithful to His people. The name of the Lord has been vindicated throughout history because of his redemptive actions on behalf of his people. The longest of times for the Lord appears as nothing. While mankind could never live for a thousand years, that is but a day to God (Ps 90:4; 2 Pet 3:8). What great confidence for an emerging adult (or anyone) who faces what seems like a never ending barrage of change—to know that for God that is but a moment, a fleeting instant in time that He is unchanged by.

Verses 6-8 of the Psalm point out the transitory nature of the life of all mankind; this experience, the instability of life is nothing unique to emerging adults, or even to modern history. As he makes the transition into verses 9-12 the poet glances back from the end of life to the course of life. And life, with all of which it had been proud, appears as an empty burden; for it passed swiftly by and he fled away, he was

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<sup>15</sup>Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 874.

<sup>16</sup>Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 5 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 593.

born away with rapid flight upon the wings of the past.<sup>17</sup>

Such experience as this ought to urge one on to the fear of God; but how rarely does this happen? Yet, as Proverbs continually points out, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. The verb at the beginning of verse 11 does not merely refer to general thought, consideration or knowledge but practical living and effective knowledge, and is here used of a knowledge which makes that which is known, conducive to salvation.<sup>18</sup>

Augustine writes of this passage and man's perspective on the instable nature of life:

'For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday, which is past by' (ver. 4): hence we ought to turn to Thy refuge, where Thou art without any change, from the fleeting scenes around us; since however long a time may be wished for this life, "a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday:" not as to-morrow, which is to come: for all limited periods of time are reckoned as having already passed. Hence the Apostle's choice is rather to aim at what is before, that is, to desire things eternal, and to forget things behind, by which temporal matters should be understood.<sup>19</sup>

Man changes, God does not. Life flies by mankind full of tumult and chaos, fleeting as the grass and morning dew but God stands as an unchanging refuge for believers. This message is what needs to be communicated to all people no matter their life stage.

Arnett makes the point that the instability of life for emerging adults is driven by their changing "plan" as they adapt to their circumstances. James warned his readers in 4:13-16 that life is unstable and to boast of any solid long term plans would be folly:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town

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<sup>17</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 597.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 598.

<sup>19</sup>Augustine of Hippo, "Expositions on the Book of Psalms," in *Saint Augustin: Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. A. Cleveland Coxe, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 8, Series 1 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888) 442.

and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that. As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

This is the kind of confidence that emerging adults are encouraged to have in the midst of the instability of life, as they modify that “plan.” This is the exact confidence described by Abby Ellin describes in the opening of her article “The Beat (Up) Generation:”

Steven Clark is 25 years old and ready to rule the world of real estate. Just ask him. He freely admits that he expects to be making millions of dollars within the next year. He is so sure of this, in fact, that he informed everyone in his office—most of whom range in age from 40 to 60—of his plans. They were not impressed. . . Exasperating though it may be Clark’s hubris is not unique, at least for someone in his age group.<sup>20</sup>

To boast of the future is not just ridiculous to the people that Clark works with, it is ridiculous to James, who is writing inspired by the Holy Spirit. Time and space belong only to God, and thus all the features necessary for human action are dependent upon him. In this case James’s deluded addressees thought and spoke as though the whole business enterprise required only self-assuredness for control of circumstances and the achievement of the desired ends.<sup>21</sup> Pride in the face of instability and uncertainty does not make courageous, it makes one a fool in the eyes of the Lord. While emerging adults work on their “plan” it is important for the church to be regularly reminding them that the will of God should be ordering their steps.

Mists do not last long. They are by their nature transitory and unstable. They appear with the dew and quickly dissipate. But this evaporation is a fitting way to refer to the ephemeral attribute of human life. No one knows the times of his or her own life. Without trust in God, these believers become nearly indistinguishable from the wicked, who take no account of God. These basic truths must be rehearsed. Just as the truth of God and his sole lordship are necessary correctives to human autonomy, so also is this

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<sup>20</sup>Abby Ellin, “The Beat (Up) Generation,” *Psychology Today*, March/April 2014, 58.

<sup>21</sup>Kurt A. Richardson, *James*, New American Commentary 36 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 199.

truth about the transitory nature of humans.<sup>22</sup> Life appears and disappears in a moment; one who really understands this fact would not make plans as if it were not true, but would look to him who truly does have control over life.<sup>23</sup>

### **Clarifying and Reinterpreting Instability in Life**

Emerging adults are undergoing a tremendous amount of change in the years from 18-27.<sup>24</sup> They are seeing what might be some of the most drastic changes in their lives, certainly at least as far as they are aware. They are changing residences, jobs, and love interests—often at a rapid pace. Emerging adults need to be prepared to handle this by those responsible for their spiritual care. Instability will continue in varying amounts not only throughout these years but in the remaining years of life.

While residential change in particular is most likely at its peak during the emerging adult years because of the temporary nature of college dorms and apartments, roommate arrangements, and even cohabitation it merely the beginning of the instability rather than the end. Emerging adults may have been sheltered from much of the instability of life by their parents but now on their own they will continue to face this instability throughout life and need a strong foundation on which to do so. No longer are most Americans, born, raised and buried in the same town. Jobs, love interests and opportunities of every kind present themselves and are embraced around the country and around the world.

Scripture makes it clear that the only stability and grounding that can be truly present in life stems from the unchanging nature of God's character. Again and again the Bible affirms that all of man's life is instable, that all of life is transition, and that there is

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<sup>22</sup>Richardson, *James*, 200.

<sup>23</sup>Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 173.

<sup>24</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 10.

only one who is unchanging—the one who is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last.

### **Positive Truth**

Life is full of instability. The lives of emerging adults are marked by large milestones, recognized or unrecognized, along with lots of change. Those changes do not need to be negative, nor do they need to be daunting. However, anyone who is relating to emerging adults or preparing children to be emerging adults needs to recognize the changes that are coming in their life and give them the foundation to handle the instability because no matter what an individual's age an unstable life can lead to chaos, doubt and confusion if they are unprepared for it.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 notes that the pursuit of happiness leaves one empty. Emerging adults are experiencing instability in part because of their pursuit for identity and their search for a fulfilling meaning in life. It would serve the church and culture well to understand tumultuous times are coming, and that proper preparation will serve to enhance the ability of emerging adults to face the unstable and uncertain times ahead.

A strong foundation is important for withstanding the storms of life. Jesus offers encouragement to those who prepare for the storms of life by building their life on the solid ground of His words in Matthew 7:24-25, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”

Likewise he offers a powerful caution to those who would face the instability of life built on whatever other foundation they have developed by their own strength in Matthew 7:26-27, “And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the

fall of it.” In both cases incredible instability of life came, it was only the foundation of the life that was different. As emerging adults seek comfort in the midst of instability it is only through Christ that they can find a foundation that will carry them through this, and every other unstable period of life.

Resisting the instability or change that takes place will not help emerging adults. Instead it is the development of the solid foundation in Christ that will prepare them for instability. This is done first and foremost in the home by parents who regularly and intentionally disciple their children. This may not have taken place and it is then the responsibility of older men to disciple younger men and older women to disciple younger women. These relationships take time and proactive effort in order to be effective. A useful spiritual foundation cannot be built in a day, and this is why it is so important for each person to understand the need to start discipleship long before they become emerging adults.

Once they become emerging adults the discipleship needs to continue. That will mean a shift as they leave home, and it may mean that it takes place in ways other than face to face. Emerging adults are facing much residential instability and this might mean that someone engaged in spiritual mentorship does so by utilizing technology. Utilizing video chat methods allows geographically separated individuals to continue a “face to face” relationship in a way not possible just a few years ago. Emerging adults need to be rapidly engaged in a local church community. They may not be in one location for years at a time and still need outlets to serve and be served in order to continue to solidify their foundation and grow in their relationship with Jesus.

## **Implications and Applications**

### **Parents of Young Children**

Young children need a solid foundation on which to build. In the passage mentioned just earlier Jesus calls for believers to build on the solid foundation of His

Word. Young children need to memorize Scripture. Doing this at home as a family shows them that it is a priority for every member. Utilizing local church programs such as Awana to reinforce this habit may make the memorization of Scripture a lifelong habit that creates something for them to cling to during the rapidly shifting times of emerging adulthood. The life of a parent must indicate a priority of the Word of God in action and not just in word. This is where executing home discipleship in faithful obedience to Deuteronomy 6 and teaching and talking about the Word of God throughout everyday life will be vital in creating a dependence and foundation upon it for your child.

### **Parents of Emerging Adults**

Parents should ask the why question when an emerging adult is making a life change. This will allow the parent to understand their thinking and help them make intentional changes. There will be enough uncertainty in their lives that introducing unwise change will build a shaky foundation. Parents should them back to Jesus and His Word in these change decisions. They must be careful not to allow their financial support to be the crutch that their children depend on for stability rather than Jesus. Love for children is natural, but God can use those challenging times to teach them to rest on him for confidence amidst a swirling world and they learn far more in those moments than they learn from the momentary financial support that parents offer them.

### **Local Church Leaders**

Church leaders must understand emerging adults walking through the door Sunday morning face an incredible amount of instability in their lives. Many are away from home for the first time, moving from place to place during these years and need some stability. Churches should consider providing opportunities for emerging adults to be housed with strong families in the congregation. This will connect them in a unique way to your congregation and remove some of the necessary movements as they move in

and out of student housing, find new roommates and show them the love of Christ in a unique way. A weekly meal in the homes of members after service with several emerging adults in one home allows for stability and discipleship that continues to point them to the constancy and hope in the Gospel. Churches must pray regularly for and with them, while some of the changes they face may seem small to, those changes loom large in their lives.

### **Christian Higher Education**

Schools should strive to create faculty relationships with students that go far beyond advising the appropriate courses to take. Granted, emerging adults need someone to guide their academic career and ask the why question about academic major changes, particularly as they move later on in their education, but students need so much more. They need faculty who are real with them, believers who disciple and walk alongside them in life. They need those who are older to rejoice with them when they rejoice and weep with them when they weep. They need to see godly marriages, singles dedicated to serving the Lord, and a community that looks beyond its own selfish desires and puts the needs of others first. They need to see real lives that face instability, changes and challenges on a regular basis. Emerging adults need Christian leaders who can speak to them from experience about how they navigated the instability of life depending on God, who can give them a perspective that rises above the storm and helps them see a big picture, and that calls them to depend on the God who never changes. These kinds of things give them hope when they face changes, they give them a sense of stability to reach out to when the times are rocky and the storm has come. Without these relationships emerging adults are left to lean on the advice of other emerging adults facing the same challenges they are and this can lead to an embracing of so much unbiblical behavior.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE MOST SELF FOCUSED AGE OF LIFE

According to Arnett, emerging adults are self-focused in the sense that they have little in the way of social obligations, duties and commitments to others, which leaves them with a great deal of autonomy in running their own lives. In contrast children and adolescents typically live with their parents and have to abide by the household rules and routines that their parents have established and they spend a substantial proportion of their time in school where they have to follow the rules and routines set by teachers and school officials. Once they get beyond age thirty many adults have commitments to a spouse, children, and a long-term employer, and each of these relationships entail daily requirements and obligations. But in between, during emerging adulthood, most people are relatively free to focus on themselves and make independent decisions about their lives.<sup>1</sup>

They recognize this period as the one time in their lives when they do not have to answer to anyone and can essentially do what they want with their lives, before they enter the permanent (or at least enduring) obligations of adult roles. However, for Arnett, being self-focused has a serious purpose as well. Emerging adults are self-focused with the goal of attaining the self-sufficiency that is at the heart of their view of what it means to be an adult. Only after attaining self-sufficiency do they feel like they have reached adulthood and begin to view themselves as ready to become more others focused by

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<sup>1</sup>Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Tanner, eds., *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 10.

entering into marriage and parenthood.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, it is the achieving of self-sufficiency that seems to be the number one goal for emerging adults as they mark out adulthood, and it is the self-centered, self-focused time in emerging adulthood that equips them to do so. It is only in-between, during emerging adulthood, that there are few ties that entail daily obligations and commitments to others. Most young Americans leave home at age 18 or 19 for the first time, and moving out means that daily life is much more self-focused. Even in the midst of the residential change that leads to them returning home, they remain self-focused.<sup>3</sup> To say that emerging adulthood is a self-focused time is not meant pejoratively by Arnett and his peers. For them, there is nothing wrong about being self-focused during emerging adulthood; it is normal, healthy and temporary—though the temporary claim seems to become more dubious as the years drag on. Certainly there are many emerging adults that move on quickly from the self-focused age but there are also some who seem to remain stuck in this self-focused rut for an extended period of time. By focusing on themselves emerging adults develop skills for daily living, gain a better understanding of who they are and what they want from life, and begin to build a foundation for their adult lives according to Arnett.<sup>4</sup>

They leave home by age 19 and for the next seven years live neither with a marriage partner or their parents. Because of this, emerging adulthood is a time that they

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<sup>2</sup>Arnett and Tanner, *Emerging Adults in America*, 12.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Frye, “A Record 21.6 Million in 2012: A Rising Share of Young Adults Live in their Parents’ Home,” Pew Research Center (August 1, 2013), accessed April 19, 2016, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/08/01/a-rising-share-of-young-adults-live-in-their-parents-home/>. In the United States of America, the number of 18-31 year-olds living with parents or other kin has increased from 36 percent to 43 percent—the so-called Millennial generation—were living in their parents’ home, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data. This is the highest share in at least four decades. A record total of 21.6 million Millennials lived in their parents’ home in 2012, up from 18.5 million of their same aged counterparts in 2007. At least 75 percent of adults 25-34 who are single are living at home with their parents.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 13.

have the freedom to focus on their personal development and to have life experiences they will not be able to have once they make commitments to careers, families, and other life responsibilities.<sup>5</sup>

For Arnett, this freedom is not a bad thing nor does it earn them the label of selfish. Almost all emerging adults will eventually make commitments to others. They are now better able to understand others' viewpoints and are less egocentric than they were when they were adolescents. They recognize that they will become less self-focused and see being others oriented and more considerate as a key part of adulthood.<sup>6</sup> Eventually, as adults they will reject selfishness in themselves and others as a part of achieving adulthood. In this they illustrate what has become the very abstract idea of what makes an adult.

The current generation of emerging adults sees much more abstract ideas such as self-sufficiency to be what marks the transition to emerging adulthood. Being self-focused means that they have the least social control from binding relationships and the greatest scope for independent decision making during emerging adulthood, but these characteristics do not automatically equate to selfishness.<sup>7</sup> Rather the problem is the imposition of old standards onto a new paradigm.

As emerging adults embrace this ability to focus on themselves and their identity they are often encouraged to do so by their parents. Now that emerging adults are no longer expected to marry young and be on track for a solid career they have the opportunity to make decisions reflecting the wider time horizon. In fact, because of these new time expectations few would be ready to embrace the challenges of modern

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<sup>5</sup>Jeffrey Arnett, "Suffering, Selfish, Slackers? Myths and Reality about Emerging Adults," *Journal of Youth and Adolescents* 36 (2007): 26.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 30.

adulthood if it presented itself because they have not been prepared to do so.<sup>8</sup>

Rather than being settled, most emerging adults understand themselves to be in a phase of life that is free, fluid, tentative, experimental, and relatively unbound by undesired encumbrances and responsibilities to others and they want to enjoy it while it lasts. It is here though that a bit of a tension over life goals is often expressed. On one hand they want to acquire independence and the ability to stand on their own two feet, but most of them also do not want full adulthood to come too quickly. They find the current phase of life between their adolescence and their full adulthood challenging and sometimes difficult. However they also want to relish it as the time to be young, have fun, and avoid major responsibilities. Nearly all emerging adults want to settle down eventually, someday, but not now.<sup>9</sup>

In the meantime many want to spend a good chunk of their twenties enjoying their newfound freedom, having a good time, doing things they think they will never be able to do again—maybe traveling, maybe partying, having lots of different kinds of relationships, and so on. Someday in the future, when they've got their youthful passions worked out of their systems, then they will settle down. Settling down looks a lot like it always has: settling into a long-term career, finding a good spouse, becoming monogamous, having two or three kids, buying a nice house, getting some nicer cars, maybe a boat, enjoying some nice family vacations—the whole American Dream. But that settling down is years, perhaps many years off in the future.<sup>10</sup>

Parents have allowed this to take place, probably for a number of reasons. Some parents may regret their marriage and career choices, particularly those choices made in the early twenties and therefore encourage their children to take their time in

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>9</sup>Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 56.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 57.

making decisions that may have far reaching impact in their lives. It seems that sometimes parents are simply not ready to let go, attempting to retain a measure of control in their children's lives and hovering around nearby. This combination of not wanting to grow up and not wanting to let go can be a contributing factor in creating this self-focused age of emerging adulthood.<sup>11</sup>

For some, it is in fact the current generation of adults who are to blame for the self-focused mindset of emerging adults. These adults have chauffeured around the current generation of emerging adults to and fro to soccer games, ballet lessons and music recitals since their infancy. They have told them that they are the center of the world, that everyone is a winner, and that their self-esteem is what is most important. How could a generation so coddled for so long not develop a self-focused view of life? While the extent of the influence of parents on these identifying characteristic of emerging adulthood can be debated, what cannot be is the fact that parents, by their presence or absence, by their conduct, words and deeds have a large influence on their children.<sup>12</sup>

In describing eight “net generation”<sup>13</sup> characteristics, the self-focused nature of emerging adults is described as customization and personalization. They are a generation raised on the ability to change the media world around them—they customize their desktop, web site, ring tone, twitter handle, and entertainment. They are a generation that has grown up with the ability to choose what media they want, when and how they receive it. In many ways it seems that the new norm is the ability to custom content and

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<sup>11</sup>Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 31.

<sup>12</sup>Stephen Moore, “This Boomer Isn’t Going to Apologize,” in *The Millennial Generation: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. David Haugen and Susan Musser (Detroit: Gale Cengage Learning, 2013), 134-35.

<sup>13</sup>Roughly equivalent to the millennials, which is those individuals who are currently the first generation through the life stage defined by Arnett as emerging adulthood.

product to the consumer desire.<sup>14</sup> This new norm for millennials/emerging adults gives credence to the idea that they are self-focused and that their parents have helped develop this tendency within them.

### **Biblical Truth about being Self-Focused**

Arnett ardently makes the distinction between being self-focused and selfish. This distinction becomes much more difficult when examining the Scripture. The whole of Scripture is to create a focus that is off of self and towards God first and neighbor second. The command is there to love others as one loves themselves. Ephesians 5:28-29 uses this kind of demand to reflect the love that should be present from a husband for his wife, “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church.” The husband is not commanded to love himself, only to use the measure of that self-love to consider the way in which he is to love his bride.

Individuals in Scripture are encouraged to focus on self as a part of the sanctification process. Second Corinthians 13:5-6 says, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test. I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.” This is not a self-focus that leads to fun and play but one that leads to Christlikeness.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 contains the Shema, which is focused on attitude toward God:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and

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<sup>14</sup>Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009), 34.

when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The Lord is to be loved with the whole heart, soul and might. Everything that makes up the person is to be consumed with love for God. Not only is the whole person to be focused on loving God, but each individual family is responsible for teaching this love to their children. This may be one of the key failures that has led to emerging adults' self-focused behavior; Christian parents who have taught their children that they are the center of the world rather than teaching them that the Lord is to be at the center of their life regardless of how old they are.

Leviticus 19:9-18 takes this all-encompassing love for God and focuses it on others because of the character of God. Who God is drives how His people behave. Leviticus 19:18 says, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD." This sums the previous verses up, requiring that the poor are cared for, the truth is spoken and conduct is righteous. This is all others focused behavior that is expected of every adult within the community.

Jesus repeats this commandment in Matthew 22:35-40:

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.'

As Jesus refers to the love that the individual has for God he refers to wholehearted devotion to God with every aspect of one's being, from whatever angle one chooses to consider it—emotionally, volitionally, or cognitively. This kind of "love" for God will then result in obedience to all he has commanded.<sup>15</sup> Love for God results in love for those around the individual. "As yourself" is not a call to self-love but does

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<sup>15</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 332.

presuppose it. The assumption that people already love themselves in a deep and abiding way clarifies how each person is to love their neighbor. These two commandments are the greatest because all others flow from them; indeed the whole Old Testament hangs on them. In other words, all other commandments in Scripture are summed up and/or contained in these two relatively simple and straightforward commands.<sup>16</sup> This type of love for God and neighbor precludes a stage of development where individuals are excused from this behavior to focus on themselves and build their identity.

Depending on how they are counted there are more than thirty “one-another” phrases in the New Testament.<sup>17</sup>

Prefer one another (Rom 12:10); be devoted to one another in brotherly love (Rom 12:10); same mind to one another (Rom 12:16); build up one another (Rom 14:19); accept one another (Rom 15:7); admonish one another (Rom 15:14); care for one another (1 Cor 12:25); do not envy one another (Gal 5:26); speak truthfully to one another (Eph 4:25); be kind to one another (Eph 4:32); be subject to one another (Eph 5:21); have regard for one another (Phil 2:3); do not lie to one another (Col 3:9); bear with one another (Col 3:13); teach one another (Col 3:16); love one another (1 Thess 3:12); comfort one another (1 Thess 4:18); encourage one another (1 Thess 5:11); be at peace with one another (1 Thess 5:13); seek good for one another (1 Thess 5:15); pray for one another (1 Tim 2:1); stimulate one another (Heb 10:24); do not speak against one another (Jas 4:11); don’t complain about one another (Jas 5:9); confess to one another (Jas 5:16); be hospitable to one another (1 Pet 4:9); serve one another (1 Pet 4:10); be humble toward one another (1 Pet 5:5); greet one another (1 Pet 5:14); fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7).<sup>18</sup>

Whether there are 28, 31, 59 or somewhere in-between, the tone of the New Testament is that believers should be others focused. At least five different human authors of the New Testament include these one another commands. In none of these contexts is there any exclusion for any particular age or life situation. The presumption is that if the individual hearing or reading the words is a believer they are to be others

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<sup>16</sup>Blomberg, *Matthew*, 336.

<sup>17</sup>Carl F. George counts 59 “one anothers.” Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Tarrytown, PA: Revell, 1991), 129-31. No matter how they are counted it is clear that Scripture is concerned that all Christians live a life that is focused outside themselves.

<sup>18</sup>Stuart Scott, *Exemplary Husband: A Biblical Perspective* (Bemidji, MN: Focus Publishing, 2002.), 319-321.

focused.

There are two of the one-another passages that seem to be particularly relevant to the situation of emerging adults and the idea of it being the most self-focused age. The first is in Ephesians 5:21 “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Each Christian is to make his or her interests subordinate to those of his or her fellow Christian.<sup>19</sup> The verb “to submit” is used in military contexts of a subordinate’s relationship to his superior in the army hierarchy. It is used of a wife’s relation to her husband in Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1; of servants to masters in Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:12; of people to state authorities in Romans 13:1. It means “to be subject to, obey, be ruled by.”<sup>20</sup> When someone is submitting to others out of reverence to Christ they are doing so in a way that denies their own desires and self-focused goals. Submission, to its very core, is others focused. It is focused on accomplishing their goals, desires, and commands. As Paul writes to the Ephesians he is instructing the believing community to put the others within the faith community in front of, and over, their own selves. Submission is a denial of self. When one denies themselves by their very nature they cannot be self-focused.

Matthew Henry writes,

Here the apostle begins his exhortation to the discharge of relative duties. As a general foundation for these duties, he lays down that rule v. 21. There is a mutual submission that Christians owe one to another, condescending to bear one another’s burdens: not advancing themselves above others, nor domineering over one another and giving laws to one another. Paul was an example of this truly Christian temper, for he *became all things to all men*. We must be of a yielding and of a submissive spirit, and ready to all the duties of the respective places and stations that God has allotted to us in the world. *In the fear of God*, that is, so far as is consistent with the fear of God, for his sake, and out of conscience towards him, and that hereby we may give proof that we truly fear him. Where there is this mutual condescension and submission, the duties of all relations will be the better performed.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 138.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 139.

<sup>21</sup>Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and*

Believers cannot live in community when they are focused on self rather than others. When Christians are willing to commit to each other they are able to better build relationship and imitate Christ.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:15 Paul writes to the Thessalonians commanding them, “see that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.” Rather than repaying a wrong with retaliatory justice, believers were to “always seek to do good.” Saying “try to be kind” fails to convey the urgency and effort implied in Paul’s exhortation, *to agathon diōkete*, “pursue the good.”<sup>22</sup> The same verb is used to say that the Christian must actively pursue virtues such as love (1 Cor 14:1; cf. “hospitality,” Rom 12:13), maturity (Phil 3:12–14), the peace and edification of the fellowship (Rom 14:19), and righteousness (1 Tim 6:11).<sup>23</sup> Paul encouraged the Thessalonians to pursue the good “always,” both for those within their faith community and for “everyone else” as well. The adverb “always” along with the use of a present tense imperative calls for continuity in the believers’ behavior.<sup>24</sup>

“One another” refers to the Christian fellowship, and “everyone else” is all those outside the fellowship. Together they call for the Christian to seek good for everyone.<sup>25</sup> A Christian is commanded to seek the good of others, and not even just those within their local church or even the universal church, but everyone! Someone who is focused on this type of behavior cannot be self-focused. They may be free from responsibilities to others in the particular sense of marriage, parenting, and/or a long term career, but they are never free from the responsibility of seeking good for everyone. In fact, given the

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*Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 2317.

<sup>22</sup>D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, The New American Commentary 33 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 179.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 180.

freedom that an emerging adult has from specific individuals such as a long term employer, spouse or children, they are most free to pursue the good of the most number of people.

When Paul describes the “new life” to the Church at Ephesus he illustrates the transition from being self-focused to other focused. The church is to speak truthfully to one another, to not be angry with one another, and they are not simply to stop stealing. Rather the one who stole is to work so that he has something to share with anyone in need. Not only are they to work as a community so that they are able to give to those in need, their speech should be good for building up and giving grace to those who hear. Each of these commands is others focused through relationships within the community. An individual believer does have personal responsibilities and work to do on their own sanctification, but for Paul, the natural outflowing of that change is to focus on the good of and building up of others.

The foot washing episode from John 13:1-20 is very instructive for believers as well. Not only are there commands from the Old Testament for the Israelites to be God and others focused, commands from Jesus that every Christian should love their neighbor as themselves, and a list of commands for believers to do to “one another” throughout the New Testament, the Gospel of John includes a powerful illustration and teaching time that commands in the imitation of Christ the service of others.

Serving another person is by its very definition other focused. It removes the focus from personal needs to the needs of the one being served. The desires of a servant do not matter, only the desires of the one they are serving. A servant is someone who performs duties for another person. The foot washing of the disciples by Jesus in the first part of the chapter becomes in verses 14 and 15 the example for the disciples to follow. It is precisely because their Lord and Teacher was willing to adopt the humbling model of foot washing that Jesus’ disciples cannot treat humility as merely a nice idea that is

unrelated to Christian life.<sup>26</sup> After giving this object lesson in humility the Lord questioned the disciples in order to draw out the significance of the lesson. The fact that he was teacher and Lord shows that Jesus is on a higher level than the disciples, yet He had done an incredibly humble service for them. Meeting others' needs self-sacrificially is what they were supposed to do as well. This is a clear call for emerging adults who claim to be believers to ignore the prescription to find themselves in the most self-focused age.

This service of washing the feet of disciples is set against a background of a discussion of position and authority among the disciples. They were "self-focused" and worried about what their position and authority might be in the future. Jesus quietly confronts this quarrel and self-focused nature by doing a lowly job, and then calling the disciples to imitate him. They have just finished recognizing that he is both their teacher and their Lord and he uses this understanding that they have of his very character to confront their own selfish nature.

Jesus teaches that blessing comes through the humble service of others. This is an important concept in helping the emerging adult to understand service. They serve to imitate Christ, and it is being others focused that they are blessed.

Many emerging adults have bought into the idea that being self-focused is what can make them happy. This is the same lie that Satan whispered in the Garden. He took the focus off of what God had commanded, what great blessings He had given, and placed it on what Adam and Eve were "missing out on." An emerging adult that is encouraged to focus on themselves is taking their eyes off of what God has given them, the blessing in serving others and will ultimately bring themselves broken relationships and isolation through self-centeredness.

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<sup>26</sup>Gerald L. Borchert, *John 12–21*, The New American Commentary 25B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 86.

## Clarifying and Reinterpreting The Most Self-Focused Age

Emerging adults are more self-focused in a “free” way than any other age. Children and adolescents are self-focused because of their developmental nature, and mature adults are able to understand, empathize with, and focus on more than their own needs. In his research Christian Smith found emerging adults to be particularly self-focused. He writes,

The emerging adults studied in the interviews are not big on volunteering and voluntary financial giving, at least at this point in their lives. They are so focused on themselves, especially on learning to stand on their own two feet, that they seem incapable of thinking more broadly about community involvement, good citizenship, or even the most modest levels of charitable giving.<sup>27</sup>

It may be a false distinction to differentiate between being self-focused and selfish; each is concerned with self and self-desires rather than those around them. A new survey by marketing firm DDB finds millennials, those between 19 and 34 years old (this is the current and first generation of emerging adults), may be more venal and self-aggrandizing than older folks. They are more likely to consider themselves workaholics even with a work ethic their elders find lacking and 27 percent of millennials say they would take credit for a colleague’s work if it helped them get ahead. Just 15 percent of Generation Xers and 5 percent of baby boomers say they would do that.<sup>28</sup>

The latest American Freshman Survey, an annual survey of thousands of college freshman conducted for the last 47 years shows a self-focused nature that is certainly not positive. In it, some four-fifths of survey respondents rank their “drive to succeed” above average and more students than ever before consider themselves gifted.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 71.

<sup>28</sup>Rick Newman, “If Millennials are Jerks, Blame Baby Boomers,” *Yahoo Finance*, September 2, 2014, accessed December 18, 2014, [http://finance.yahoo.com/news/if-millennials-are-jerks--blame-the-baby-boomers200028613.html;\\_ylt=AOLEV1d.uQhU874AelxXNyoA;\\_ylu=X3oDMTEExNjdtbnJtBHNIYwNzcgRwb3MDMgRjb2xvA2JmMQR2dGlkA1VJQzFfMQ--](http://finance.yahoo.com/news/if-millennials-are-jerks--blame-the-baby-boomers200028613.html;_ylt=AOLEV1d.uQhU874AelxXNyoA;_ylu=X3oDMTEExNjdtbnJtBHNIYwNzcgRwb3MDMgRjb2xvA2JmMQR2dGlkA1VJQzFfMQ--).

<sup>29</sup>Jenna Goudreau, “Are Millennials Deluded Narcissists?” *Forbes*, January 15, 2013, accessed October 30, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2013/01/15/are-millennials-deluded->

There appears to be a disconnect between how emerging adults view themselves and the world around them and how the older generations view them. This is certainly not exclusive to them; each generation approaches the following one with some concern, but the emerging adults seem to have reached a new level of self-involvement.

Compared to those of previous generations, recent American college students are more likely to view themselves as above average on attributes such as academic ability, drive to achieve, leadership ability, self-confidence, and writing ability.<sup>30</sup> Seventy-three percent more college students in 2009 (vs. 1966) rated themselves as above average in social self-confidence, 53 percent more in writing ability, 54 percent more in intellectual self-confidence, 48 percent more in public speaking ability, and 51 percent more in leadership ability. Self-evaluations of understanding others and cooperativeness were unchanged, and self-evaluations of emotional health, physical health, and spirituality decreased.<sup>31</sup> This is a significant increase in their view of self.

For Twenge this shows a rise in narcissism:

These increases occurred despite the decreased selectivity of 4-year colleges over this time, which should have pushed comparisons with peers lower instead of higher, and were not explained by changes in objective performance or increased effort. Increases in positive self-views were limited to agentic traits and did not extend to communal traits such as cooperativeness, understanding others, or spirituality. This is consistent with previous research finding generational increases in agentic traits and either no change or declines in communal traits. Given that narcissism correlates highly with agentic traits but either nonsignificantly or negatively with communal traits, these results are also consistent with studies finding a generational increase in narcissism.<sup>32</sup>

Narcissism can be defined as extreme selfishness, with a grandiose view of one's own talents and a craving for admiration. That certainly seems to fit Arnett's description of emerging adults in the self-focused age pretty well. Arnett does disagree

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narcissists/.

<sup>30</sup>Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, "Generational Increases in Agentic Self-Evaluations among American College Students, 1966-2009," *Self and Identity* 11 (2012): 416.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 417.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 420.

with Twenge in her methodology and results but they are certainly worth noting.

Lev Grossman of *Time* describes emerging adults and their self-focused manner this way:

There was a time when people looked forward to taking on the mantle of adulthood. That time is past. Now our culture trains young people to fear it. "I don't ever want a lawn," says Swann. "I don't ever want to drive two hours to get to work. I do not want to be a parent. I mean, hell, why would I? There's so much fun to be had while you're young." He does have a point. Twixters have all the privileges of grownups now but only some of the responsibilities. From the point of view of the twixters, upstairs in their childhood bedrooms, snuggled up under their *Star Wars* comforters, it can look all downhill.<sup>33</sup>

It all looks downhill when someone is looking from a place of a self-focused happiness towards a life that moves them beyond that to a time in life that demands a focus on others.

Arnett describes how being self-focused explains some of the behavior that is seen today:

Emerging adulthood as the self-focused age also helps explain why young men in their twenties play electronic games at higher rates than people in any other age group. Being self-focused means having fewer daily social obligations, responsibilities, and restraints than people do at other stages of life. Unlike in childhood or adolescence, parents are not around in emerging adulthood to ask (or order) the young man to turn off the games and do homework, or come to dinner, or go to sleep, or ... something. Once the commitments of adulthood come along, there will be a spouse or partner to tell him to turn off the games, and probably children who need a lot of care and attention that is incompatible with long hours in front of a screen. It is only during emerging adulthood that it is possible to spend hours a day playing electronic games without anyone else objecting.<sup>34</sup>

It is very difficult to see what benefit hours spent in front of a screen brings to any young man. He is not engaged in any of the hard work of exploring who God created him to be, what path he should take in life, or how he can use the skills and talents that he possesses to make the world a better place. He is simply engaged in gratifying himself at

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<sup>33</sup>Lev Grossman, "Grow Up? Not so Fast" *Time Magazine*, January 16, 2005, 3, accessed January 11, 2013, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1018089-3,00.html>.

<sup>34</sup>Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press), loc. 4275-81. Kindle.

the most base level. The young man described above is simply lazy, slothful and unable to do anything positive without someone around to hold him accountable. This is an incredibly sad picture of young men, though it appears to be a fairly accurate one. The young man who cannot manage himself, who can do nothing productive, such as homework or even eat or sleep at the appropriate time, but finds himself so enraptured with a game is the sluggard described in Proverbs.

### **Positive Truth**

No doubt emerging adults are living in an age that gives them great flexibility and fewer responsibilities than they may have at any other point in their lives. Certainly at this point in history contemporary American culture has encouraged emerging adults to focus on themselves rather than preparing them for the biblical command to serve others.

Recognizing the freedom from responsibility is important from a biblical worldview because it allows emerging adults an unparalleled opportunity for service to others. The singular state in which emerging adults find themselves has potentially fewer encumbrances and distractions than the married state, therefore this stage more easily facilitates a spirit of undivided devotion to the Lord than any other. Rather than encouraging emerging adults to use this unhindered time to focus on self, they should be encouraged to take full advantage of their fleeting freedom from responsibility to pursue service to the Lord.

In 1 Corinthians 7:32 Paul encourages the single, “I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the thing of the Lord, how to please the Lord.” Paul then contrasts that to the married man that has responsibilities to a wife. Paul had already recognized what Arnett takes notice of, namely that unencumbered individuals are free in a way that those who are bound to a marriage and family are not. However, Paul encourages the believer to fully embrace the work of the Lord rather than to focus on self. Nowhere does Paul say, “Take full advantage of your singleness now,

play video games, sleep around, hop from job to job and travel the world. Let yourself go and find who you really are. If you do not do this you will regret it for years to come.” Paul encourages godly service in a way that will be impossible once a man (or woman) finds themselves bound to another individual and responsible to them. This should be a great word of caution to parents who are preparing their children to head out into the world. They should be preparing them, from a very early age, to embrace the attitude that Paul encourages singles to embrace rather than the attitude of selfishness that Arnett (and the culture as a whole) encourages them and gives them permission to embrace.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned His followers against letting concern for the material aspects of this life distract them from devotion to God (Matt. 6:25–34). The poor widow (Mark 12:44) gave all her material sustenance to God as an act of singular devotion. A married man or woman has necessary concerns for the well-being of their family, and would have been less likely to do that. The situation illustrates Paul’s point that the single life with its reduced familial obligations allows a potentially greater commitment of time, resources, and self to the Lord than would be possible for a married person dutifully carrying out the marital and familial obligations attached to that state.<sup>35</sup> An emerging adult who is unmarried and unconnected to a long term career has an unparalleled opportunity to serve the Great Commission. There will be few, if any other times in a person’s life where they are an adult with the freedom to pursue service to the Lord wherever they may go.

This is the perfect opportunity for churches, parents and spiritual mentors to encourage emerging adults to use their time in a way that is God glorifying rather than self-serving; to serve in missions all over the world in ways that are difficult, if not impossible for those with families to do. The freedom from a long term career and an

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<sup>35</sup>David K. Lowery, *1 Corinthians*, The Bible Knowledge Commentary 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 520.

already transitory lifestyle allows them to move to pursue ministry opportunities, rather than to move in order to pursue self-fulfilling motives.

## **Implications and Application**

### **Parents of Young Children**

One of the main factors promoting the self-focused characteristics of emerging adults is that they are afraid that they will no longer be able to have fun once they begin to marry, have children, and move on in a career. A parent's attitude toward these things when they are young children will have a long lasting impact as they grow. How parents speak about their lives, the joys and challenges present in them, will frame how emerging adults approach their own situations. Parents who spend years complaining about work and coworkers, the challenges of parenting and married life will have children who grow up and desire to postpone those sorts of responsibilities as long as possible and stay focused on themselves and their joy. On the contrary, parents who express joy at parenting and marriage and see work as an opportunity to glorify God will raise children who long for the excitement of responsibility for others as they grow.

### **Parents of Emerging Adults**

Emerging adulthood is truly in a unique life stage—they are free from many responsibilities they will have later in life and yet have more freedom than they have had before now. Some of that freedom relies on ongoing parental financial support either directly or through living at home. Parents should help them utilize that freedom in ways that glorify God, rather than extensive video game playing, shopping focused on their own desires, or other self-centered pursuits. This is the time for them to travel—not solely for educational purposes (that's focused on themselves), but rather for mission trips, service around the world for the spread of the Gospel and the glory of God. They have the opportunity to use their free time to serve in the local church and these missions

opportunities not only help them take the focus off of themselves and fulfill a biblical call but can help them discover opportunities and gifts that God has given them as they move through life.

Families should encourage emerging adults to lead a radical life, one far different than their peers. They are indeed free in ways they will not be in the future, and now is the time for them to capitalize on that freedom in unique ways for the Gospel. Parents should not hold them back, but encourage them to go, to explore and embrace ministry opportunities in the dark and dangerous places, to “go outside the camp” as Hebrews 13 puts it for the spread of the Gospel.

### **Church Leaders**

It can be scary to put emerging adults in leadership positions, to give them ministries and to allow them responsibility. They haven’t been around the church that long, they are historically mobile and could be considered unreliable by some, but they are free in ways that many in the church are not. They do not have family responsibilities; many do not have extensive work or home responsibilities and have the extra time to serve in powerful ways. Leaders should mentor and disciple them and give them responsibilities to execute ministries. This will allow them to lead—they are innovative and think in ways far different than many current church leaders. The combination of time and creativity can be a powerful force for the Gospel and for the growth of the local church.

Emerging adults need to be engaged in the breadth of ministries at church, quickly. If they have a desire for a ministry that is not currently operating, they should be given the encouragement and resources necessary to make that ministry happen. This is the fulfillment of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7 as he encouraged the single state in order to remain unencumbered and focused on serving God only. Emerging adults have to be provided these sorts of outlets, yet too often in the local church the primary concern

becomes length of tenure in the church or age rather than gifting, desire, and opportunity to serve.

### **Christian Higher Education**

This is a unique time for emerging adults. Many are still receiving parental support and they are engaged in learning and being encouraged to focus on figuring out what they want to be when they grow up and how they are going to impact the world in the future. The challenge is that they have unique opportunities to impact the world for Jesus now. A school could welcome new students by giving them a towel, then preach on John 13 and remind them that Jesus did not see himself too great to serve others, and that He has commanded that each of His followers do the same. Following this they break up each of the new students into small groups with a faculty advisor and have them brainstorm ways that they can “wash the feet” of their fellow students, the local community and the world. Following this the school should hold them accountable to do service over the course of their educational career. A service requirement for graduation will help to motivate them to utilize their freedom in ways that fulfill the great commission. Graduation should come with another commission, and another towel, a reminder that their call to service is not ending, but just beginning.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE AGE OF FEELING IN-BETWEEN

The exploratory nature and instability of emerging adulthood give it the quality of an in-between period. Emerging adults are between adolescence, when most people live in their parents' home and are required to attend middle and high school, and young adulthood, when most people have entered marriage and parenthood and have settled into a stable occupational path. In-between the restrictions of adolescence and the responsibilities of adulthood lay the explorations and instability of emerging adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

The feeling of being fully adult takes a long time to attain, and for a substantial period they feel in-between, as if they are emerging into adulthood but not there yet. The explanation for this phenomenon lies at least in part in the criteria emerging adults consider to be most important for becoming an adult: events such as finishing their education or getting married, milestones that take place at a specific time and that a person clearly either has or has not reached are no longer their key events. On the contrary, the criteria most important to them are reached gradually, so their feeling of becoming adult is gradual too. The top three criteria for adulthood are now: accept responsibility for yourself, make independent decisions, and become financially independent. Most emerging adults are in their late 20's by the time they feel they have met this criteria.<sup>2</sup>

By their late 20s they have become confident that they have reached a point

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<sup>1</sup>Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 14.

<sup>2</sup>Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Tanner, eds., *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 12.

where they accept responsibility, make their own decisions, and are financially independent. They have often gotten to a point where they support themselves by their jobs and live on their own. However, while they are in the process of developing those qualities, they feel in-between adolescence and full adulthood.<sup>3</sup>

According to Arnett, learning to accept responsibility for yourself means taking over responsibilities that had been previously assumed by your parents and no longer expecting your parents to shoulder the responsibility for the consequences of things you have done. Making independent decisions means no longer having important decisions about your life made or influenced by your parents. Becoming financially independent means no longer having your parents pay some or all of your bills. Emerging adults are on the way to achieving independence in all three of these respects, but during emerging adulthood they are in-between, not there yet. They still rely on their parents in ways they expect will not continue once they become fully adult, especially for money but also for advice and emotional support.<sup>4</sup>

The shift in perceived requirements for adulthood contributes to the feeling of being in-between. If you are neither the child who lived under your parents' authority, nor an independent adult, you are left with "in-between." In the past (and many cultures today), the crossing of the threshold to adulthood has been relatively clear, with the focus on a single event: marriage. According to anthropologists, cultures all over the world have shared a common belief that marriage marks not only the joining together of two persons in a life-long partnership but also the attainment of full adult status.<sup>5</sup> Through most of American history, until late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, getting married meant reaching full adulthood.

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<sup>3</sup>Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), loc. 514-16, Kindle.

<sup>4</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 48.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 208.

Marriage no longer has this meaning in American society. It is meaningful in other important ways, of course, but its status as a marker of adulthood has passed. What explains the demise of marriage as a marker of adulthood? Perhaps most important is that marriage is a much less dramatic transition than it used to be even 40 or 50 years ago. By the time they marry, the majority of today's emerging adults have already known each other for several years, had a regular sexual relationship, and lived in the same household. Being married may feel different to them psychologically than cohabiting did, but in fact not much changes in their daily lives.<sup>6</sup>

Marriage continues to decline as a marker of much of anything for today's emerging adults. It has moved from a desirable outcome to a delayed outcome to a questionable outcome altogether. Single Americans now make up more than half of the adult population for the first time since the United States government began compiling statistics. A total of 124.6 million Americans were single in August 2104, just over 50 percent of all Americans over the age of 16. In comparison, in 1976 it was just 37 percent.<sup>7</sup> This decline in marriage leads more and more emerging adults to find themselves between what was traditionally the marker of really reaching "adult" status and what has now become a very ambiguous set of markers.

Along with marriage there has been a seismic shift in another traditional marker of adulthood—home ownership. Emerging adults living a much more transient lifestyle as they are in-between do not want to be tied down to a mortgage.<sup>8</sup> Since 2008, the year that Lehman Brothers collapsed and home prices dropped, there has been a steady increase in the number of people ages 18 to 34 renting homes instead of buying.

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<sup>6</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 208.

<sup>7</sup>*Bloomberg Business*, accessed October 28, 2014, [www.bloomberg.com/new/2014-09-09/single-american-now-comprise-more-than-half-the-u-s-population.html](http://www.bloomberg.com/new/2014-09-09/single-american-now-comprise-more-than-half-the-u-s-population.html).

<sup>8</sup>*Yahoo Finance*, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/no-picket-fence-younger-adults-010109865.html>.

Almost 875,000 more households are now made up of emerging adult renters than would have existed if the trend in 2008 had held steady.<sup>9</sup> Even as the economy improves emerging adults are moving to rental apartments from shared spaces and their parents homes.

Developers are targeting this new generation of those emerging adults who are in-between, in-between their parents' home and the home that they may (or may not) one day purchase. High end complexes targeted at emerging adults feature built in Ipod docks, outdoor movie theaters, fire pits, pools and rooftop decks to offer the luxury features that the rental generation desires but could never afford in a home. They desire a hotel like experience.<sup>10</sup>

Emerging adults are definitely taking longer to reach any sense of financial self-responsibility. One of the main signs that it takes a long time to grow up these days is in how long it takes to achieve financial independence. Nearly half (44 percent) of parents say they provide their 18 to 29 year olds with either “frequent support when needed” or “regular support for living expenses,” according to the Clark parents poll, and only 26 percent provide “little or none.”<sup>11</sup> This seems to be counterintuitive for a group of individuals wanting to learn to be financially independent—they certainly cannot do that while relying on their parents' financial support.

In most societies, reaching adulthood is a valued achievement. Being an adult means having a certain authority, commanding respect, and being allowed to participate in activities forbidden to children and adolescents. In American society too, entering adulthood is something most emerging adults regard as an achievement. They take pride in being able to fulfill the responsibilities necessary for independent adult life: holding a

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<sup>9</sup>*Yahoo Finance*, accessed October 28, 2014, <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/no-picket-fence-younger-adults-010109865.html>.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., loc. 1593-95, Kindle.

job, paying their bills, running a household. They enjoy being able to run their own lives and make their own decisions about where their lives should go. However, many emerging adults are ambivalent about reaching adulthood. It is nice to have the freedom to run your own life, and it is satisfying to be able to handle adult responsibilities competently. But mixed in with their pride in reaching adulthood is dread and reluctance. In part, this ambivalence results from a realization that adult responsibilities can be burdensome and annoying. The other source of their ambivalence about entering adulthood is that they associate becoming an adult with stagnation.<sup>12</sup> There appears to be a true reticence on the behalf of emerging adults to reach adulthood, they would rather remain in the world of “in-between.”

Emerging adults seem to feel that once they become adults they cease growing and changing, that there is no more movement or freedom. Eric Erickson writes, “While the end of adolescence thus is the stage of an overt identity crisis, identity formation neither begins nor ends with adolescence: it is a lifelong development largely unconscious to the individual and society.”<sup>13</sup> Individuals continue to change and grow throughout their lives. They neither begin to form who they are when they reach this stage of emerging adulthood, nor does personal growth and formation end when the stage finishes and they finally move on to adulthood.

### **Biblical Truth about the “Age of In-Between”**

One of the first truths in wrestling with emerging adults and their being “in-between” is that Scripture shows no such “in-between” world. It was shown previously in the thesis that the Bible delineates between adults and children, but gives no in-between time. There is an expected level of accountability for an adult that is not present

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<sup>12</sup>Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood* (2004), 218.

<sup>13</sup>Erik Erickson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1980), 122.

for children. The children (those under twenty) are not held to the same standard as adults. Certainly in the nation of Israel during the time of wandering in the wilderness there were children that grumbled alongside their parents, but they are not judged and excluded from the Promised Land because of it.

In Deuteronomy 1:39 Moses writes, “And as for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess it.” The children who they were trying to protect are excluded from the pronouncement of judgment. The adults would face the consequences of their actions, but the children would not face any consequences though they were involved during the same time. There are children and there are adults

In Deuteronomy 24:16 the Lord makes it clear that the children would not be punished for the father’s sin, nor the fathers for the children’s sin. When combined in context from the other passages of judgment we see clearly in the Old Testament that the Lord differentiated between children and adults, and it appears that the age at which that distinction was made was twenty years old. When a boy turned twenty he was a man and held to a standard of obedience. Scripturally there is no room for a stage of reduced responsibility in-between childhood and adulthood. Maturity comes in time and does not come immediately, instantly or at a designated age. Accountability for one’s actions does begin at a specific point, in both the Old Testament age and in modern society. In both cases, from several thousand years ago until the present day it appears that age is twenty years old (give or take a little bit).

While there is no room biblically for a stage that is in-between childhood and adulthood, there is clearly the concept that there is a season for everything. The book of Ecclesiastes makes it clear that life is full of seasons and that each of those seasons has a purpose.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 says,

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.

Having a season for everything means that emerging adults can truly still seek some of the things that Arnett says being in-between is great for, but it means they cannot live and operate as though they are without accountability or responsibility. Truly the season of life is different at twenty-five than at forty-five and again at sixty-five.

The Apostle Paul recognized that there are challenges inherent in being a young adult and exhorted Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12, “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.” The exhortation that Paul offers does not lower the standard for Timothy because he is young; rather it is higher because of the necessity of his exemplary conduct. Paul was clearly concerned that Timothy’s age, though he was an adult, might be a hindrance to him. While there is no way of determining exactly how old Timothy was, obviously he was younger than Paul, and most probably younger than many of the church leaders and members who were under his charge. In a culture where age was revered and the younger adults given a somewhat lower value, it was important for young leaders to be encouraged to regard youth as an asset and not as a liability.<sup>14</sup>

Paul’s description of Timothy as “young” does not need that he must be pictured as a teenager or even a young adult in his early twenties. Acceptable estimates of Timothy’s age could easily place him between thirty and thirty-five years old. There are some commentators that would place him in his mid to late twenties. Certainly some

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<sup>14</sup>Daniel C. Arichea and Howard Hatton, *A Handbook on Paul’s Letters to Timothy and to Titus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1995), 103.

Christians in Ephesus might have chafed at receiving instructions from a man this young.<sup>15</sup>

Timothy's age is of interest in this passage, but what are even more relevant to the discussion are the exhortations and standards of behavior that Paul sets for this young man. He is commanded to be an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. The traits listed by Paul divide into two groups. The terms speech and life are outwardly observable or public traits. Speech refers to all types of verbal expression, and life describes general behavior. Paul wanted Timothy to be known for wise words rather than for rash, impetuous drivel. The second group of characteristics, consisting of love, faith, and purity, refers to inner traits. Paul desired a love that demonstrates itself for both God and others. The term here in the Greek likely represents an attitude of faithfulness or trustworthiness rather than right belief. The call for purity demands both sexual purity and integrity of heart.<sup>16</sup>

Making independent decisions is another criteria used to determine whether one "feels" like an adult. The general thrust of emerging adulthood and independent decision making seems to really mean that they are making decisions independent of their parents and the accountability present there. The Bible however cautions about independent decision making and encourages the use of wise counselors in making decisions.

Proverbs 15:22 says, "Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed." Rather than emerging adults being encouraged to make decisions independently, or even worse in many cases, make decisions on the counsel of their friends, they should be encouraged to seek the counsel of wise individuals who have their

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<sup>15</sup>Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New American Commentary 34A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 137–38.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

best interest in mind. For most emerging adults the wisest individuals in their lives who have their best interests at heart will more than likely be their parents. This does not mean that they are paralyzed with fear or unable to make basic decisions on their own, rather it means that they avail themselves of the wisdom that the years and the Lord have bestowed upon their parents. It also means that the parents should be actively engaged in the lives of their emerging adults.

### **Clarifying and Reinterpreting The Age of Feeling In-Between**

The top three criteria for adulthood are now: accept responsibility for yourself, make independent decisions, and become financially independent. With these being so vague it is important not only to understand that those are not the biblical requirements for adulthood, but what has the Bible said about these characteristics.

Romans 14:10-12 says “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written: As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.” Every person will be held accountable for their actions and thoughts. This will be a judgment based on works. In the long run the validity of faith is established by the quality of life it produces. What people do is the most accurate indicator of what they really believe.<sup>17</sup> Emerging adults need to understand that whether they feel as though they are ready to accept responsibility for themselves, they are already accountable for their actions before God. The phrase “to give an account of himself” may be rendered as “to explain to God what one has done any why one has done it” or “to answer to God for what one has

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<sup>17</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, The New American Commentary 27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 254–55.

done.”<sup>18</sup> The Bible leaves no gray area in regards to personal accountability, even if that accountability does not come until the last day.

Second Corinthians 5:10 says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." These verses contain an explicit warning: every believer will stand before Jesus and have his actions throughout life judged. It is this divine judgment seat not the court of public opinion which ultimately counts. No one can escape it. One cannot melt into the crowd. Each person will be held accountable for their individual actions. The chances that anyone might fool the God who knows even subconscious thoughts is zero.<sup>19</sup> Personal moral responsibility before God means that Christians can never be indifferent to such things as sexual immorality (1 Cor 5:1–13), trying to gain advantage over others in the courts of the unrighteous (1 Cor 6:1–8), consorting with prostitutes (1 Cor 6:12–20), dining at the tables of idols / demons (1 Cor 10:14–22), or humiliating other brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Cor 11:7–22).<sup>20</sup> Paul Barnett writes:

The teaching about the judgment seat before which all believers must come reminds us that we have been saved, not for a life of aimlessness or indifference, but to live as to the Lord (5:15). This doctrine of the universality of the judgment of believers preserves the moral seriousness of God... The sure prospect of the judgment seat reminds the Corinthians—and all believers—that while they are righteous in Christ by faith alone, the faith that justifies is to be expressed by love and obedience (Gal 5:6; Romans 1:5), and by pleasing the Lord (v. 9).<sup>21</sup>

John writes also writes that non-Christians face judgment in the book of

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<sup>18</sup>Barclay Moon Newman and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Romans*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1973), 261.

<sup>19</sup>David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, The New American Commentary 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 265–66.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>21</sup>Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1997), 277.

Revelation 20:12-13:

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works....and they were judged every man according to their works.

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil."

Clearly from Scripture it is not about whether a person feels accountable for their actions, rather each and every person will be held accountable for their own behavior.<sup>22</sup> Not being ready to accept responsibility for one's self may be a marker of emerging adults, but they are not excused from accountability regardless of their feelings.

Making independent decisions is another marker that emerging adults list as something that makes them feel like adults. Proverbs 11:14 says, "Where there is no guidance a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety." Proverbs 15:22 likewise advises making decisions with counsel, "Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed." As emerging adults pursue their independence they want to be able to make decisions on their own. Proverbs counsels against that here, as without counselor, "deliberation," implies a wise deference to the opinions of the wise and good, contrasted with rashness.<sup>23</sup> This principle is summarized well by Keil and Delitzsch:

But it cannot become a rule of morals not to accept of counsel that we may not go astray; on the contrary, it is and remains a rule of morals: not stubbornly to follow one's own heart (head), and not obstinately to carry out one's own will, and not in

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<sup>22</sup>There is some debate about the "age of accountability"—i.e. at what age are children accountable for their actions. That discussion is not germane here as it does not relate in any way to the accountability of adults/emerging adults but only to young children.

<sup>23</sup>Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 396.

the darkness of wisdom to regard one's own plans as unimprovable, and not needing to be examined; but to listen to the counsel of intelligent and honest friends, and, especially where weighty matters are in hand, not affecting one's own person, but the common good, not to listen merely to one counsellor, but to many.<sup>24</sup>

Feeling financially independent is the third marker that emerging adults use to feel like adults. What exactly does financial independence mean? Financial independence at the basic level would appear to be the ability to provide the necessities of life for one's self—food, shelter, and possibly transportation. The top three items that parents report giving their children money for are: housing, living expenses, and transportation costs.<sup>25</sup> It is true that emerging adults are more dependent on their parents for support, and for more support in their lives than thirty years ago.<sup>26</sup> More than 50 percent of emerging adults receive some type of support from their parents, and this has particularly increased over the last ten years.<sup>27</sup>

Settersten and Ray summarize the new view of what is necessary this way:

Perhaps rather than the hard costs of housing, transportation, and groceries, something more intangible is keeping young adults with comfortable backgrounds from striking out independently. Perhaps the perception of what it means to live comfortably, what is “needed” in life, has changed for this group, leaving them with expectations that are too high. There is clear evidence that what young people consider luxuries and what they consider necessities have changed. According to a 2007 Pew Research survey, growing shares of Americans consider things like cell phones, dishwashers, cable television, and other amenities “necessities.” The third-floor walk-up with iffy heating and a diet of ramen noodles is apparently no longer cutting it. With affluence comes a longer list of what people cannot live without and thus Tom and others live more comfortably at home while saving money for their first home instead of opting for the third floor walk-up.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 6 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 236.

<sup>25</sup>Jenna Goudreau, “Nearly 60% of Parents Provide Financial Support to Adult Children,” *Forbes*, May 20, 2011, accessed November 15, 2014 <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2011/05/20/parents-provide-financial-support-money-adult-children/>.

<sup>26</sup>Patrick D. Wightman et al., “Historical Trends in Parental Support of Young Adults” *Population Studies Research Center Report 13-801*, September 2013, 10.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>Richard Settersten and Barbara E. Ray, *Not Quite Adults: Why 20-Somethings are Choosing a Slower Path to Adulthood and Why it's Good for Everyone* (New York: Bantam Trade Paperback, 2010), 51.

The question that emerging adults must wrestle with is, “What kind of stewards are they being with their money?” As parents continue to support emerging adults are they doing so because their children truly need it, or because it allows them to maintain a standard of living that they have become accustomed to?

### **Positive Truth about Feeling In-Between**

Emerging adults now face economic challenges that can create a feeling of being in-between. Sixty-five percent say that the financial pressures faced by their generation are tougher than those faced by previous generations and one third of parents agree that their children are worse off than they were.<sup>29</sup> The unemployment rate for emerging adults is above the national average and they are saddled with more than twice the student loan debt than twenty years ago.<sup>30</sup>

Ecclesiastes 3:11 says, “He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” When one considers what it means for there to be a season for everything, and for man to have eternity in his heart the feeling and the longing that emerging adults have—time rushing on and yet a desire to remain free from the struggles that may come in the future; it becomes obvious that this may be an evidence (wrongly expressed) of what the author of Ecclesiastes is saying. There is an already and not yet that exists in this world, whether it is acknowledged by the creation or not. This concept was first popularized by George Ladd and he expressed that the Kingdom of God is His sovereign reign, but that reign is expressed differently throughout stages of redemptive

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<sup>29</sup>Jenna Goudreau, “Nearly 60% of Parents Provide Financial Support to Adult Children,” May, 20, 2011, accessed November 15, 2014 <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2011/05/20/parents-provide-financial-support-money-adult-children/>.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

history. The kingdom of God is both present and future.<sup>31</sup>

Hebrews 13:14 says, “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” The Christian knows that in a real sense every person is living “in-between.” The longing for the future is to come—God has set eternity in the hearts of men. Emerging adults feel in-between in part because they truly are. This world is vanishing and eternity will come. The emphasis here is on the changing state of human life. Recognizing that there is nothing permanent here, the believer is longing and striving to obtain something which is out of reach and out of sight.<sup>32</sup> A Christian rightly recognizes that at any age they are in-between, and may feel that tension. Certainly emerging adults are in-between full adulthood (at least in terms of responsibilities) and adolescence where they were entirely dependent on their parents (though many throughout history have been incredibly independent teenagers), but the Christian at any life stage recognizes that they are in-between something much greater, the fading world of the present and the everlasting earth of the future.

Feelings do not make truth and feeling in-between does not make it so. Emerging adults are in-between many of the accomplishments and achievements that their predecessors had taken on and adolescence. They may not feel ready to make independent decisions, be financial independent, and accept responsibility for themselves but that does not make them less of an adult any more than a twelve year old who is an entrepreneur making good money and independent decisions and feels responsible is an adult. Fact and feeling are not the same thing and when adulthood is based primarily upon feelings a dangerous area may be entered where some may never reach the stage of adulthood because they never feel ready.

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<sup>31</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (New York: Paternoster Press, 1959), 23-25.

<sup>32</sup>Ellingsworth and Nida, *A Translators Handbook on the book of Hebrews*, 330.

Emerging adults feel in-between because as the criteria for being an adult have changed they have lost some of the grounding markers which previous generations clung to—completing education, marriage, and children. The loss of these markers, the continued dependence on parents and the inability to shift identity from child to wife/husband, father/mother, and long term employee do present real challenges for emerging adults. Arnett rightly observes that emerging adults can feel lost, as though they have moved on from what they were, but not yet to whom they will be and that creates an in-between feeling.

Those who are ministering to emerging adults need to recognize that the loss of markers can help them feel as though they are drifting along through life. It is important to develop anchors to help. Using life events such as birth, driver's license, high school graduation, etc. leading up to the stage of emerging adulthood will give them a feeling of progression and growth.<sup>33</sup> Doing these will help prepare emerging adults to move down the spectrum toward adulthood and give them a clearer delineation from their childhood and adolescence and allow them to fully embrace adulthood and all of its responsibilities. Markers leading up to emerging adulthood combined with a solid biblical foundation and understanding that life is full of seasons and that Christians will always feel in-between since this world is not their home gives emerging adults the ability to navigate this uncertain, in-between life stage with confidence.

## **Implications and Applications**

### **Parents of Young Children**

Parents setting markers as their children grow will help them see a clear progression toward adulthood. In his book *Shift* this is exactly what Brian Haynes suggests. A clear marker for them each step of the way at specific milestones helps them

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<sup>33</sup>Brian Haynes, *Shift: What it takes to Finally Reach Families Today* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2009).

have a clear idea that they are progressing through seasons of life toward adulthood. Parents can start with a baby dedication, then mark the start of school, the start of high school, getting a driver's license, and finally when they graduate from high school. A ceremony upon graduation from high school may be important because it frames how they approach the coming years. This is the opportunity for parents to lay out a charge to their children. Something like this may be appropriate:

To a world very much needing his character, his gifts, his skill, and his love for Christ, we \_\_\_\_\_ do proudly yet humbly announce in the manner of our heavenly father this is our beloved son \_\_\_\_\_ in whom we are well pleased. Like an arrow fashioned not to remain in the quiver, but to be released into the heart of its target we release \_\_\_\_\_ to adulthood. We know him to be thoughtful, capable, and mature. He is the message we release to a world we will never see. He is a man. We release him to his manhood and all of its responsibilities, To the finding and cherishing of a godly and supportive wife, To the begetting and raising by God's grace and design believing children. And to the commission of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself to go into all the world, making followers of all people, teaching them to observe the rich and life giving truths of His Holy Scripture. \_\_\_\_\_ we love you, we're extremely proud of you, and we release you to the target of being all you can in Christ. You will always be our son but never again our little boy. You have blessed us richly. We know God will use you greatly. We will pray for you continually. We desire to continue to be a part of your life, but in a different role. "When I was a child I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child; when I became a man I did away with childish things." 1 Corinthians 13:11.

A charge such as this, presented in a ceremony and on a certificate, marks a major shift and can help the emerging adult feel less in-between. They have a clear notice, from their parents and before witnesses, that their role has shifted and they have new responsibilities.

### **Parents of Emerging Adults**

Emerging adults may not feel like adults, but it is a parent's responsibility to remind them that whether they feel like an adult or have all of the responsibilities of an adult that they are just as accountable for their actions either way. This is part of why a specific parental charge to them as they graduate and move into legal adulthood is so important. How parents treat their emerging adults will say a lot to them and influence

their attitude greatly. While parents may continue to support them in a number of ways, this is the time in which emerging adults should begin to take responsibility for themselves, especially in small ways. Parents may provide some necessary financial support, but it should be based on responsible usage of the income they do have—parental financial support should not allow or encourage selfishness in their spending habits. Emerging adults should be managing their own finances, doing their own laundry, keeping their calendar, etc. Parental support that takes the place of doing these basic tasks not only keeps the emerging adult from “feeling responsible for themselves” but delays their movement through this particular season and could leave them less prepared for later life.

### **Church leaders**

Churches should treat emerging adults appropriately—they do not belong with the youth group. They may not feel fully adult yet but it is important for them to take on adult tasks. They should be contributing with the other adults in the congregation. They should be allowed to serve as ushers, lead committees, or take on other responsibilities that the church would allow adults to do. Maturity and spiritual health must be evaluated, but too often churches are hesitant to engage emerging adults because of a perception that they are not adults yet. When churches do this they send the message to emerging adults that they are right—now isn’t the time to take responsibility, but exactly the opposite is true.

Discipleship relationships are vital during this time because they will help emerging adults sort through the feelings of not being completely adult yet, of depending on their parents and other individuals for things. These discipleship relationships remind emerging adults that even though they may be in a particular season of life they are still fully accountable for their actions. There is no one in their life that they can blame for things; it will be them alone before God. Their past influences them, they may have been

wonderfully prepared for this life season by their parents or have been left woefully unprepared to fend for themselves, but they alone are accountable now. Discipleship relationships call them to cast off the past and press on toward the goal.

### **Christian Higher Education**

Those under the care of the school should be treated much more like adults than children. They may be in-between and feel like they are unable to take responsibility for themselves in certain ways and the educational institution certainly has some accountability for how they watch over those under their care, but they must also helping emerging adults transition from the season of life where they were wholly dependent on their parents to a life of independence. Emerging adults should be given responsibilities and held accountable. Certain students may have special needs, but by and large the college community should be treated in ways that adults are treated. They are given community standards and should be held to them. They should treat each other with respect, honor their course commitments and be reminded not to do so brings consequences. Minimizing consequences in an ill guided effort to shield them may ultimately set emerging adults up for failure in the outside world. Their future employer will hold them to standards. Their spouse someday will have expectations.

Schools can use discipleship/faculty advisement groups to help emerging adults answer the questions about how they will accept responsibility for themselves, make independent decisions, and become financially independent. This is where the why, what and how questions become important and can be valuable to wrestle through in a guided group setting. What does financially independent mean? How does that standard line up with Scripture? What does it mean to accept responsibility for themselves? Is there a way to not accept responsibility or is it simply denying that they are responsible? How do they make independent decisions? How does that balance with the wisdom from Proverbs that there is wisdom in many counselors? A program over the

course of weeks that forces emerging adults to wrestle through these questions together will help develop independent thinkers and those who are dependent on God's wisdom rather than the wisdom of the world.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE AGE OF POSSIBILITIES AND OPTIMISM

Finally, Arnett observes that emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities, when many different futures remain open, when little about a person's direction in life has been decided for certain. It tends to be an age of high hopes and great expectations, in part because few of their dreams have been tested in the fires of real life. Emerging adults look to the future and envision a well-paying satisfying job, a loving, lifelong marriage, and happy children who are above average. Few emerging adults look to the future and see the dreary, dead-end jobs, the bitter divorces, the disappointing and disrespectful children that some of them will find themselves experiencing in the years to come.<sup>1</sup>

Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities in two different ways. One is that emerging adulthood is a time of great optimism, of high hopes for the future. The second way that emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities is that it represents a crucial opportunity for young people who have experienced difficult conditions in their family lives to move away from home and to attempt to steer their lives in different and more favorable directions before they enter the commitments in love and work that structure adult life.<sup>2</sup> Emerging adults look with hope to the future even when they have experienced disappointment or challenge in their current life. They believe that the future will bring them more than the present has given them.

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<sup>1</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16.

<sup>2</sup>Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Tanner, eds., *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 13.

Christian Smith summarizes the optimism of emerging adults that he encountered in his interviews:

The first is a tremendous optimism among emerging adults about their personal futures. The emerging adults we interviewed are, as a whole, some of the most optimistic people we have ever encountered or studied when it comes to their own personal lives and futures. Their eyes are firmly set on the future, which they look to with great hope and assurance. Some emerging adults are indeed beset with fear or despair about what awaits them. But these are relatively few. For most, their hopes run high, their anticipated prospects in life are bright, and they expect good things in the years to come. If severe personal limitations, misfortunes, and failures at some point impinge on people's lives, that has not yet happened in the lives of most of America's 18- to 23-year-old emerging adults, at least not that they will admit. Even many of those whose lives are in desperate shape, beset by serious troubles or hampered as a result of terrible decisions or awful circumstances, tend nevertheless to fortify themselves with optimism and assurances that things will get better, that their personal future will be bright. Even many young men and women enslaved to addictions or debilitated by severe depression insist that things can and will only get better, that they are on the road to good things, that life will turn out well. Few emerging adults in America are cynical, weary, jaded, despondent, or defeated—at least usually not for more than a day or two. Rather, they say things like “This is my optimal path, what I've always wanted. You know, I really think where I'm going is exactly where I wanted to go in high school and the beginning of college.” And, “Right now I'm headed into finding my first, real, year-round job, and that's very exciting to me. A lot of changes have happened but they're positive changes.” Or, “I think I'm making a turnaround, like before I was going down, things that were going on in my life or whatever I was doing was wrong. But now I think I'm going in the right direction.” And, “My son's made me the happiest I've ever been in my life. Everything's not where I want it to be, but I think with time it will be where I want it to be, because like I said, I'm very determined, I'm absolutely sure of myself.” Even this single mother who was homeless with her children reported to us, “I'm still lost, still lost, just taking it one day at a time and God's gonna show me which way he wants me to go, because right now I am lost. I need to change, I am so lost, I haven't found my purpose, but that doesn't really affect me. One day he gonna show me, one day he gonna show me, I just haven't found that one day, but he gonna show me.”<sup>3</sup>

They believe in the future, they imagine all that life might be and what might lie ahead. Optimism seems in some way to be natural to every person; no person wants to look to the future and imagine a life of drudgery and disappointment.

The possibilities are unfolding before the emerging adult. Since they have not, in many cases, chosen a mate, career, living location, etc., they face possibilities in areas

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<sup>3</sup>Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 150-51.

that would have already been decided for their predecessors. The search for the best degree, the ideal job, the perfect mate all hint at a growing pattern among young people today: they live in a world of elevated expectations. For some people this does not mean they are spoiled or coddled; it simply means they have been raised to believe in themselves. But couple that strong self-esteem with a society that cherishes only winners and there begins the collision course. Not everyone can be a winner. Expectations for a stellar life can all too easily lead to disappointment, if not outright paralysis in moving ahead.<sup>4</sup> The optimism and possibilities for emerging adults can lead to disappointment and challenges as they find themselves falling short of the expectations that they have set for themselves (and feel their parents and society have set as well).

In conjunction with their optimism emerging adults desire to regret nothing in life. Smith writes,

Despite often hurting from hard lessons learned, most of the emerging adults we interviewed initially denied feeling any regrets about any of their past decisions, behaviors, or problems, at least explicitly so. In keeping with their widespread optimism about the future, most who we spoke with, including those with serious problems, insisted that the past was the past, that they had learned their lessons, that they would not change a thing they had done even if they could, that what's happened is part of who they have become, and that they have no regrets about anything at all.<sup>5</sup>

While a desire to regret nothing is admirable, it appears from Christian Smith's research that emerging adults' lack of regret does not come from living lives that are regret free, but an almost obstinate denial of the impact of life choices on their lives. These two factors combined seem to indicate that for most emerging adults living in the age of optimism and possibilities means lives that are fulfilling, that bring satisfaction,

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<sup>4</sup>Richard Settersten and Barbara Ray, *Not Quite Adults: Why 20-somethings are Choosing a Slower Path to Adulthood and Why it's Good for Everyone* (New York: Bantam Trade Paperback, 2010), xxi.

<sup>5</sup>Smith et al., *Lost in Transition*, 151. They do go on to note that while emerging adults clearly express their desire to have no regrets, their descriptions tend to indicate that no matter how much they tell themselves they regret nothing, that their lives can often be marked by regret.

and entertainment with no challenges. The optimism for the future is based on the possibility of securing a more rewarding job, higher income, more personal and psychological security, material possessions and ultimately happiness.<sup>6</sup>

David Setran and Chris Kiesling define the optimism of emerging adults in light of regret as well:

Today's emerging adults are an optimistic lot, rejecting any sense of regret about the past and looking with unmitigated enthusiasm toward a hopeful future. Yet the messages of John the Baptist and Jesus were both grounded in the initiating call, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt. 3: 2). True growth in Christian faith cannot occur without an underlying understanding that the soul is utterly incapacitated without God's prevenient and restoring grace. More and more, however, emerging adults appear uncomfortable with language that addresses sin or evil within the soul, preferring to speak of brokenness or woundedness inflicted by others. "People do not mind being sick or bogged down with problems or even weak," Dietrich Bonhoeffer once suggested, "but under no condition do they want to be sinners." Growing up in a therapeutic culture anchored by self-absorption and self-esteem (as Cornelius Plantinga puts it, thinking much "about herself" and much "of herself"), the thought that we are radically sinful and in utter need of God's grace certainly goes against the cultural grain.<sup>7</sup>

A Clark University research study shows although they regard their current time of life as fun and exciting, most emerging adults believe their adult lives will be even better. Fifty-nine percent agreed with the statement "I think adulthood will be more enjoyable than my life is now." The majority may see adulthood as providing a relief from the instability and stress of their current lives.<sup>8</sup>

Arnett goes on to write about the challenges and optimism of emerging adults:

Life is not easy for emerging adults. They have an unemployment rate that is consistently double the overall rate. Those who do have a job usually make very little money for most of their twenties. Nearly all aspire to a college degree, but fewer than one-third have attained one by ages 25 to 29. Most move away from the

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<sup>6</sup>Smith et al., *Lost in Transition*, 102.

<sup>7</sup>David P. Setran and Chris A. Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 37-38.

<sup>8</sup>Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Jeffrey Schwab, "The Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults: Thriving, Struggling, and Hopeful" (Worcester, MA: Clark University, 2012), 9, accessed September 11, 2013, <https://www.clarku.edu/clark-poll-emerging-adults/pdfs/clark-university-poll-emerging-adults-findings.pdf>.

comfort and support of the family home to take on the formidable task of finding a place in the world. It's not surprising, given these circumstances, that so many of them say they often feel stressed, anxious or depressed, as we have seen earlier in the report. What may be more surprising is that, despite the many challenges of the emerging adulthood life stage, most of them remain hopeful that their lives will ultimately work out well. Nearly 9 of 10 agree that "I am confident that eventually I will get what I want out of life." Almost as many agree that "At this time of my life, it still seems like anything is possible." And, despite frequent claims that they face a diminished future and will be the first generation in American history to do worse economically than their parents, more than three-fourths agree that "I believe that, overall, my life will be better than my parents' lives have been."<sup>9</sup>

Optimism surely appears to run deep among emerging adults regardless of circumstances or predictions regarding their futures. They see the future as a road of possibilities ahead of them. In fact, research shows that even in the midst of economic downturn emerging adults are more optimistic about their future earning power than previous generations—88percent of emerging adults believe that they will be able to earn enough in the future. This is significantly higher than both Gen-Xers and Boomers.<sup>10</sup> Even as they are dissatisfied with their current earnings, they look to the future with confidence. Emerging adults today are even more optimistic about their future than the previous generation was.<sup>11</sup>

### **Biblical Truth about Optimism and Possibilities**

As Christian Smith noted, it seems possible that emerging adults are deceiving themselves as they think both about their future and their past. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" Here is an emphatic denial that people are basically good and can trust their feelings. The heart of man is more deceitful, cunning than anything else, literally here dangerously sick,

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<sup>9</sup>Arnett and Schwab, "The Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults," 18.

<sup>10</sup>Paul Taylor and Scott Keeter, eds., "Millennials, A Portrait of Generation Next: Confident. Connected. Open to Change" (Pew Research Center, February 2010), 20, accessed July 13, 2013, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 20. Currently 92 percent believe they will make enough money to live the kind of life they want. In 1997 only 77 percent thought they would make enough money to live the life that they wanted.

incurable, sore wounded by sin, corrupt or depraved. Who can know it? i.e., fathom its nature and corruptness. Therefore a man must not trust the suggestions and illusions of his own heart.<sup>12</sup> It is too easy to be led away by what the heart tells a person, even in the midst of reality and in the face of the commands of God.

Biblical optimism seems to be more accurately described as hope, hope placed in God, his character, promises and outcomes. Romans 15:13 says, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” For the Christian hope comes through the power of the Holy Spirit and God’s empowering presence in the midst of life’s uncertainties. It is not up to the individual to conjure up hope based on possibilities or good wishes for the future. The only access to empowerment for life is to believe in God.<sup>13</sup>

Biblical hope is not built on the possibilities of what might come nor the number of options available, but on the personhood of God. This is the resounding refrain in the book of Psalms. Hope is neither determined because of present circumstances nor the promise of a happy future, but on the confidence that God is present and in sovereign control of all circumstances. In Psalm 71:5 the psalmist writes, “For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth.” The psalmist speaks out of mature experience with the Lord. He prays for help (71:1–4), but affirms his confidence in the One whom he has found faithful from his youth (vv. 5–13). Although in danger, the psalmist will “always have hope” and will always praise God (vv. 14–18). No matter life’s troubles or challenges, the psalmist counts on God to restore him (vv. 19–21)

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<sup>12</sup>Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 8 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 176.

<sup>13</sup>Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, The New American Commentary 27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 262.

and commits himself to a life of praise (vv. 22–24).<sup>14</sup>

Optimism in the life of the believer rests squarely upon the character and conduct of God rather than on circumstances. This means that an emerging adult can have hope for a bright future (not one free from suffering or difficulty) because of who God is and His faithfulness to His character and promises. The author of Lamentations writes with great passion about the pain he suffers in Lamentations 3:19-27:

Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.

Even in his suffering the author finds hope in the great mercy of the Lord. The suffering that has been described throughout the preceding verses is constantly on his mind and beginning to overwhelm him. In verse 21 a shift takes place in his perspective as he reminds himself of the steadfast love of the Lord. The basis for this renewed hope is God’s “great love.” The Hebrew word here *hesed*, sometimes translated as “covenant love” or “loyal love,” is a word that has the basic meaning of loyalty or faithfulness.<sup>15</sup> Another basis of hope is God’s unfailing “compassions” (*raḥāmîm*; from a word related to the womb, it describes the tender, caring love of a mother), which are experienced in a fresh and new way every day.<sup>16</sup>

There is no greater hope than knowing that God is totally reliable. God has always been faithful. That is true reason for optimism about the future; God has and always will

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<sup>14</sup>Lawrence O. Richards, *The Bible Reader’s Companion* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1991), 366.

<sup>15</sup>F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah Lamentations*, New American Commentary 16 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 473.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

be faithful. No matter the circumstance a person can trust in the loving kindness and faithfulness of God. Emerging adults truly have a reason to be optimistic about the future, but it has nothing to do with the fact that their possibilities are “limitless” or that they are currently unencumbered and able to explore at will, rather it is due to the fact that those who are believers serve a God who is always faithful whether their current (or future) circumstances bring sorrow and pain or great joy.

Paul encouraged the Corinthians with much the same kind of hope; that of future resurrection despite any current situation as he wrote,

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven (1 Cor 15:42-49).

Corruption, dishonor, and weakness are all qualities with which all are familiar. They are a normal part of everyday experience. They are attributes of our natural bodies. These qualities will give way in the resurrection to their antitheses. Incorruption, glory, and power are the characteristics of the spiritual body.<sup>17</sup> The change of bodies from broken, cursed, decaying vessels to glorified images of Jesus Christ is the true hope and optimism of the believer for the future.

Jeremiah 29:11 offers hope to a floundering Israel as God tells his people, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” Here the Lord offers encouragement that life was not a series of unplanned accidents and that the plan for His people was a “hope and a future”

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<sup>17</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Surprised by Suffering: The Role of Pain and Death in the Christian Life* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2010), 111.

or maybe “a hopeful future.”<sup>18</sup> The difference between the false assurances of ungodly men and the hope that is present in God is made clear in this chapter. The act that had seemed to put an end to the covenant in fact gives life where there had been but the appearance of it. The story illustrates neatly the difference between the Lord’s thinking and human plans (Prov 16:9; Isa 55:8). What seems to be the end of hope is but the end of tawdry dreams; with God there is always a real future.<sup>19</sup> This passage is one that is often given to graduates and used in motivational/devotional sorts of photos and other Christian paraphernalia, but the truth goes so much deeper than a Hallmark platitude. Yet again it is important to recognize that the hope that an emerging adult has for the future, the thing that should give them true optimism no matter the challenges faced, is the fact that the Almighty God has a plan for their life.

The concept of biblical hope is here clearly contrasted with the hope that emerging adults possess. While they long to have a life filled with the American dream, a good job, good spouse and good children, God promises something much different, a hope in the midst of chaos and a promise in the midst of lies.

True hope is based on the revealed Word of God, not on the messages any of self-appointed prophets. God gave His people a promise to deliver them, and He would keep His promise. God makes His plans for His people, and they are good plans that ultimately bring hope and peace. Therefore, there is no need to be afraid or discouraged.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 254.

<sup>19</sup>D. A. Carson et al., eds., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 694.

<sup>20</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Decisive*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 123.

## **Clarifying and Reinterpreting the Age of Optimism and Possibilities**

There is no denying the optimism of emerging adults. Whether it is Arnett's research through Clark University, Christian Smith's Research, or the Pew Social Trends Research team, each and every one finds that emerging adults possess great optimism about their future, the idea that life will hold all that they dream for—a good job providing enough money to live the life they want, a happy marriage, and wonderful children. However, this optimism is largely focused on something totally foreign to the Christian life. Their optimism is based on circumstances, on the things that culture tells them are important. This sets them up for failure and disappointment later in life. When they face sick children, a marriage falling apart or a job that vanishes, the youthful naivety and optimism that buoyed them during the emerging adult years is staged to become bitterness and resentment rather than a determined hope because of the great faithfulness of an unchanging God who is good all the time.

In a very real and true sense emerging adults live in the age of possibilities. Their lives are not set and their future is undetermined—at least from a human perspective. This has the potential to be an idea though that may tend to put both too much pressure and responsibility on emerging adults during this age of possibilities. God is sovereign. In Psalm 139 the Psalmist extols both the omniscience and omnipresence of God and in verse 16 says, “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” God has ordered the days of each individual. He knows the future from the past and the present.

Talking about the future is something that is challenging for any individual, particularly young people. Emerging adults look to the future and make plans. There is nothing wrong with plans, and Scripture encourages wise planning before action. However, James cautions his readers about such confidence in the future outside of the

will of God. As emerging adults are optimistic about the future and the possibilities that it holds, they are often attempting to work out the perfect formula for success, the way to achieve the dreams that they have now and the possible futures they so vividly imagine.

James confronts this future planning with a reminder to consider God's will. His hearers, as many emerging adults were and are oblivious to the presumptiveness of predicting their own future. Instead, they were caught up in their "winning" formula: the timing, the journey to a financial center, the securing of a temporary residence there, the possession of sufficient time to do business, and the expectation to turn a profit. In all of this the divine will had been left out entirely. Time and space belong only to God; therefore all the features necessary for human action are dependent upon him. Emerging adults need to be reminded in the midst of their optimism that they need to consider the will of God for their lives. To look forward to possibilities without God is to consider one's self the lord of life rather than remembering that God has ordered all of life and knows it from first to last.

Living in the age of possibilities has the potential to create a paralysis and be overwhelming for emerging adults. Even those who are Christians may be on the lookout for the "one" plan that God has for their lives with a fear that they may somehow miss out on his best for them. Whether this plan is about work, living location, a spouse or educational direction often they search ways to divine the will of God. This plan is neither something intentionally hidden from them by God nor something that He promises to reveal ahead of time. God is sovereignly in control of all things, but does not necessarily reveal His will to individuals, outside of His moral will. As for the future, God commands only two things: do not worry about tomorrow, and do not boast about tomorrow. Both commands are rooted in the fact that God holds the future in his hands and wants all people to rest in his daily care for their lives.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 128.

## **Positive Truth about the Age of Optimism and Possibilities**

Recognizing the optimism within emerging adulthood and their view of the possibilities of the future (both to leave the past behind, and the almost unending options available) allows adults in the lives of emerging adults to have a better idea of how to approach them. One neither wants to crush the optimism nor allow a paralyzing fear for emerging adults. This means that this is a vital stage for active engagement with emerging adults. Parents, pastors and spiritual mentors need to have open and honest discussion not only about the mistakes that they have made in the past and the impact those decisions had, but about the desires and passions that make the emerging adult tick. As they discover these they are better able to help provide guidance, remove some of the fear of missing out on something, and help create a hope that is grounded on God and His character rather than on the sheer number of possibilities in life.

Possibilities abound for emerging adults where they might not once have. In the past the life script for most men was pretty simple: they are born; they grow up; they learn to do the hunting, fishing, building, farming, and the like expected of them; they get married; they have children; get old and die. While there certainly were variations to this script the general theme was true. Men were required to provide, or help provide, for their wives and children, and in many cases for other family members. In the face of danger, those same men had to protect these as well.<sup>22</sup>

A clear path in the past might not have allowed for optimism and a plethora of possibilities, but it gave direction and focus to the lives of young people. This clear direction no longer exists. Those working with emerging adults need to understand the clashing virtues of endless possibilities and a hope placed in something other than God. To approach the optimism of an emerging adult with the grudging attitude of someone

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<sup>22</sup>Hymowitz, *Manning Up*, 127-28.

who had few options will not engender close relationships but put the emerging adult at odds with the person, be they parent, mentor, or friend, who is trying to aid them.

In practical terms, the argument for emerging adulthood seems to go as follows: being in the age of possibilities for Arnett is good because of the opportunity to take time to make decisions with all their lives before them, that freedom from responsibility is good because it buys time, and time must automatically therefore result in better decisions—if emerging adults take longer to choose their mates and their careers, they'll make fewer mistakes and live happier lives goes the thinking.<sup>23</sup> Surely many adults wish in hindsight that their youth had lasted longer, but it's not actually clear from such nostalgia that a longer youth would have resulted in a happier or wiser adulthood.

Since time itself is not guidance in matters of marriage or vocation (especially if both are delayed because they are either unavailable or no longer worthwhile in principle), today's emerging adults may just be taking longer to make the same mistakes. Unless one were to believe that the longer one takes to make a decision, the better it will be—playing out to the logical conclusion that the person who delays marriage until the age of 90 is most likely to choose the best spouse or career—there must be somewhere else to look for some other standard to determine the wisdom of such decisions. Maybe these past decisions were not mistakes at all. The view that decisions about marriage, work, and childrearing made in the past were generally misguided is the fundamental assumption held by the promoters of emerging adulthood. But one cannot know they were forced to make those decisions too early if they do not know that they did them badly, or in some clearly immature way?<sup>24</sup> If mistakes were made by adults this is their

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<sup>23</sup>Rita Koganzon, "Slacking as Self Discovery: The Rebranding of Indolence as Emerging Adulthood," *The New Atlantis* 29 (Fall 2010): 23.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

opportunity to help provide guidance and direction for emerging adults. They are working through the age of possibilities and it is the responsibility of parents and spiritual mentors to help them navigate those possibilities carefully.

### **Implications and Applications**

#### **Parents of Young Children**

Here again the primary influence that parents will have on their children in preparing them for emerging adulthood will be personal actions. Where is the parent's hope for the future? Is their hope built on Christ and His redemptive work and God's character or is it bound up in work, life experiences, or a spouse? How does the parent respond in the midst of heartbreak—do they lose hope or do they cry out with the Psalmist, "I will yet praise the Lord?" Children in the home are watching; what will they see? This is the time to illustrate confidence in God rather than confidence in personal abilities and the possibilities that may lie ahead.

#### **Parents of Emerging Adults**

The age of optimism and possibilities can be paralyzing for an emerging adult. They have incredibly high expectations of the future and do not want to miss out on the very best of what the future has to offer. It is a parent's responsibility to help them remember that God is sovereign and in control of the future. They can look with excitement and anticipation to the future but do not need to fear missing out on God's will for their lives. When they ask the question, "What is God's will for my life?" a parent should remind them that His will is obedience to Him for His glory in the service of others for the spread of the Gospel—that is His will and they need not fear that they will miss out on the one career, the one spouse, the one location for living, or any other once in a lifetime God's will opportunity.

## **Church Leaders**

Sometimes, as they have left home, emerging adults have been saddled with baggage from verses like Jeremiah 29:11 and left feeling as though there is a single purpose and plan that God has for their lives and if they somehow miss it they will be forever left wandering the wasteland of second best. Regular personal testimonies by individuals about God's work in their lives amidst the congregation will illustrate God's sovereignty and faithfulness across the course of time. Combining this with a strong understanding of God's gracious sovereignty will equip the entire congregation with a hope based on the character of God rather than what the future may bring. Regular study of the Psalms in small group settings allows for discussion and application of this to real life situations. Emerging adults need applied, not abstract theology. They will experience disappointment, heartache, break-ups, and life changes and yet God gives them the hope to face each of those circumstances in a way that their unbelieving peers never can.

## **Christian Higher Education**

Emerging adults arrive on campus with incredibly high hopes and dreams. They are looking to the future with all of its possibilities and wondering what it will hold in store for them. As they explore that future and shape their identity there will be bumps along the way. A Christian higher education institution should be prepared with a strong biblical counseling program. This may mean partnering with local churches to provide some of these services. Not only does there need to be positive shepherding relationships there needs to be a system of care in place for those times when regret and disappointment creep in.

Pairing the hopes and optimism of emerging adults with practical expressions is a second vital piece for higher education. Their optimism must be tempered with realistic expectations of the workforce through regular interaction with alumni and other

local individuals working in those areas. This interaction gives them great hope for the future and what they could accomplish paired with realistic expectations so that they are not stymied by initial disappointment or setbacks.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Jeffrey Arnett makes helpful observations as he describes emerging adults. From a Christian perspective the problem comes in when these characteristics are adopted without critique or thoughtful consideration. It takes pairing these observations with solid biblical foundations to give grounding to emerging adults. That is the responsibility of every spiritual leader in their lives.

In Jeremiah 17:5-8 the prophet contrasts the only two options in life, connected to God through faith or separated from him, and the outcome of that life:

Thus says the LORD: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.”

Those who depend on their own flesh instead of God’s Spirit for strength are satisfied with their own abilities and do not believe they need divine help. This kind of person is likened to a shrub in the desert. The person who trusts in self and human resources will have a dried up, empty life. That life will be as barren and unattractive as a desert plant struggling for survival.<sup>1</sup> The one who trusts in themselves is cursed. Jeremiah says that he “shall not see any good come.” In many cases this seems to be true for emerging adults. While emerging adults are optimistic, even Arnett recognizes that is primarily because many of them have not yet felt the sting of the disappointment that failed

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<sup>1</sup>F. B. Huey, *Jeremiah Lamentations*, New American Commentary 16 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 175.

marriages, crumbling careers and disappointing and demanding children can bring.

Emerging adults often trust in themselves and that trust is most clearly indicated in the fact that they are only adults when they feel like adults. There is nothing external to them that can indicate whether or not they have arrived into adulthood, it is entirely dictated by the feelings of each emerging adult.

In contrast to the self-trust of emerging adults is the picture of the plant in Jeremiah 17 that is anchored next to the stream and blessed by the Lord. It is ready for the difficult times that may come. What a powerful picture of reliance on the Lord and the confidence and good that it brings into life. It is quite noteworthy in this passage that the blessed tree, planted by the water does not avoid the drought and heat of life, but is simply prepared for it by drawing water from the river. This gives, in brief, a picture of preparing young people to become adults. Arnett makes the helpful observation that this will be a tumultuous time, and the goal is not to shield them from that heat or drought, nor is it to promise them a life of ease when they trust in the Lord. Rather a strong faith in the Lord will prepare young people (and people of every age) to weather the struggles of life because they are depending on the life giving stream of faith in Jesus Christ rather than their own efforts. This is the beginning of preparing emerging adults and happens long before they reach this stage. They have to be grounded in the Gospel.

Christian Smith confirms Arnett's observations in his own extensive study of emerging adults:

But we came away from our 230 interviews with emerging adults thinking that, for most, their horizon is disappointingly parochial. Get a good job, become financially secure, have a nice family, buy what you want, enjoy a few of the finer things in life, avoid the troubles of the world, retire with ease. That's it. Nothing much bigger, higher, more meaningful, more transcendent, more shared, more difficult. That is not a bad life, exactly. But neither, we think, is it terribly inspiring, ambitious, or great. And neither, we believe, will it be terribly fulfilling or enriching in the long run. Good human societies have always been built on the very human belief that there's got to be something better than this. We fear that the horizons of emerging adults today instead follow more closely the outlook of the 1988 song "Birth, School, Work, Death" by The Godfathers. Given what we know about the stirrings and aspirations of the human spirit, we do not think that such an outlook

can be sustained forever and does not bode well for what might come after in reaction.<sup>2</sup>

The view of emerging adults is just too small and their world too focused on themselves. While this is a stark and disturbing assessment of the life of emerging adults it seems to be fair when you take the characteristics to their logical end. A life with a focus on identity explorations, especially in the areas of love and work, full of instability, and self-focused leaves an individual feeling in-between, neither adolescent nor adult and looking to the possibilities of the future.<sup>3</sup> Emerging adults are not whatever they are necessarily because they have chosen as individuals certain ideas and values and lifestyles out of the air. Most of what they are devoted to and what they experience is powerfully shaped by the fact that emerging adulthood is an institutionally structured reality of American life today. Emerging adulthood is at the heart about postponing settling down into real adulthood. It is about possibilities, options, and openness.<sup>4</sup>

It is not hard to see this as an outworking of years of parenting focused intently on children, ferrying them to and from sports and music practices, ensuring that they have every “advantage” over their peers. Children, who have been taught that they need to do all these things so that they can get into a good college, get a good job, have a happy marriage and everything else have naturally adopted that philosophy, the American dream, as their core ideal and they search for that dream throughout these years, wandering undirected and supported by adults.

Helicopter parenting has now been proven to be a negative for the children under their parents unending control. Whether warm or cold, lovingly engaged or formally demanding, parenting that hovers over the child’s every move, results in

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<sup>2</sup>Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 236-37.

<sup>3</sup>Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Tanner, eds. *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 7.

<sup>4</sup>Smith et al., *Lost in Transition*, 231-32.

negative outcomes including binge drinking and other harmful behaviors.<sup>5</sup> This study examined college students, the same type of students that Arnett, Smith, and Pew Research interviewed when they studied emerging adults. While helicopter parenting is far from an exclusive cause for emerging adulthood, the inability of people ages 18 to 25 or 29 to launch into an independent adulthood could certainly be seen as connected in some way to the over involvement of parents in their lives for the preceding years.

However, children in previous generations grew up working side by side with a parent for years as they learned a trade or had mothers who stayed home and made the home their profession. In each of these cases the children would have spent far more time with parents than many emerging adults today who have been involved in school, extracurricular activities and other things from a very early age, only spending minimal time at home with the family. A connection between parental involvement during childhood and adolescence and level of presence of each of Arnett's five characteristics of emerging adulthood would make for an interesting and possibly eye opening future study.

At its core emerging adulthood is about spending a long period unmarried, without children, and not settled into a real career or residence and seeking to discover identity. Emerging adulthood as a social fact means not making commitments, not putting down roots, not setting a definite course for the long term. It is about experimenting, exploring, experiencing, preparing, anticipating, having fun, and not regretting those experiences. As currently structured emerging adulthood entails few significant social or financial obligations, relatively little accountability to others, along with plenty of interesting detours and escape hatches. It is a time of limbo, of transition, of being neither a teen nor a real adult. Emerging adults can be unsure, can change their minds, can give

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<sup>5</sup>Alissa Greenberg, "Helicopter Parenting Hurts Kids Regardless of Love or Support Study Says," *Time*, June 2, 2015, accessed June 7, 2015, <http://time.com/3904527/helicopter-parent-study-controlling-students-kids-children/>.

things a shot, and can try something else if it does not work out. This reality is driven by personal choices but also by social-structural forces and parental support that make those choices seem sensible for many emerging adults.<sup>6</sup>

As has been illustrated in the preceding chapters, the biblical standard for living simply does not line up with the life that Jeffrey Arnett notes emerging adults typically live. He writes, “It is only for a small segment of Conservative Believers that religion is still about traditional ideas of sin, grace, and redemption. For most emerging adults, if they adhere to religion at all, they see it as being about how to be a good person and feel happy.”<sup>7</sup>

Biblical standards of purity, work, reliance on God and trust in His sovereign will do not align with the markers of emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood and its key characteristics are not something that has simply happened, they have developed over time, but that seismic shift has found some believers buying into the cultural norm that each of these characteristics are to be embraced, or at least tolerated. Whether it is Christian parents watching their children leave home for the first time and embrace these things or it is the Christian 18 to 29 year olds who find themselves away from home and encouraged by friends, their educational institution and sometimes even family to embrace and explore all that emerging adults have to offer, it is important to develop solid biblical truth that allows the individual to evaluate the truth underlying each of these assumptions.

Overcoming the negative aspects of emerging adulthood is more than simply generating a list of biblical prohibitions or even a practical theological framework. That is the ground floor, simply the beginning. To assume that emerging adults will

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<sup>6</sup>Smith et al., *Lost in Transition*, 232.

<sup>7</sup>Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press), loc. 4656-58, Kindle.

experience a life changing shift of perspective because of one thing is to simplify the matter. The arrival at this stage was not swift nor will the turning of the ship from its current course. The biblical principles here are key for emerging adults to understand but to start teaching them to emerging adults is too late, these are principles that must be learned from the time of birth.

This is where a home consistent with Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is foundational,

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

A home focused on God's Word and plan for the lives of children will bring about fruit in their lives, it will bring about remembrance when those same children enter an age that they are encouraged to shirk responsibility, to pursue their own desires and find themselves through identity explorations in every area. Smith finds a failure of not only Christian parents to teach these principles, but a failure of society at large to teach moral principles grounded in anything solid or of substance:

Perhaps it is not too stark to say that we as a society are failing our youth in crucial ways. If our analysis in this book is correct, then it may not be too strong to suggest that we are failing to equip teenagers and emerging adults with the basic tools for good moral reasoning. We are failing to teach them how to deal constructively with moral, cultural, and ideological differences. We are failing to teach them to think about what is good for people and in life. We are failing to equip our youth with the ideas, tools, and practices to know how to negotiate their romantic and sexual lives in healthy, nondestructive ways that prepare them to achieve the happy, functional marriages and families that most of them say they want in future years. We are failing to teach our youth about life purposes and goals that matter more than the accumulation of material possessions and material comfort and security. We are failing to challenge the too-common need to be intoxicated, the apparent inability to live a good, fun life without being under the influence of alcohol or drugs. And we are failing to teach our youth the importance of civic engagement and political participation, how to be active citizens of their communities and nation, how to think about and live for the common good.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Smith et al., *Lost in Transition*, 237.

One of the true challenges for emerging adults is that they have been failed to be grounded in the Gospel. They have been taught little true biblical knowledge. Emerging adults have learned, in some cases Bible stories as episodic events, but little else. This kind of teaching can easily mean that attention is taken away from the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ throughout redemptive history to mere rehearsal of episodic events, often followed by a moral admonition a sort of teaching much like Aesop's Fables.<sup>9</sup>

Effective teaching of principles grounded in the redemptive history of God's work is important for emerging adults long before they become emerging adults. Otherwise they will tend to approach religious participation, like music and sports, as an extracurricular activity: a good, well-rounded thing to do, but unnecessary for an integrated life.<sup>10</sup> Simply teaching emerging adults dos and do nots will not solve any problems. However, a lack of this foundational teaching does not remove accountability from emerging adults; each person stands accountable before God for their own actions.

Emerging adults need to be grounded in solid biblical theology. James Hamilton describes the story of Scripture this way:

In broadest terms, the Bible can be summarized in four words: creation, fall, redemption, restoration. This sequence functions as an umbrella story encompassing the whole canonical narrative, but it is also repeated countless times on both individual and corporate levels. The whole cosmos is created, is judged when man rebels, is redeemed through Christ's death on the cross, and will be restored when Christ returns, but this also happens to the nation of Israel and to particular individuals. For instance, God's word creates Israel as a nation when, having already called Abraham out of Ur, God calls the descendants of Abraham out of Egypt and gives them his law at Sinai. The nation falls at Sinai, is redeemed by God's mercy, and, in a sense, is restored through the second set of stone tablets. This pattern is repeated again and again in the Bible. In significant ways the Gospels interpret the death and resurrection of Jesus in these terms<sup>68</sup> It is as though his death is the climactic moment of exile, the moment when the temple is destroyed

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<sup>9</sup>Gary Parrett and J. I. Packer, *Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old Fashioned Way* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 72.

<sup>10</sup>Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), loc. 142-43, Kindle.

(cf. John 2:19), and his resurrection begins the new exodus (cf. Luke 9:31). This story of salvation history is a story of God's glory in salvation through judgment. Those who believe in Jesus have been saved through the salvation through judgment of the exile and restoration he accomplished in his death and resurrection, and we are now sojourning, passing through the wilderness on our way to the Promised Land, looking for that city with foundations, where the Lamb will be the lamp.<sup>11</sup>

A proper understanding of the arc of God's redeeming action grounds people within the Gospel and gives them a firm understanding of the life framework in which they must make decisions. Part of the reason emerging adults find themselves operating within the framework which Jeffrey Arnett describes is because they have no theological grounding or framework from which to operate. They are left to make personal decisions on what being an adult, particularly an adult within a Christian context looks like.

The teaching of adults is incredibly important. Christian Smith notes that the failure of emerging adults to be grounded in anything deeply moral may be due in large part of the failure of American adults to be grounded themselves, and are instead passing on their own moral ambiguity to the next generation:

We are failing to teach them how to deal constructively with moral, cultural, and ideological differences. We are failing to teach them to think about what is good for people and in life. We are failing to equip our youth with the ideas, tools, and practices to know how to negotiate their romantic and sexual lives in healthy, nondestructive ways that prepare them to achieve the happy, functional marriages and families that most of them say they want in future years. We are failing to teach our youth about life purposes and goals that matter more than the accumulation of material possessions and material comfort and security. We are failing to challenge the too-common need to be intoxicated, the apparent inability to live a good, fun life without being under the influence of alcohol or drugs. And we are failing to teach our youth the importance of civic engagement and political participation, how to be active citizens of their communities and nation, how to think about and live for the common good. On all of these matters, if our analysis is correct, the adult world is simply abdicating its responsibilities. Moreover, if our analysis is correct, we in the older adult world are failing youth and emerging adults in these crucial ways because our own adult world is itself also failing in those same ways. It is not that the world of mainstream American adults has something great to teach but is simply teaching it badly. That would also be a problem, but at least a remediable one. Rather, we suspect that the adult world is teaching its youth all too well. But what it has to teach too often fails to convey what any good society needs to pass on to its children. In short, if our sociological analysis in this book is correct, the problem is not simply that youth are bad students or that adults are poor teachers. It is that

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<sup>11</sup>James M Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), loc. 793-807, Kindle.

American culture itself seems to be depleted of some important cultural resources that it would pass on to youth if it had them—and yet not just for “moral” but also for identifiable institutional reasons, as repeatedly noted above. In which case, not only emerging adulthood, but American culture itself also has a dark side as well.<sup>12</sup>

The teaching of adults has been effective; it has unfortunately often been in the wrong direction. Current popular definitions of adulthood can serve as barriers to spiritual formation among people in their twenties. In other words, those normal expectations about pathways into adulthood may compromise or obscure alternative paths more likely to lead to Christian faithfulness at this life stage. Both self-absorbed and self-sufficient adulthood normalize patterns that threaten the very foundations of the adult faith structure. Those in the self-absorbed category refuse to accept the new responsibilities of adulthood, remaining fixated on their own needs and completely dependent on others, unwilling to assume leadership roles.

On the other hand, self-sufficient emerging adults lose all of the admirable childlike qualities that should live on into Christian adulthood: humility, receptivity, trust, and wonder. And some show evidence of both false pathways. These well-worn cultural grooves create challenges for both emerging adults and their leaders as they search for a proper vision of adult spiritual formation.<sup>13</sup>

Kenda Creasy Dean describes how she believes American Christianity got to the point of emerging adults embracing this moral therapeutic deism:

The tremors of loveless faith still rumble through American Christianity. The philosopher James K. A. Smith suggests that these rumblings haunt contemporary Christian education in particular: “Could it be the case that learning a Christian perspective doesn’t actually touch my desire, and that while I might be able to think about the world from a Christian perspective, at the end of the day I love not the kingdom of God but rather the kingdom of the market?” After two and a half centuries of shacking up with “the American dream,” churches have perfected a dicey codependence between consumer-driven therapeutic individualism and religious pragmatism. These theological proxies gnaw, termite-like, at our identity

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<sup>12</sup>Smith et al., *Lost in Transition*, 238.

<sup>13</sup>David P. Setran and Chris A. Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 235-36.

as the Body of Christ, eroding our ability to recognize that Jesus' life of self-giving love directly challenges the American gospel of self-fulfillment and self-actualization. Young people in contemporary culture prosper by following the latter.<sup>14</sup>

She puts the blame squarely on the church's pursuit of the American dream. For years the church has wanted to have both the American dream and Jesus and it may just be that emerging adulthood and moral therapeutic deism is the fruit that has been reaped from what has been sown.

True Christian formation continues into emerging adulthood and cuts against the grain of self-absorption, pointing instead to a life of costly discipleship marked by personal and cultural investment. Rather than a time marked by freedom from authority, emerging adulthood is transformed into a time of growing responsibility for others and the world. At the same time, such spiritual formation also cuts against the grain of the autonomous, self-sufficient adulthood that promotes individuality and rather points instead to a life of humble dependence on God and interdependence with others. The growing competence, identity, and responsibility of adulthood becomes a place of wonder and gratitude for God's provision, continued reliance on his grace, and loving stewardship of his gifts for others' good and for his glory.<sup>15</sup>

This is what the mentorship of Titus 2:2-3 is all about. Paul writes and says, "Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good." Paul's primary concern was to indicate that the Christian's faith, both subjectively as experience and objectively as a body of doctrine, must result in a life that consistently demonstrates appropriate behavior. Such behavior must be free of sordid living and evidence the gospel of Jesus Christ,

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<sup>14</sup>Dean, *Almost Christian*, 121-28.

<sup>15</sup>Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood*, 236.

which Christians publicly profess as the source of their salvation.<sup>16</sup> The older men and women within the church are to be examples, teaching through their lives and conduct how the younger generations are to behave. Proper spiritual formation begins at an early age in the home and is continued throughout life in the context of the church. A church that is effective in doing such things will help emerging adults develop in a way that brings glory to God. The key to avoiding the selfishness and youthful foolishness so often described and contained within emerging adulthood is discipleship, within the home and within the church.

With these two simple sentences in Titus 2:2-3 Paul introduces us to the importance of godly, mature men and women in the church as central tools in the disciple-making process. In Paul's Titus 2 exhortation, the first and most important quality for men and women to possess is godly character. These aren't just older men and women, nor are they simply wise in a worldly sense of the word. These are men and women of spiritual substance. Paul is not simply referring to old people, but people of the mature character which God forges over time as men and women walk faithfully with him. This is important, since the value of their example will depend of their moral character. They can either teach the young men and women Moral Therapeutic Deism, a God who serves us, or they can teach a life grounded in the Gospel and based on a life of service to Him and His bride. As Calvin noted in his commandments on Titus 2, "Nothing is more shameful than for an old man to indulge in youthful wantonness, and, by his countenance, to strengthen the impudence of the young."<sup>17</sup> Even here as Paul calls for mentorship he still calls the young men to live in self-control. Whether a young man (or woman) has a mentor, someone Godly pouring into their lives they are not freed from

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<sup>16</sup>Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin Jr., *1,2 Timothy Titus*, The New American Commentary 34 (Nashville: Broadman and Holman), 292.

<sup>17</sup>Voddie Baucham Jr., *Family Shepherds: Calling and Equipping Men to Lead their Homes* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011), 28-30.

the clarion call to a life of self-control rather than self-indulgence.

In His wisdom God has given the key way to avoid the problems in emerging adulthood: a lifetime of strong discipleship and intergenerational interaction that points each person within the church to God and the characteristics that He calls each member of that body to display. When passionate living for an eternal kingdom is regularly evidenced in the lives of a congregation emerging adults will be drawn to something that is lasting, children will see in their parents and the other adults within their congregation a desirable life, and all will participate as one body, serving and living within the kingdom.

Emerging adulthood is a time of possibilities, it is a time where emerging adults can begin to express the identity that God has built within them and discover how they express the gifts that God has given them in service to the church and work that provides opportunities for joyful giving. It will be a time of instability as they move from home to college or work, as they get married and begin to have children, but this instability need not lead to being selfish and self-focused and the challenges of this time period of life do not excuse unbiblical behavior. When they have been equipped with an understanding of the expectations of God for their moral conduct and connected to the church in a way that has given them discipleship experiences they will not be left rudderless or wandering, but pointed on an arc that moves them toward spiritual maturity even as the cultural calls them to behave in ways that contradict them.

Once adults truly have an intimate and growing relationship with their Savior, creating a solid biblical foundation for children as they grow and come to know Christ is the next step in helping prevent emerging adults who are self-focused and free to embrace immorality and selfishness as is reported by Arnett. Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.” Then during the emerging adult stage intensive discipleship and involvement of solid Christian adults in

the lives of emerging adults (older men with younger men, older women with younger women) will help to guide them during the tumultuous times. This involvement combined with their solid foundation will allow them to be like the blessed tree that Jeremiah describes: blessed and bearing fruit no matter the situation, including heat and drought.

Families committed to discipling their children and building biblical foundations, and churches committed to equipping parents to do this job and filling that role for those who do not have biological parents in the congregation is the first step to an emerging adulthood that glorifies God. Titus 2 discipling relationships throughout emerging adulthood will build on that foundation and ultimately result in young men and women who use their freedom to glorify God and impact the world for Jesus rather than satisfy their own desires.

APPENDIX  
TABLES

Table A1. Identity Explorations

<i>Audience</i>	<i>Trend</i>	<i>Application</i>
Parents of Young Children	Identity Explorations	Biblical identity-Catechism for Young Children, redemptive storyline Bible such as <i>Jesus Storybook Bible</i>
--	In love	Godly marriage examples @ home & in church— particularly when they are from single parent homes
--	--	Require dating relationships that do not become glorified divorce practice
--	In work	Teach work as good and necessary through age appropriate chores
--	--	No complaining about work around children
--	--	Encourage their gifted areas as they grow rather than vague “you can be anything you want to be” conversations
--	--	Expose them to adults in a variety of careers
Parents of emerging adults	Identity Explorations	Your financial support allows much of this, ensure it is being used in a Godly manner

Table A1 continued

--	--	Challenge them to get actively involved in a local church to build a foundation of identity in Christ
--	In love	Tell your dating and marriage story—the good and bad parts and talk through the ways in which it was God-honoring and ways it was not
--	--	Talk about the “right” age to get married—read and discuss together articles such as “The Case for Early Marriage” by Al Mohler or Mark Regenerus’s “Freedom to Marry Young.”
--	In work	Study Proverbs together and talk about how work is described
--	--	Use <a href="http://www.workasworship.org">www.workasworship.org</a> or <i>33 The Series</i> to talk about how all work is worship irregardless of the job title or pay.
Church leaders	Identity Explorations	Provide a place of service to explore gifting and grow in faith
--	--	Plug emerging adults in quickly to service roles or they may leave feeling unconnected.
--	In love	Titus 2 discipleship relationships will ground them and give them opportunities to ask pointed questions as the grow in faith related to both love and work
--	--	Offer pre-engagement counseling, exploring expectations and desires before any kind of commitment toward marriage is made

*Table A1 continued*

Christian Higher Education	Identity Explorations	--
--	In love	Monitor relationship trends in order to head off any unhealthy/unbiblical patterns that are developing
--	--	Provide special “date” interactive opportunities
--	--	Protect couples with rules about private interactions in on-campus facilities
--	In Work	Provide regular campus and community service opportunities that allow for engagement of gifts
--	--	Varied internship and work placement opportunities that allow students to test out desires in the local community
--	--	Lunch and learn opportunities with local business leaders to expand knowledge of key components of various businesses/careers

Table A2. Instability in life

<i>Audience</i>	<i>Trend</i>	<i>Application</i>
Parents of Young Children	Instability	Evident personal devotional time
--	--	Family worship
--	--	Scripture memorization—family and corporately through Awana or other program
--	--	Family life mirroring Deuteronomy 6
Parents of emerging adults	Instability	Ask why when changes are made, helping them think through the changes in their lives
--	--	Do not let financial support become a source of stability rather than Jesus
--	--	Struggle can help teach reliance on God
--	--	There is a season for everything and the Lord walks through each season with those who trust him
Church leaders	Instability	Offer housing opportunities with congregation members
--	--	Family meals weekly with emerging adults and congregation members
--	--	Regular prayer for and with them
--	--	Welcome and good bye events at appropriate times of the year
Christian Higher Education	Instability	Faculty student relationships beyond academic advising

*Table A2 continued*

--	--	Student community groups that last throughout entire academic career
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Table A3. The most self-focused age

<i>Audience</i>	<i>Trend</i>	<i>Application</i>
Parents of Young Children	Most self-focused age	Positive attitude toward marriage, work, and children
--	--	Teach “one-anothers” in everyday life to children
--	--	Give children age appropriate service opportunities alongside parents such as putting offering in on Sunday or filling shoe boxes for Operation Christmas Child
--	--	Ensure allowance has an other focused component such as tithe or gifts for others
Parents of emerging adults	Most self-focused age	Encourage the use of independence and freedom for local and international missions travel
--	--	Build a plan together that uses their freedom for the service of the local church and others without the same level of freedom from responsibility
--	--	Do not offer financial support if their resources are used solely for their own interests
Church leaders	Most self-focused age	Allow emerging adults to fill ministry leadership positions—they have time and creativity that may not be present for others in various life stages.
--	--	Give them responsibility tied with discipleship and encouragement

*Table A3 continued*

--	--	Allow them to launch new ministries
--	--	Help them embrace the 1 Corinthians level of service in the local church and around the world
Christian Higher Education	Most self- focused age	Convocation service with towel and reminder of Jesus example of service rather than selfishness
--	--	Empower student groups to create service opportunities that blend their desires and skills with the needs of local churches and the community
--	--	Graduation service with a framed towel as a reminder of their commissioning to go and make disciples through service for the glory of God

Table A4. Feeling in-between

<i>Audience</i>	<i>Trend</i>	<i>Application</i>
Parents of Young Children	Feeling in-between	Life stage markers as they grow up to mark the progression toward adulthood
--	--	Commissioning service at graduation to send them out into the world with a direction and purpose
Parents of emerging adults	Feeling in-between	Transition from treating them as children and begin to treat them as peers
--	--	Require them to perform their own adult level tasks like managing money, paying bills, etc.
--	--	Allow them to face negative consequences of choices rather than interceding to mitigate like you would if they were a child
Church leaders	Feeling in-between	Give and allow responsibilities like adults rather than treating them like youth group members
--	--	Hold them accountable for behavior as any other adult in the congregation
--	--	opportunities with those younger than themselves
Christian Higher Education	Feeling in-between	Hold students accountable to the school code of conduct and biblical behavior

*Table A4 continued*

--	--	Grade in a consistent manner that brings consequences for failure to meet the given standard
--	--	Discipleship groups and forums that help them wrestle with and answer personally what it means to accept responsibility for themselves, to be financially independent, and make independent decisions

Table A5. The age of optimism

<i>Audience</i>	<i>Trend</i>	<i>Application</i>
Parents of Young Children	Age of optimism	Example of life and conduct—where and what do you express your hope in? What do you trust for the future: your skills and abilities or God’s sovereignty?
--	--	Talk about the goodness of God’s will even when life isn’t perfect.
Parents of emerging adults	Age of optimism	Discuss God’s will together. Talk about the differences in the types of His will and how those impact decision making for the future
--	--	Talk about the sovereignty of God in decision making and life direction
--	--	Work together to define the reality of the fact that this is not our home, the impact of sin and the fall on life here and that God still loves us and provides blessing
Church leaders	Age of optimism	Unpack Jeremiah 29:11 in a small group setting
--	--	Teach on God’s sovereignty
--	--	Make specific application of sermons, Bible studies and small groups to their lives
Christian Higher Education	Age of optimism	Build a strong biblical counseling program connected to the local church

*Table A5 continued*

--	--	Regular alumni interaction for a true picture of life after graduation
--	--	Workforce interactions that prepare them for both the realities and possibilities in real terms rather than abstract lectures

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## ABSTRACT

### A BIBLICAL CRITIQUE OF JEFFREY ARNETT'S THEORY OF EMERGING ADULTHOOD

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Jeffrey Arnett coined the term *emerging adulthood* and defines it with five key characteristics. Each characteristic is examined in light of Scripture and to make ministry applications. Chapter 2 examines the age of identity explorations, particularly in the areas of love and work. This is contrasted with an examination of biblical texts related to both areas. Chapter 3 examines emerging adulthood as the age of instability. Scripture is examined to create an understanding of life instability.

Chapter 4 examines the most self-focused age in light of the God and others focus of Scripture. Chapter 5 examines the age of feeling in-between and contrasts it with Scripture. Chapter 6 examines the age of possibilities. Scripture teaches that all of this life is full of possibilities no matter life circumstance. Chapter 7 concludes with thoughts about keeping from embracing the unbiblical aspects of emerging adulthood and offers suggestions for ministry.

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