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REALITY BYTES

Snapshots of a Crying and Dying Culture



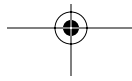
HE SITS THERE FOR HOURS. His parents wonder why he isn't outside expending the energy they had when they were his age. He's satisfied to stay in his chair, fingers flying across the keyboard as his eyes focus on the monitor. Like millions of other young people, fourteen-year-old Derrick "lives" for several hours a day in an online world.¹ He sends and receives e-mails, posts comments on blogs, surfs the Web, and IMs his online friends in real time.



When his parents ask him about his obsession, he can't explain it. But visitors to his blog can read about Derrick's feelings of loneliness and confusion, and his inability to connect with adults—even the adults who live under his roof.

Derrick, like all teens, is trying to find his place in this world. When he's most honest and transparent, he admits he feels overwhelmed and lost. Even though he's never personally met most of his online friends, they offer acceptance, understanding, community, meaning and guidance that he doesn't get from anywhere else. Most of them feel just like Derrick.

¹The stories in this book are true. At times, I have combined stories to offer a broader picture of contemporary adolescent reality. Names have been changed to protect identity.





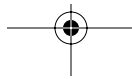
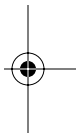
To Derrick, the hours spent in front of his computer afford him the best place to be open and honest. Sadly, the best that Derrick has experienced isn't very good. One look at the thoughts he's posted on his blog reveal his disturbing reality.

i miss brooke. . . . she never talks to me anymore. ever. i get this feeling, whenever i look at her picture, the one she sent of her and me before she left . . . a feeling like the coolest person was torn away from me. . . . i miss myself . . . f—ing depressed f—ing depressed f—ing depressed. . . . ya know what the sad thing is? i typed that all out. so confused. . . . no clue what im gonna do about anything or everything. . . . i wanna just disappear, but ive got such anxiety that i cant sleep in 10 minutes past my alarm during the school week without my heart pounding out of my chest. . . . why am i so ugly? . . . i look in the mirror and i wanna claw my body to shreds. . . . so imperfect. . . . i think i might stop typing now . . . but thatd require . . . stopping doing the one thing i have to do. . . . im sorry im sorry im sorry and i lie and i lie and i lie and im not worth it and im not good enough and all i want is someone to hold me. . . . and for some reason everything is crashing down. . . . i should be happy now but im not

As horrible as Derrick's words sound, the adults in his life don't have a clue about what lies beneath the surface of his seemingly "normal" teenage life.

Is Anybody Listening?

Derrick's experience is not unusual or even surprising. His generation, known as the Millennial Generation or Generation Y, is the second to grow up in a world driven by the emerging postmodern worldview. For them the world is filled with questions, but very few answers. The cries rising out of their deep hunger and thirst are loud, very loud. If we listen, we'll hear it in their music, books and films. We observe it in their choices and behaviors. They long to be "meaningfully con-





nected to life.”² But the complexities of their world have made it difficult for them to hear the good news—at least in the way the church is now “spreading” it—in a timely and understandable manner.

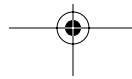
As hope-filled ambassadors of Jesus Christ, we should be listening and responding with urgent compassion. Instead, those of us who have been given the task of leading the young to the soul-satisfying “bread of life” (Jn 6:35) and “streams of living water” (Jn 7:38) may have unknowingly locked the bread box and shut off the water valve through our inability or unwillingness to hear the nuances of their unique worldview and experience *before* attempting to answer their cries. If we try to talk to our young people *before* listening to their reality, we will, as Francis Schaeffer said, “only beat the air.”³

Teenagers are by nature hopeful and idealistic. But for many, their wonderfully refreshing and youthful idealism has no solid foundation and will eventually yield to the presumption that life just isn’t satisfying. Ironically, instead of finding eternal life, their earthly lives are sucking the very life out of them. For the sake of their future and the advance of God’s kingdom, the church must start listening.

Several years ago I traveled to the Midwest to speak in a church in a small community about the changing world of Derrick and his peers. Shortly after my return I received a thank you note from a mother who had attended my seminars. In it she described her frustrating efforts to care for her fourteen-and-a-half-year-old daughter Erin. Their relationship had been fine until Erin turned twelve. Almost overnight, it all began to unravel. The aching mother directed me to Erin’s handwritten poem penned as a message from daughter to mother, summed up in the potent phrase “Somehow I lost my mouth. / Somehow you lost your ears.” Erin’s poem is more than a message to mom. It’s a message to God’s people today. Erin communicates a surprising and startling reality—we aren’t listening, and we don’t even know it!

²Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 106.

³Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1985), p. 9.





Fighting for Meaning

Over the years I've talked to hundreds of young people who have spent their adolescent years feeling and living like Derrick and Erin. When they're children, life typically seems easy. But when they reach their teenage years, more and more young people feel and experience something markedly different. They can't always put it into words, but they know something's wrong. Change confronts them from every direction as they grow. Simultaneously they face the challenges, choices, expectations and pressures of a rapidly changing world. Even those who are able to maintain their spirit of youthful idealism become "idealists" who have "not been able to find an ideal."⁴

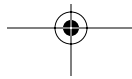
While all teens struggle at some level, teens who lack a distinctively biblical foundation and the security of a strong home face greater difficulty. Our world is populated by increasing numbers who bear the ugly marks of relational breakdown. By the time they move into young adulthood, far too many continue to wander on a painful and confusing path with the aching awareness that something is terribly wrong. Many unknowingly fall into a nihilistic way of life that sees everything as meaningless and chaotic. In the 1999 cult film *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden speaks on their behalf; if they don't come to faith, the emerging generation of Millennials will soon find themselves echoing his words: "Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won't. We're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off."⁵

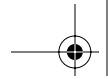
For over twenty years Steve Garber has been working with university students. He consistently asks them, "Why do you get up in the morning?" because

it gets at the relationship between what one believes about the world and how one lives in the world, particularly as that dynamic interaction is being formed as young people move out of

⁴Ibid., p. 37.

⁵*Fight Club*, dir. David Fincher, Twentieth Century Fox, 1999.





their parents' worlds and worldviews and tape up their own convictions as frameworks within which to live and move and have their being.

Among other things, he's discovered that young people "are finding it increasingly difficult to make sense of the world and their place in it."⁶

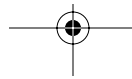
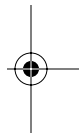
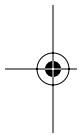
Some generational analysts believe these problems are unique to the postboomer generation known as Generation X. But without a solid and firm biblical foundation and view of life that helps them make sense of God's world and their place in it, the same is certain to be true for the Millennial generation as they enter into young adulthood. If nothing changes, we can be sure the post-Millennial generation will be marked by the same confusion.

The end result can be heard in the music of Dave Matthews, an artist embraced by a faithful legion of young listeners. A series of family tragedies shaped his music and view of life. In his 1994 song "Rhyme & Reason," a first-person testimony of human sadness, hopelessness and pain written after the murder of his sister Anne, he sings: "My head aches—warped and tied up / I need to kill this pain / My head won't leave my head alone / And I don't believe it will / 'Til I'm dead and gone / My head won't leave my head alone / And I don't believe it will / 'Til I'm six feet under ground. . . . Well I know these voices must be my soul / I've had enough / I've had enough / Of being alone / I've got no place to go."

Unmet Needs

All human beings need to be heard and understood. Those needs are amplified during the critical change-filled years where teenagers are moving from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood. However, they aren't always expressed in ways that are easily understood or that make us feel comfortable. When they can put their pain into words, the emerging generations are usually critical

⁶Garber, *Fabric of Faithfulness*, p. 106.





of the institutions that have let them down: family, church, school or maybe adult society in general. When they can't put the pain and feelings into words, they put them into actions—sometimes acts of violence inflicted on themselves or others.⁷

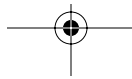
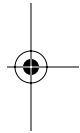
Multipatinum recording artist Christina Aguilera sings about the gnawing emptiness of her generation. When Christina turned six, her mother left Christina's violent and abusive father and moved with Christina and her sister to Pittsburgh. Christina's emotional pain and emptiness increased as she spent her elementary and junior-high school years being rejected by her peers. Even after winning a 1999 Best New Artist Grammy and achieving fame and financial fortune, she was spurned by her high school classmates. Her 2003 Grammy-winning single, "Beautiful," sums up the relational pain and spiritual yearnings of so many in our culture. Each new morning brings her the hope and promise of fulfillment, but as the day wears on, reality takes hold and "suddenly it's hard to breathe," she feels insecure and ashamed. She emotionally addresses her listeners as they too try "to fill the emptiness." In her yearning she asks, "Is that the way it is?"⁸

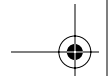
Adults often fail to see such expressions as cries resulting from teens' unmet hunger and thirst for God. Theologian Alister McGrath articulates this need that is so elusive to adolescents:

If there is something that has the power to fulfill truly and deeply, then for many it is something unknown, hidden in mystery and secrecy. We move from one thing and place to another, lingering only long enough to discover that it is not what we were hoping for before renewing our quest for fulfillment. The great certainty of our time seems to be that satisfaction is nowhere to be found. We roam around, searching without finding, yearning without being satisfied. The pursuit of happiness is often said to be one of the most fundamental human rights. Yet this happiness proves

⁷For information on the growing problem of cutting and other forms of self-abuse, visit the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding website. Especially helpful is the article "Crying Through Their Cuts: The Stark Reality of Self-Abuse" <www.cpyu.org/Page.aspx?id=76714>.

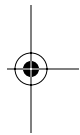
⁸Walt Mueller, "Christina & Justin: Innocence Lost or Truth Be Told?" *youthculture@today*, spring 2003, pp. 3-11.





astonishingly elusive. So often, those who actively pursue happiness find that it slips through their fingers. It is an ideal which is easily put into words, yet seems to remain beyond our reach. We have long become used to the fact that the richest people in this world are often the most miserable, yet fail to see the irony of this. Perhaps this is just one of the sad paradoxes of being human. Maybe we will have to get used to the fact that we are always going to fail in our search for happiness. Part of the cruel irony of human existence seems to be that the things we thought would make us happy fail to do so.⁹

Blaise Pascal epitomized Aguilera's quest from a Christian perspective. McGrath describes Pascal's model as "a God-shaped emptiness within us, which only God can fill. We may try to fill it in other ways and with other things. Yet one of the few certainties of life is that nothing in this world satisfies our longing for something that is ultimately beyond this world."¹⁰ As it has been for all people since the Fall of humanity and expulsion from Eden, this is the great need of young people today. They are crying out to have their God-shaped emptiness filled.



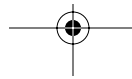
Who Will Be There for Me?

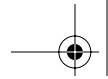
God spoke through Moses to the people of Israel regarding their responsibility to the young among them:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on

⁹Alister McGrath, *The Unknown God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 8-9.

¹⁰McGrath, *Unknown God*, p. 120.





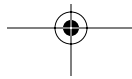
the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deut 6:4-9)

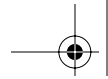
God's design is to use families and the larger body of Christ to point young people to their divine purpose. But teenage life in today's culture leaves us wondering if we've heeded God's command. Families, even those in the church, are falling apart and malfunctioning. While many in the church have not intentionally turned their backs on the young, they are only "beating the air" and as a result, our youth are leaving the church in droves. In some cases, the family and church are present but unaccounted for. In other words, we're there but we aren't paying attention. Even though members of the emerging generations try to connect, it seems to them that nobody's home. At times, we're occupied with other things—some important, some not. At other times, our children's inability or unwillingness to live up to our expectations and behavioral standards leads to an angry retort or disingenuous lecture on our part. Sometimes they scare us. Or maybe we don't think they have any interest in what we have to offer. More than likely, the real problem is we haven't been listening. Veteran youth worker and cultural analyst Dean Borgman issues a timely warning to the church: "When young people cry out in pain, we cannot respond with a shaking of our heads, detachment, and silence."¹¹

The fact of the matter is that young people have very little experience in how to effectively communicate what's on their mind, but they are painfully aware when we fail to hear what they have to say. Erin's words are powerful—she felt her parents "lost" their ears. As a result, she "lost" her mouth and the cycle of communication breakdown moved full speed ahead. In the end, her parents weren't worth listening to anymore.

This sad progression of relational collapse has been repeated in too many families. Unfortunately, it's happening in the church as well—to Christian parents charged by God with the spiritual nurture of their children, to pastors called to preach the Word to the full spectrum of the people in the pews, to youth pastors who work with students during their adolescent years, and to those involved in educational

¹¹Dean Borgman, *Hear My Story* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 9.





ministry. If the church doesn't listen, the church can't understand. When young people realize they aren't understood, church becomes a place where they don't belong. Then, as they try other places in their efforts to satisfy the spiritual hunger, the unmet groans for redemption (Rom 8:22) grow louder and more intense with the passing of time. As part of the creation subjected to "frustration" because of sin, the lost and unredeemed suffer "emptiness, futility, purposelessness, and transitoriness."¹²

The cost of losing *our* ears is great. Whoever takes interest and listens with both ears will be given the privilege of influence. God's people are typically surprised not only to learn that our young are not listening to us but who they *are* listening to.

Guess Who's All Ears?

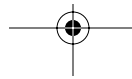
In the early 1980s a series of eighteen studies compared the changing influence of various institutions on the values and behaviors of thirteen- to nineteen-year-olds. In 1960 the family exercised the greatest influence on teen values and behavior, followed in order by school, friends and peers, and the church.¹³ While 1960 was by no means a perfect time, families in general were still active in the lives of their children. In addition, schools and churches were for the most part reinforcing the basic values taught in the home. There was a more unified voice influencing teens. The young were generally more settled and had a place to belong.

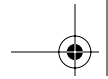
Fast-forward to 1980, by which point friends and peers had taken the number one spot as influencer of teen values and behavior. The family dropped to number two and the media¹⁴ jumped onto the list

¹²John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 238-39.

¹³Joe Francomano, Wayne Lavitt and Darryl Lavitt, *Junior Achievement: A History* (Colorado Springs, Col.: Junior Achievement Inc., 1988), pp. 93-95, cited in Walt Mueller, *Understanding Today's Youth Culture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1999), p. 68.

¹⁴"Media," as used in this book, refers to all popular entertainment outlets targeted and marketed to children and teens. This includes but is not limited to television, film, music, radio, video games, magazines, books, advertising and websites. "Popular culture" in today's world is created, driven and dispensed by the media.





at number three. School dropped two notches to number four, and the church dropped out of the top four list altogether.¹⁵ Not only had the influences changed, but the messages sent to young people were less consistent as those institutions disagree on basic values.

What would this list look like today? The global pervasiveness of MTV and the Internet boost the media's influence to the top of the list. Friends and peers—a group targeted by an aggressive marketing machine looking to make money and generate lifelong brand loyalty—would drop to number two. The family—for numerous reasons, including breakdown and parental indifference—continues to drop to number three,¹⁶ and the school stays at number four.¹⁷

Consider the conclusion of media analyst Quentin Schultze and his colleagues in their book *Dancing in the Dark*, a compelling study of the role electronic media play in the lives of our young people:

Youth and the electronic media today are dependent upon each other. The media need the youth market, as it is called, for their own economic survival. Youth, in turn, need the media for guid-



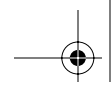
¹⁵Mueller, *Understanding Today's Youth Culture*, p. 68.

¹⁶It is my belief that while the semantics of this study's results point to the fact that the institutions of influence on teen values, attitudes and behaviors are shifting in balance of degree of influence, parents *are always* the single most significant socializing force in the lives of the emerging generations. God ordained the institution of the family at creation and established the family as the arena in which spiritual nurture is to take place (Deut 6:1-9). In the economy of today's culture, the failure of the family to function according to God's design and intent fosters a situation where the tasks of nurture and socialization are handed by default to other institutions or cultural forces. In other words, the family is always the greatest influencer of teen values, attitudes and behaviors *for better or for worse* depending on the role the family is or is not playing in the life of the young person.

Consequently, it is possible to affirm the results of the cited study along with the research conclusions of The National Study of Youth and Religion, and researcher Christian Smith in his book *Soul Searching*: "Contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misperceptions, we believe that the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents. Grandparents and other relatives, mentors, and youth workers can be very influential as well, but normally, parents are most important in forming their children's religious and spiritual lives. . . . The best social predictor, although not a guarantee, of what the religious and spiritual lives of youth will look like is what the religious and spiritual lives of their parents *do* look like. Parents and other adults, as we have suggested, most likely 'will get what they are.'" Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 261.

¹⁷While this list is speculative, my own experience, anecdotal evidence, youth research and on-going discussions with other culture watchers support these conclusions.





ance and nurture in a society where other social institutions, such as the family and the school, do not shape the youth culture as powerfully as they once did.¹⁸

The authors suggest that the media provides the emerging generations with “maps of reality” to guide them into adulthood. Because teens see the media as understanding them and their place in life, it is “extremely well-suited to provide information relevant to many of the questions adolescents face.”¹⁹ It serves to define the meaning of life, values, attitudes, behavioral norms and social and gender roles, which then translate into behaviors.²⁰ Media speaks back to young people, giving them “equipment for living” their day to day lives in the world.²¹

Dean Borgman has spent years studying the power of media in the lives of young people. He recognizes that media’s function is multifaceted. For young people, especially those who don’t already have a place to belong, media can serve as an escape from the cares, concerns and pains of life. The media gives them a voice that frees them from social neglect and the resulting silence. It can serve as a form of lament, much like the biblical psalms. At times it serves as a form of protest against victimization and oppression. For some it can actually become an addiction. And, of greatest importance to our discussion, media can serve as religion, especially where the church seems to have little or nothing to say.²²

As a directive force, the media is uniquely suited to fill instructional voids left by families and churches. Young people want “to be certain about how to live and to understand why things happen as they do—and the popular arts help them navigate through life.”²³ In effect, popular culture gives them purpose. Because it has listened to them, the young are returning the favor.

Sociologist Donna Gaines says that “to those who’ve grown up feeling abject, strangers to themselves and the world around them, rock &

¹⁸Quentin J. Schultze et al., *Dancing in the Dark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 12-13.

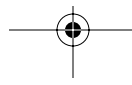
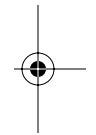
¹⁹Peter G. Christenson and Donald F. Roberts, *It’s Not Only Rock & Roll* (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1988), p. 29.

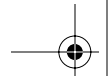
²⁰Schultze et al., *Dancing in the Dark*, p. 99.

²¹Christenson and Roberts, *It’s Not Only Rock & Roll*, pp. 31-71.

²²Dean Borgman, *When Kumbaya Is Not Enough* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1997), p. 128.

²³William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), p. 28.





roll has meant much more than just the music; it offers salvation, a new lease on life." As a result, "youth culture remains a powerful, meaningful force in kids' lives. Many need it to live. Sometimes it's the only thing left to hold on to."²⁴ Gaines's experience as a lost teen looking for answers led her to study the role pop culture plays in the lives of children and teens. In *A Misfit's Manifesto*, Gaines's memoir of her life as a rock and roll fan, she refers to pop culture as her "unholy redeemer," explaining that "for many, the music has the potential to obliterate pain, transform experience, reinvent meaning, alter feeling states. It can change personal identity and cultural history."²⁵

Still, she admits that in her experience ultimate redemption never came. "Strung out, hunting down redemption, I felt like s— for most of my life," she writes. "Joy was ephemeral, like holy water rolling off my fingertips, quickly disappearing. And then I had to start all over again. Running on empty, looking for a fix and a kiss, I did what I had to do, filling the hole, filling the hole."²⁶ From a biblical perspective we know that unless media (or any other institution) points to redemption in Christ, it's only taking people on a rabbit chase. But young people would rather chase rabbits than *wait* for someone to hear and understand their cries. It's easy to justify life on the wide and well-traveled road that leads to destruction if nobody takes the time to effectively show the way to the narrow road that leads to life (Mt 7:13-14).

Opening Our Ears

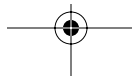
Can we regain *our* ears and give them back *their* mouths? If our goal is to shape an appropriate biblical response, where can we go to hear what they have to say?

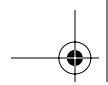
In my work with students over the last three decades, I have learned that the most powerful conduit to understanding young people is to hear their words. Through one-on-one conversations, reading their poetry, digesting their journals or tapping into other creative outlets, we

²⁴Donna Gaines, *A Misfit's Manifesto* (New York: Villard, 2003), pp. xvi, xvii.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. xiii.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. xiv.





discover their joys, concerns, questions, frustrations and ideas. We must let them speak for themselves as we listen with undivided attention.

But a second way sometimes speaks louder and with greater clarity than young people themselves. Popular culture speaks through a variety of media outlets, including music, television, advertising, books and film. It can speak *for them to us*.

Hans Rookmaaker, art critic and Christian scholar, “listened” to art in order to hear what the culture was saying about itself. Rookmaaker’s comments in his book *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, while written in specific reference to modern art, apply equally well to contemporary popular culture and its youthful audience:

This art is the work of your neighbors, your contemporaries, [your children,] human beings who are crying out in despair for the loss of their humanity, their values, their lost absolutes, groping in the dark for answers. It is already late, if not too late, but if we want to help our generation we must hear their cry. We must listen to them as they cry out from their prison, the prison of a universe which is aimless, meaningless, and absurd.²⁷

Gen X theologian Thomas Beaudoin says that popular culture must be heard because for the young it’s “a major meaning-making system.” In addition, the young express their “religious interests, dreams, fears, hopes, and desires through popular culture.”²⁸ Listening opens our eyes to the reality and depth of the needs of young people. And once we know the reality, we can communicate the gospel in ways that can be heard and understood.

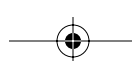
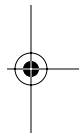
Listening to Tracy’s Generation Speak

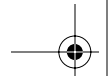
Jean-Luc Godard says that “a film is the world in an hour and a half.”²⁹

²⁷H. R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994), p. 136. Parenthetical remarks mine.

²⁸Thomas Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. xiv.

²⁹Jean-Luc Godard, quoted in Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), p. 162.





The ninety-nine-minute film *Thirteen* serves as a mouthpiece for the young and an effective example of how pop culture can open our eyes and ears to a troubling reality.³⁰ If this is indeed the world of young people, we'd better start paying attention.

A 2003 film about thirteen-year-olds written by thirteen-year-old Nikki Reed with help from writer/director Catherine Hardwicke, *Thirteen* autobiographically chronicles the desperate confusion of teenagers and their search for significance, purpose and belonging. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Reed said her own personal coming-of-age struggles and confusion were rooted in the fact that "I felt like I wasn't understood and like no one was listening to me."³¹

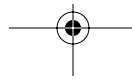
At the outset of the film Tracy Frieland enters adolescence and morphs from a cute and perky straight-A student into a confused and rebellious teenager. Tracy turns her back on her girlfriends in favor of a connection with the charismatic yet painfully broken Evie Zamora (played by the film's writer), the most popular girl in the seventh grade. Tracy experiences a variety of situations not uncommon among today's teens. As Tracy and her generation speak to the church, what do we hear them say?

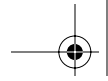
"We're changing, confused, and vulnerable." On the first day of seventh grade Tracy gleefully walks the outside corridors of the middle school campus with her lifelong neighborhood girlfriends. As they stop to interact with Tracy's older brother Mason and a group of his friends, they notice the boys' attention shift to Evie Zamora, who has changed from a girl to a woman over the summer. Evie's voluptuous body and seductive dress grab the attention of all. As the boys lustily comment on Evie, the girls realize that they fall far short. While little or nothing is said, Tracy's expression communicates that she sees herself as the little girl left behind.

Tracy resolves to move into adulthood as quickly as possible. She gets home from school and angrily throws her cherished stuffed animals and little girl toys—and other things representative of her child-

³⁰*Thirteen*, dir. Catherine Hardwicke, Twentieth Century Fox, 2003.

³¹Televised interview with Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, original air date, October 2, 2004.





hood—into the trash. She then “trashes” her friends so she can pursue a friendship with Evie. The door of childhood is closing on Tracy’s life. The doorway into adolescence is opening wide, and she’s not sure what she sees or where to go.

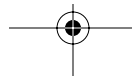
For Tracy and many of her friends, the teenage years are all about surviving and finding their way. They are vulnerable, facing not only the normal developmental changes associated with the adolescent years (physical, social, emotional, intellectual, moral) but a culture where social pressures are on the rise, and many of the social supports that should guide young people through these years have collapsed or disappeared altogether.

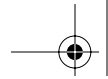
In his book *Age of Opportunity* Paul Tripp finds in the first seven chapters of Proverbs a biblical perspective on the struggles facing Tracy’s generation. First, adolescents have “no hunger for wisdom or correction.” Tripp explains, “Most teenagers . . . think they are much wiser than they actually are, and they mistakenly believe that their parents have little practical insight to offer.” Second, they have “a tendency towards legalism.” In other words, “they tend to emphasize the letter of the law rather than the spirit. Teenagers tend to push at the fences while telling you that they are still in the yard.” Third, they have “a tendency to be unwise in their choice of companions.” Tripp recognizes that friendship is important to teens and that “it is impossible to be uninfluenced by one’s friends.”³²

Fourth, life for an adolescent is marked by “a susceptibility to sexual temptation.” Because the teenage years are a time where God’s design for the body is realized by the body’s new ability to reproduce itself, our teens experience a variety of sexual feelings. Fifth, adolescents manifest “an absence of eschatological perspective.” In other words, “they don’t tend to live with eternity in view. They don’t think in terms of delayed gratification. Teenagers are shockingly present-focused.” Finally, teenagers evidence “a lack of heart awareness.”³³ They don’t always know that they are hungering and thirsting for

³²Paul David Tripp, *Age of Opportunity* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1997), pp. 76, 81-83.

³³*ibid.*, pp. 85, 87, 89.





God. As the emerging generations cry out to the church, they are asking us to understand them better than they understand themselves. For the most part, we aren't.

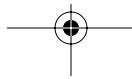
"Our support systems aren't working and it's stressing us out." Many 1980s era "coming of age" films featured the conspicuous absence of healthy adults. Parents were frequently portrayed as self-absorbed, marginally involved in their children's lives and easily manipulated by teenagers. School administrators are portrayed in a similarly negative light in films such as *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and *The Breakfast Club*.

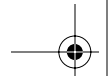
While popular culture was a significant factor in the youth of baby boomers, Thomas Beaudoin notes that Generation Xers "found it at an earlier, more critical age and without the familial supervision of previous generations."³⁴ They're now old enough to see how the absence of healthy, involved adults during the developmental years produces long-term fallout. Consequently, today's thoughtful coming-of-age films reflect that reality.

In Tracy's case the foundational institution of the family has been broken by divorce. Dad is conspicuously absent. When he does appear, Tracy's longings for a connection with her father are shattered. Their planned weekend visit is cancelled because he has business responsibilities, and their short face-to-face conversation is interrupted by his ringing cell phone. Tracy lives with her mom, Mel, a recovering alcoholic struggling to make ends meet for her family. Mel attempts to meet her own relational needs by opening her home and bed to an on-again, off-again boyfriend, a recovering cocaine addict. While Mel's attempts to provide for and guide her two children are valiant, her efforts are frustrated by the reality of a family terribly broken by past choices and present circumstances. Tracy has no support.

Like so many other teens from broken homes, the vulnerable young Tracy seeks support from a peer. Sadly, Evie's situation is markedly worse. Her father and mother are totally out of the picture. Abuse is

³⁴Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, p. 5.





part of her past. Currently, she lives with a guardian whose own life is a train wreck. Thus a confused child is led by an even more confused child in a difficult and confusing adult world. The reality of living in today's society has made Tracy and her peers more vulnerable to stress while exposing them to stresses and situations almost unknown to previous generations.

Developmental expert David Elkind believes that adults have forced children out of childhood—the time they need to grow—and into a premature adulthood.

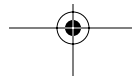
In today's society we seem unable to accept the fact of adolescence, that there are young people in transition from childhood to adulthood who need adult guidance and direction. Rather, we assume the teenager is a kind of adult. Whether we confer premature adulthood upon teenagers because we are too caught up in our own lives to give them the time and attention they require or because we feel helpless to provide them with the safe world they need, the end result is the same: teenagers have no place in society.³⁵

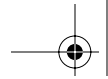
This imposition of premature adulthood robs teenagers of that all-important period of life when they are able to define who they are. "By impairing his or her ability to construct a secure personal identity, today's society leaves the teenager more vulnerable and less competent to meet the challenges that are inevitable in life." With too many freedoms, loss of security and "the frustration of trying to prepare for their life's work in school settings that hinder rather than facilitate this goal," teenagers "are subject to more stress than were teenagers in previous generations."³⁶

As a result of his ongoing study of what is happening in the developmental stage known as midadolescence (roughly ages fourteen to eighteen), Chap Clark discovered that "a far wider relational and social chasm exists between adults and adolescents than I had previously

³⁵David Elkind, *All Grown Up & No Place to Go* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1984), p. 4.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.





considered.”³⁷ Clark says that “the way midadolescents have been forced to design their own world and separate social system has created perhaps the most serious and yet understudied social crisis of our time,”³⁸ a crisis he labels as a crisis of systemic abandonment of our teenagers. This “systemic abandonment by institutions and adults who are in positions originally designed to care for adolescents has created a culture of isolation”³⁹ that has left many members of the emerging generation—who by all appearances seem to thrive and have it all together—“one step away from the abyss of isolation and despair.”⁴⁰

Conspicuously absent from *Thirteen* are the church and its ambassadors. The only positive adult presence is a teacher who challenges Tracy on the sudden decline in the quality of her schoolwork. The film winds up being a story of the blind leading the blind. Who is to blame? The young teenagers who have been deprived of support and who struggle to find their way? Or the support systems that have miserably failed due to their weaknesses, lack of understanding or absence?

“*We need a place to belong.*” Tracy initiates a “chance” encounter with Evie and dances with ecstatic joy when Evie invites her to go shopping later that day. Suddenly, feelings of significance surge through her being, but her newfound place of belonging is actually the start of a downward spiral that takes Tracy to the brink of self-destruction.

In the adolescent mind the risk of self-destruction is a small price to pay for acceptance. Teenagers desire to fit in and belong. If they don’t, they see themselves as abnormal. “Consequently, pursuing and adopting the image of those who are accepted, desirable, and interesting can become a consuming passion dictating appearance and behavior.”⁴¹ Researcher Marcel Danesi observed adolescent behavior for years and came to the conclusion that kids are either “cool” or “losers.” He writes, “*Coolness* has become a synonym for social attractive-

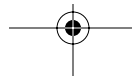
³⁷Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 43.

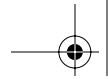
³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹Mueller, *Understanding Today's Youth Culture*, p. 216.





ness, and its opposite, *loserness*, has become a synonym for ugliness and alienation."⁴² Nobody wants to be a loser.

Peer pressure is incredibly difficult for a child growing up in an intact and healthy functioning home. It's that much more intense where the family is failing. When the places they were made to belong fail to meet their most basic emotional and spiritual needs, teenagers will seek other options.

Just as a street gang serves as a "family" for the disenfranchised urban kid on the streets, Tracy's new circle of friends becomes a family that provides her with a place, a set of rules and some significance. She is being socialized by a confused peer group instead of her parents. In no time at all Tracy engages in theft, shoplifting, drug abuse, sexual activity and a variety of other distressing behaviors. Her mom continually looks at her with a helpless expression that begs an explanation for the sudden change in her little girl.

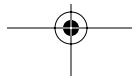
Dean Borgman recognizes that a child "grows up as part of, and is shaped by, various social systems. It is God's plan that these systems lead children to maturity and fullness of life. Disorder in these systems can produce disorder in the life of the emerging adult."⁴³ Tracy was suffering both the consequences of her choices and the fallout from her lack of belonging.

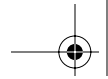
"We're hurting, and hurting deeply." Tracy and countless of her peers are hurting deeply. One estimate is that at least one out of every four teenagers in the United States is currently "at serious risk of not achieving productive adulthood. According to one study, about 21 percent of U.S. children ages nine to 17 have a diagnosable mental or addictive disorder associated with at least minimum impairment."⁴⁴ Dean Borgman sees relational brokenness as the root cause of the pain that young people like Tracy exhibit: "In one dramatic way after another, adult society has shoved young people into silent margins;

⁴²Marcel Danesi, *Cool: The Signs and Meanings of Adolescence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), p. 41.

⁴³Borgman, *Hear My Story*, p. 50.

⁴⁴*Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (New York: Institute for American Values, YMCA of the USA, and Dartmouth Medical School, 2003), p. 8.





there they must tell their stories—if not in words, in silent, self-destructive acts or bold outbursts of violence. This is the simplest explanation of self-injury or self-immolation, of gangsta rap, school shootings and perhaps bullying and rape.”⁴⁵

Tracy’s obsession with body image leads to eating issues, an epidemic in today’s youth culture. She engages in a range of risky and immoral sexual behaviors, including an attempt to seduce an older male neighbor. She experiments with drugs and alcohol. At one point she and Evie—both giddy and high from huffing—willingly exchange face punches so severe that they are left bloodied. On three occasions during the film, she slices her arms in an effort to release her emotional burdens. Tracy and Evie have become in Borgman’s words, “troubled youth”—that is, “young people in imminent danger of inflicting serious injury on themselves or others.”⁴⁶ Tracy and her peers are hurting, and hurting deeply.

“Will you be here for us?” As *Thirteen* comes to a close three scenes send a clear message to our adult culture and to the church. In the first scene, Tracy’s mother, desperate to do something to help her daughter, pulls her in close and squeezes her in a way that says, “I am here and I will not let you go.” For a moment Tracy resists, but eventually her resistance stops and she collapses into her mother’s arms while both weep.

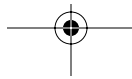
Next, the camera focuses on the two as they lie together sleeping in Tracy’s bed. Tracy is backed into her mother’s body. Lost in her mother’s embrace, Tracy feels a safety and peace she has not experienced for quite some time. Her mother is there for her.

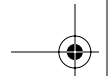
In the final scene the camera captures Tracy’s face as she spins on a piece of playground apparatus. The picture of youthful innocence is shattered as the little thirteen-year-old girl lets out a blood-curdling scream. Just like that, the film ends.

The scenes combine to summarize Tracey’s journey. She is young. She is vulnerable. She has been through great pain. And finally, she wants and needs someone to be there for her.

⁴⁵Borgman, *Hear My Story*, p. 13.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 23.





What Will We Do?

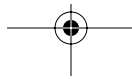
Thirteen testifies to the universal longing of fallen humanity—especially the emerging generations—for spiritual wholeness and restoration. Sadly, some in the church disapprove of films like *Thirteen* and the world it reflects, retreating back from its messy reality into the safety of a cloistered existence. After all, if we don't look at the ugliness, it won't be able to do anything to us and we won't have to do anything about it.

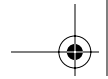
Jesus challenged this sinful attitude. One time, some Jewish leaders presented to Jesus a woman who had been caught in adultery. They wondered whether they should follow the law of Moses and put her to death by stoning. Jesus invited anyone who was without sin to begin the stoning. Those who *thought* they had understanding were silenced by his words. One by one they walked away, until Jesus and the woman were the only two remaining. He told her that he would not condemn her, but that she should "go now and leave your life of sin" (Jn 8:1-11). In compassion he reached out to the woman and loved her. He filled the hole in her soul.

There's not one person who is unredeemable. Even the traditionally cautious and spiritually gun-shy world of social science is recognizing a yearning among young people. A recent report from the Institute for American Values indicates that there is an abundance of "scientific evidence—largely from the field of neuroscience, which concerns our basic biology and how our brains develop—showing that the human child is 'hardwired to connect.'" The two primary connections all humanity needs in order to function and flourish are other people and "moral meaning and openness to the transcendent."⁴⁷ The desire for connections—human and divine—is undeniably present.

The church faces a moment of unprecedented opportunity. The youth culture is calling. If we fail to listen and faithfully respond, we're effectively telling them we don't care or we have nothing to say. We hold back the good news from those who so desperately need to hear.

⁴⁷*Hardwired to Connect*, p. 6.





Perhaps saddest of all is that we don't even know when we're doing it.

John Stott challenges us to look at the incarnation of our Lord as a model of cultural identification.

For the Son of God did not stay in the safe immunity of his heaven, remote from human sin and tragedy. He actually entered our world. He emptied himself of his glory and humbled himself to serve. He took our nature, lived our life, endured our sorrows, felt our hurts, bore our sins and died our death. He penetrated deeply into our humanness. He never stayed aloof from the people he might have been expected to avoid. He made friends with the dropouts of society. He even touched the untouchables. He could not have become more one with us than he did. It was the total identification of love.⁴⁸

Before we speak for Jesus, we must live among our young people—like Jesus. We must participate in their lives—like Jesus. And we must listen—like Jesus. Let's begin our journey to communicate to the emerging generations by listening—listening to generations that need to hear, understand and respond to the good news. It's a generation Jesus invites to "come" (Mt 11:28-29). It's a generation to which Jesus commands us to "go" (Mt 28:19-20).



⁴⁸John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 357.

