

Engaging the Emerging Jewish Generations

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&men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.

I Chronicles 12:32

In addressing the subject of evangelism among the younger emerging generations of Jewish people, it should be clearly understood that we are all students of this task. Jewish evangelism among today's emerging generations is often like fishing on an unknown northern lake for the elusive Muskie. For those of you who aren't fishermen, that means that those of us desiring to effectively minister to emerging Jewish generations don't necessarily have a definitive fishing report to make your fishing experience unproblematic. If there is anything that I hope to accomplish in this brief analysis regarding ministry to the emerging generations of Jews, it is that we will all need to experiment with new lures and innovative techniques, while remaining intimately connected to the Messiah Yeshua.

Before I suggest how we can more effectively engage the emerging Jewish generations with the life-changing hope of the gospel I think that it is important that we remind ourselves of what is shaping and defining their identity. Joe Aldrich, in his book, *Life-Style Evangelism*, states, "The greatest barriers to evangelism are not theological, they are cultural. Those of us in Jewish ministry deeply understand the importance of this rule, and we realize that losing touch with the Jewish culture and its subgroups greatly minimizes our evangelism efforts. Like the men of Issachar, it is imperative that we understand the times we live in and learn to respond accordingly. To do this, we must ask ourselves: What is shaping the thoughts, ideas, and values of the Jewish community? How are the arts, music, media, economics, literature, and the new philosophies impacting Jewish identity and spirituality?"

We are all aware that the majority of the Jews today are not religious. Recent studies show that 80 percent of the American Jewish population never set foot in synagogue, even during the High Holy Days. Half intermarry, and less than a third of their children are raised as Jews. Jewish isolationism has been replaced by Jewish assimilation. Alan Dershowitz, in his controversial and enlightening best-selling book, *The Vanishing American Jew*, brought great awareness to the fact that the American mainstream community has warmly embraced Jews in America. According to Dershowitz, Jews in America have converted from Judaism to Americanism. Suffice it to say, emerging Jewish generations are significantly more influenced by American popular culture, than they are by rabbinical Judaism.

The identity of Jews in America is progressively becoming less distinct as they blend and mix with things that don't perpetuate a Jewish identity. In a recent interview with *GenerationJ.com*, Jewish actress, Heather Paige Kent, from the CBS television sitcom *That's Life* acknowledged of her and her husband, "We're the WASPiest sounding Jews." Heather Paige Kent, like thousands of other Jews in her generation, have blended in with the non-Jewish non-religious world around them. They don't have mezuzahs on their doors or menorahs in their windows. Inwardly they realize that they are Jews, but outwardly there is little to show for it.

Of even greater influence than that of Americanism is the emerging worldview known as postmodernism. Postmodernism is difficult to define, but its influence can be seen within every subculture of the emerging generations, and its influence upon young Jews is increasingly

evident. In 1999, Lisa Schiffman released a book titled, *Generation J*, that gives us a personal look into the emerging postmodern Jewish experience. She writes:

I m part of a generation of fragmented Jews. We re in a kind of limbo. We re suspended between young adulthood and middle age, between Judaism and atheism, between a desire to believe in religion and a personal history of skepticism. Call us a bunch of searchers. Call us post-holocaust Jews. Call us Generation J.

You ll see us everywhere: Jews in search of a perfect clarity. We re turning away from the religion into which we were born. We re turning to Wicca, to New Ageism, to Buddhism, to nothing. We re burning sage sticks at home and pounding drums in the forest. We re meeting with psychics, shrugging our shoulders at rabbis, listening to the music of twelfth-century nuns. If we believe anything, it s that Allen Ginsberg may return as someone else.

In our hearts, we know that we re missing something called Jewish pride. We re not unaware; we re ambivalent. We eat kasha varnishkes at home and pork fried rice outside. We drive German cars. We intermarry. We try to see in the darkness but are afraid there s nothing out there. We are, for better or worse, the future.

For now, we don t know what to believe. We tell ourselves if there is a God, we d stop worrying. We d imagine he d leave messages on the wall letters and shapes, things that look like upturned faces. We wonder if the constellations, the rhythm of tides, are reminders that God exists. We doubt it and push on.

Like it or not, postmodernism is significantly impacting the current and future generations of Jewish people. If you think that postmodernism is simply a marketing gimmick or a label invented by Madison Avenue executives, Dave Tomlinson, in his book, *The Post-evangelical*, would urge you to reconsider. He writes, Those who think that postmodernism is a figment of the academic imagination, a passing fad, could not be more wrong. Postmodernism has flowed right out of the musty corridors of academia into the world of popular culture; it is on the pages of youth magazines, on CD boxes and the fashion pages of Vogue. We must understand that postmodernism is not a label that is ascribed to a fixed generational demographic like the Baby Boomers or Gen Xers. Postmodernism is an emerging worldview that will increasingly dominate the mindset of those we will minister to in the century ahead.

Before we consider how we can minister more effectively to the Jewish community in an emerging postmodern world, we should first understand the primary characteristics of the postmodern mindset. Stanly Grenz, in his book, *A Primer on Postmodernity*, defines postmodernism as an intellectual mood and an array of cultural expressions that call into question the details, principles and values that lay at the heart of modern mind-set. The modern mindset, which emerged during the Enlightenment period, is characterized by a single, universal worldview and moral standard; all knowledge is good and certain; truth is absolute; individualism is valued; and thinking, learning and beliefs should be determined systematically and logically. According to Eddie Gibbs, the professor of Church Growth at the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary, Postmodernists:

□□ Redefine truth in terms of consensus and whatever works for you

- Reject propositional certainty as the ploy of the powerful
- Claim we should celebrate diversity and regard ambiguity as providing the fertile soil for continuing creativity
- Create his or her own meaning and associate with others to increase his or her power base in a fragmented society of competing interests
- Believe that everyone is entitled to his or her point of view
- Value image over substance, and community over isolation
- Are computer-savvy people connected by the World Wide Web of the electronic global village that provides a marketplace of ideas and a virtual reality that is paradoxically anonymous and intimate

Postmodernists don't see any contradictions with statements like the one given from Madonna in an interview with *60 Minutes* "I go to synagogue, I study Hinduism. All paths lead to God."

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the shift from modernism to postmodernism began, but it is generally identified with those who were born after 1960. However, there are those who were born prior to 1960 who would reflect a postmodern mindset. For example, in the bestseller, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom writes of his former college professor who died of Lou Gehrig's Disease: "Morrie borrowed freely from all religions. He was born Jewish, but became an agnostic when he was a teenager & He enjoyed some of the philosophies of Buddhism and Christianity, and he still felt at home, culturally, in Judaism. He was a religious mutt, which made him even more open to the students he taught over the years."

If we want to minister effectively to the Morrie's and Lisa Schiffman's of this world, then it is imperative that we stay in tune with the philosophical shift that is substantially impacting emerging Jewish generations. They still have the same basic needs and desires of previous generations. They long for purpose and spiritual fulfillment, and they want to be loved and embraced. Nevertheless, we need to rethink creative ways of engaging the postmodern culture for the Messiah without becoming postmodern ourselves. Yeshua remains the same, yet the methods we use to teach about Him and worship Him may need to change.

The following list identifies some of the methods that ministries are currently utilizing to reach postmoderns:

Services and literature are designed primarily to reach those who have no previous religious experience

Symbols are utilized to visually promote a sense of spiritual reverence

Starting point is the Garden of Eden and the retelling of creation and origin of man and sin (Acts 17:22-34)

Biblical terms are deconstructed and redefined in their language

Evangelism is a process that occurs through relationship, trust and example

Visuals, art, innovative worship, testimonies and stories are utilized to create a spiritual experience

Demonstrating changed lives is the primary apologetic

The Bible serves as a compass for direction and a means to experience God

(Compiled from Dan Kimball of Graceland at Santa Cruz Bible Church, California)

Anyone in the position to implement methods like these among emerging postmodern Jewish generations must first ask themselves "Do I want to?" I know this seems like a simple question with an obvious answer, but it must be asked. Saying "Yes" to this question will likely require changes to way we do ministry. Eddie Gibbs, in his book, *ChurchNext*, addresses many of these changes, but most importantly he challenges us to be prepared to be questioned at every point, not only in the area of basic beliefs but also in relation to obedience based on those beliefs. Does our *orthodoxy* translate in *orthopraxis*? Do we practice what we preach? Are we seeking to live by an unconditional and radical commitment to our beliefs, whatever the personal cost? Only in so far as Christians are prepared for their own position to be scrutinized at close quarters will they be in a position to persuade postmodernists to critique their own assumptions.

Suggestions for Effectively Engaging the Emerging Jewish Generations:

- 1) Inform your constituents of the characteristics of the postmodern culture so that they will enthusiastically support your ministry initiatives to the emerging generations
- 2) Create evangelistic literature that utilizes the stories of changed lives and personal encounters with God
- 3) Utilize the World Wide Web
- 4) Use surveys and questionnaires
- 5) Continue to encourage Christians to embrace and experience their Jewish roots and heritage, and to interact with other Jewish believers
- 6) Focus on issues that are pertinent to Jewish people (i.e. interfaith marriages)
- 7) Consistently participate and engage in Christian leadership circles and initiatives to establish relationships and strategic partnerships with local churches and ministries that are in the position to engage postmodern Jews
 - Young Leaders Network** (www.youngleader.org)
 - :Links together those who are thinking through the postmodern cultural shift
 - The Ooze** (www.theooze.com)
 - :Links churches in America reaching out to postmodern culture
 - FutureGen** (www.cookministries.com)
 - :Annual conference on future generation ministry
- 8) Empower emerging leaders financially and authoritatively within your ministry to have influence over the development of evangelistic strategies and initiatives
- 9) Focus on developing ministry teams and community environments where creativity can flourish and flexibility is encouraged
- 10) Take a class or read a book or two on philosophy and world religion
- 11) Stay in tune with popular culture
 - Books & Culture: A Christian Review** (www.christianity.net/b&c)
 - :Provides thoughtful reflections on both Christian and secular books and interviews with leading cultural thinkers
 - Echoes** (804-924-7705)
 - :Provides findings from front-line research on the nature and consequences of contemporary social change
 - First Things** (800-783-4903)

:The voice for public intellectual concerned to advance a religiously informed public philosophy for the ordering of society

Fortune (www.fortune.com)

:Provides insight into the economic trends that are affecting society

Joe s Fellowship (www.joefellowship.com)

:E-zine about new culture ministry

Next-Wave (www.next-wave.com)

:Monthly e-zine on postmodern culture and the church

Rolling Stone (303-604-1465)

:Provides an overview of contemporary youth culture its views, music, films, and styles

□□ **Utne Reader** (www.utne.com)

:provides a thematic synthesis of alternative, progressive, and libertarian viewpoints

□□ **The Wilson Quarterly** (800-829-5108)

:Newsmagazine of the world of ideas and new understandings

□□ **Wired** (800-769-4733)

:The cheerleader and champion of cyberspace and the voice of virtual reality

12xxx Keep an eye on emerging Jewish generations

□□ **GenerationJ.com**

:Webzine for Gen X Jewish thought and expression

□□ **InterfaithFamily.com**

:Webzine that presents various viewpoints on the wide range of issues and decisions faced by interfaith families.

□□ **JewishFamily.com**

:Online link to families who may not feel comfortable in traditional Jewish organizations

□□ **JewZ.com**

:Online media network of Jewish web-sites

□□ **JVibe.com**

:Webzine for Jewish teens

□□ **Moment**

:Independent magazine presenting current Jewish political and cultural issues from diverse points of view

□□ **MJzine.com**

:Webzine for emerging Messianic Jewish thought and expression

□□ **newvoices.org**

:Webzine for Jewish students

□□ **tattoojew.com**

:Webzine for Jews with attitude

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In conclusion, we must consider the possibility that churches and non-Jewish ministries that make it a priority to minister to and communicate with the emerging postmodern culture will increasingly become more effective and proficient at reaching emerging Jewish generations than Jewish ministries and congregations that neglect to understand and address postmodernity's influence on the Jewish community. It is imperative that Jewish ministries learn to engage the postmodern culture, otherwise we will cease to have authority on speaking to the church on how

to reach emerging Jewish generations. The future of Jewish ministry is, and will always be, dependent upon our desire to lean upon the Lord for deeper and clearer understanding of those we minister to. We must be willing to do whatever it takes to follow in the Messiah's footsteps as we engage emerging Jewish generations within the changing landscape of Jewish culture. The waters may be murky, but the fish are hungry and they *will* bite.