

FAITH, A HAVEN FOR GEN Z'S EMOTIONS:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HOW FAITH RELATES TO GEN Z'S EMOTIONS

BY
CLAYTON J. FURY

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PROF. LUKE G. THOMPSON, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

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ABSTRACT

Gen Z faces unique emotional challenges that stem from a variety of ways in which they are different from generations before them. This paper highlights various challenges that Gen Z Christians have regarding emotions and devotional use of Scripture in their lives. At the same time, the Holy Spirit's power through the gospel positively impacts the emotions of Gen Z Christians. My qualitative research presented three key findings as it relates to faith and the gospel's impact on Gen Z's emotions. First, Gen Z truly desires to have God's Word be a practical tool in their lives. When believers of this generation are feeling down, stressed, anxious, etc., they want to find rest in the life-giving words of Scripture. Yet second, Gen Z does not necessarily feel equipped to devotionally use the Bible in this way. Third, empathetic faith communities and practical devotional tools are important ways that Gen Z's faith has a direct impact on their emotional well-being. These three key findings will help further the discussion on ministry to Gen Z. We praise God for his work in the hearts and lives of young believers. Meanwhile, we continue to seek ways that help us faithfully serve this generation through gospel ministry.

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z faces a unique set of emotional challenges as compared to previous generations. In some ways, Generation Z is unlike any generation that has come before it. Perhaps the biggest factor that differentiates the young Gen Z is the technology they have grown up with. Smartphones have completely changed the way this generation interacts with the world. Jean Twenge, author of *iGen*, renames Generation Z, “iGen” due to the fact that this generation has drastically been formed by smartphones.¹ “While older generations have enthusiastically adopted smart devices, Gen Z was raised with them. Collectively, they are *of* the Screen Age. Their shared reality is indelibly shaped by five-inch computers carried around in their pockets and by the unparalleled access these devices give them to information, entertainment, people and ideas.”² In 2019 Common Sense Media conducted a survey reporting that teenage members of Gen Z spend about 7.22 hours each day looking at screens.³ This is a generation that is dominated by media and technology.

1. Jean M. Twenge PhD, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, Reprint edition. (New York: Atria Books, 2018).

2. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2* (Barna Group, 2021), 33.

3. “The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2019 | Common Sense Media,” <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2019>.

This technological inundation has a great emotional impact on Gen Z. The American Freshman Survey, a survey that has been given to incoming college freshmen for over 50 years, has recently shown that “every indicator of mental health issues.... reached all-time highs in 2016 – rating emotional health below average (increasing 18% since 2009), feeling overwhelmed (increasing 51%), expecting to seek counseling (increasing 64%), and (perhaps most troubling) feeling depressed (increasing 95%, or nearly doubling).”⁴ Twenge’s book expresses a connection between these striking survey results and technology.

“The sudden, sharp depressive symptoms occurred at almost exactly the same time that smartphones became ubiquitous and in-person interaction plummeted. That seems like too much of a coincidence for the trends not to be connected, especially because spending more time on social media and less time on in-person social interaction is correlated with depression.”⁵

Another interesting fact that differentiates Gen Z is that this generation happens to be the most diverse generation in United States history.⁶ With this diversity come blessings such as a desire for social equality and for marginalized voices to be heard, a broader understanding of culture, etc. Yet alongside the great diversity of Gen Z also comes great plurality. Things like “trigger warnings” and “safe spaces” demonstrate Gen Z’s desire to avoid negative feelings and emotions.⁷ Meanwhile, often this polarized plural society only seems to add to their negative emotions. “Gen Z’s collective aversion to causing offense is the natural product of a pluralistic,

4. Twenge, *iGen*, 103-4.

5. Twenge, *iGen*, 104.

6. *Ep. 13: Jason Dorsey on How Gen Z Will Change the Future of Business | The Trusted Leader Show*, 2021.

7. Barna Group, ed., *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the next Generation: A Barna Report Produced in Partnership with Impact 360 Institute* (USA: Barna Group, 2018), 27.

inclusive culture that frowns on passing judgment.”⁸ This pluralistic culture of modern America seemingly has a greater impact on Gen Z than on other generations as it relates to the Christian faith.

Barna Group conducted a survey that identified what percentage of Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z fit into the profile of someone with a “biblical worldview.” They defined this specific identification based on whether someone believes certain truths such as the Bible is inerrant, they will go to heaven when they die, Jesus lived a perfect life, etc.⁹ They found that ten percent of Boomers, seven percent of Gen X, six percent of Millennials, and only 4 percent of Gen Z fall into this category of someone with a “biblical worldview.” Likewise, the number of those who fall under the label of “born again,” those who have faith in Jesus as Savior and say that salvation comes through faith alone, is also dwindling in Gen Z. However, the most striking conclusion that Barna found in this recent survey is that the percentage of Gen Z that identifies as atheist is double that of preceding generations. Barna states that Gen Z has a “spiritual blank slate. They are drawn to things spiritual, but their starting point is vastly different from previous generations.... The worldview of Gen Z is truly post-Christian. They were not born into a Christian culture, and it shows.”¹⁰

The fact that Gen Z has been raised in pluralistic America is what heightens the spiritual effects of culture for them as compared to generations before them. While their parents and grandparents certainly are being influenced by the culture we live in as well, this society is all

8. Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 27.

9. *Gen Z* Vol.1 pp.113

10. Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 25–26.

they have known. David Kinnaman, author of *You Lost Me*, explains the challenge of young Christians living in a pluralistic culture.

“The story – the great struggle – of this emerging generation is learning how to live faithfully in a new context, to be in the world but not of the world (John 17)... For the next generation, the lines between right and wrong, between truth and error, between Christian influence and cultural accommodation are increasingly blurred. While these are certainly challenges for every generation, this cultural movement is at once a singular opportunity and a unique threat to the spiritual formation of tomorrow’s church. Many young adults are living out the tension of *in-but-not-of* in ways that ought to be corrected or applauded, yet instead are often criticized or rejected.”¹¹

The religious aspect of what makes Gen Z different from other generations is just one of many differentiating characteristics that add to the discussion of Gen Z’s emotions.

So, who is Gen Z? Although the different birth years that come into consideration when identifying Gen Z are debated, Jason Dorsey provides an excellent point of reference for identifying who is and who is not a member of Gen Z based on one’s year of birth.

“Gen Z is born starting around 1996.... Where that comes from is they do not remember 9/11. And that was one of our most famous discoveries early on is that how do we know when millennials end, and Gen Z begins? Sometimes there’s a generation-defining moment.... Gen Z does not, this is really the key, does not remember 9/11. It’s not a contemporary event for them.”¹²

On top of technology and diversity, this generation’s post-9/11 upbringing comes with a host of social and economic issues that affect emotions. Barna’s study of Gen Z states,

Most in Gen Z do not remember the years before 9/11. They do not recall ever having lived in a country at peace. ‘As a group raised in constant war, contemporary youth may view the world with the belief that the world is ‘unsafe,’ yet at the same time, they may have greater global awareness as a result.’ Between the financial crisis and perpetual war, they are apt to be distrustful of the future. According to analysis in *Forbes*: ‘Generation Z

11. David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith*, Reprint edition. (Baker Books, 2016), 10. (ebook page number)

12. *Ep. 13*.

never had the luxury of a threat-free perspective so they've been forced to view life through a more guarded lens from the start."¹³

Since Gen Z does not even remember 9/11, they have grown up in a society that feels a lack of safety. There is a certain level of fear and anxiety since that attack that exists throughout society. This lack of security brings with it anxiety and emotional unrest.

Not only does physical insecurity affect Gen Z, but the social unrest that Gen Z has had to experience growing up has a great impact as well. "Societal upheaval is challenging every facet of Gen Z's daily reality—from school to work to social interaction—and they will need the support of parents, teachers, pastors and mentors to help them piece their lives back together."¹⁴ American members of Gen Z have lived through economic recession, political controversy and partisan conflict, racial tensions, and the list goes on. All this tension and societal stress brings anxiety to these young members of society. Gen Z has a host of different financial expectations that differentiate them as well. Common financial burdens such as college students graduating without jobs, the lofty expenses of modern living, and the memories of financial recessions during their childhood add a burden of financial anxiety for this generation. We will explore this topic further in a later section of this paper.

Dorsey also explains which birth year this generation ends with, "Gen Z ends around 2015 and the reason is – we believe the capstone event is now Covid-19, this pandemic. And so as we think about COVID-19 and how it's impacting the generation, this is their 'where were you when....' moment."¹⁵ The study of COVID-19 and its emotional impact on this generation

13. Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 29.

14. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 16–18.

15. *Ep. 13*.

has only begun. However, some surveying has demonstrated that COVID-19 had a more acute emotional impact on this generation. The American Psychological Association reported, “Gen Z adults (46%) were the most likely generation to say that their mental health has worsened compared with before the pandemic.”¹⁶ Forbes explained the kind of impact a traumatic event such as covid can have. “Every generation develops certain characteristics, at least partly in response to the historical events of its time. Generation Z is no exception. Born just before or soon after 9/11, awakened to childhood consciousness during the Great Recession of 2008, and now coming of age in a time of a pandemic, these young people have had a remarkably complex journey.”¹⁷ The emotional impact of Covid on Gen Z is not over.

All people of all time have dealt with emotions both positively and negatively. Yet for Gen Z, their emotional struggles seem to be more prevalent than previous generations before them. A survey conducted by McKinsey & Company demonstrates this about Gen Z,

“A series of consumer surveys and interviews conducted by McKinsey indicate stark differences among generations, with Gen Z reporting the least positive life outlook, including lower levels of emotional and social well-being than older generations. One in four Gen Z respondents reported feeling more emotionally distressed (25 percent), almost double the levels reported by millennial and Gen X respondents (13 percent each), and more than triple the levels reported by baby boomer respondents (8 percent).”¹⁸

The consensus concerning Gen Z is that with this heightened negative emotional experience comes a greater willingness to express themselves emotionally. “A widespread characteristic of

16. “Young Americans Continue to Struggle,” *Https://Www.Apa.Org*, n.d., <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2021/one-year-pandemic-stress-youth>.

17. Lynda Silsbee, “Council Post: The Challenge And Promise Of Generation Z,” *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2020/05/29/the-challenge-and-promise-of-generation-z/>. Forbes: the challenge and promise

18. “Addressing Gen Z Mental Health Challenges | McKinsey,” <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/healthcare/our-insights/addressing-the-unprecedented-behavioral-health-challenges-facing-generation-z>.

Generation Z is their openness to disclose their inner lives. While many of their parents and grandparents may have grown up with mindsets and coping mechanisms that reflect more emotionally stoic eras, Gen Z has generally been allowed freedom to explore their emotions and deal with them out loud and in community.”¹⁹ Similarly, “Gen Z are far more conscious of mental health issues—and more able to articulate them—than their parents were.”²⁰ There are both blessings and curses that come with a generation full of people with heightened emotional awareness. Increased numbers of emotional distress and mental health issues are a problem. Meanwhile, an openness to share emotional experiences and to make conversations about emotions less taboo is certainly a beneficial thing. What sort of implications do the emotional characteristics of this generation have on young Christians?

For Christian members of Generation Z, the gospel has a direct, positive impact on their emotions. As these cultural and societal challenges affect them emotionally, so does the gospel. The Holy Spirit works through his means to effect faith in them, to change their hearts, and to empower in them sanctified living. God works through the gospel in word and sacrament to bring these blessings to sinners. Martin Luther expresses this change the Holy Spirit brings about through baptism.

“This does not happen by a change of clothing or by any laws or works; it happens by the rebirth and renewal that takes place in Baptism, as Paul says: ‘As many of you as were baptized have put on Christ.’ Titus 3:5: ‘He saved us, in virtue of His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration.’ For in those who have been baptized a new light and flame arise; new and devout emotions come into being, such as fear and trust in God and hope;

19. Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 9. 9

20. “American Psychological Association Survey Shows Teen Stress Rivals That of Adults,” *Https://Www.Apa.Org*, n.d., <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2014/02/teen-stress>.

and a new will emerges. This is what it means to put on Christ properly, truly, and according to the Gospel.”²¹

Here Luther explains what Paul wrote in Galatians 3:27. Those who have clothed themselves with Christ in baptism have received faith, have been completely washed and forgiven of their sins, and have even been sanctified and empowered in their emotions as well. Luther also writes about the Spirit’s work in sanctifying our emotions when commenting on Psalm 119,

*“I ran the way of Thy commandments when Thou didst enlarge my heart. This is what the Spirit does, who, as I have said, is in us in different degrees. And always He reveals the letter more and more and creates new spirits and emotions in us, so that we may run the way of His commandments.”*²²

This sanctifying work of the Spirit in the Christian does not imply that they will always be happy and full of positive emotions. Instead, the Spirit guides the emotions and hearts of believers to trust in the promises of God even amid difficulty.

*“We see, then, what a godly and heroic heart is, namely, a heart which retains trust in God in the utmost poverty and in trials of every kind but, on the other hand, is not puffed up by prosperity but fears the Lord. Such men are surely able to rule the world. They attend to all their duties in such a spirit that they are not content with the good things of this life but hope and wait for another kingdom. Nevertheless, they retain their natural affections and the emotions implanted in their nature, because the Holy Spirit does not extinguish them but renews, inflames, and supports them in a wonderful manner.”*²³

Again, Luther credits the sanctifying power of the Spirit as the source of these godly emotions. It is not as though a believer is given a new set of emotions. However, the renovation brought by the Holy Spirit has a great impact on a believer’s emotions.

21. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 352–353.

22. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 11: First Lectures on the Psalms II: Psalms 76-126*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 11 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 439.

23. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 8: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 45-50*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 8 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 20.

This paper will sort through my own qualitative research and other research, surveying, and analysis done regarding Gen Z to identify what impact the faith of young Christians has on their emotions. I will begin by identifying what negative emotions greatly affect Gen Z and why they have spiritual implications. Then I will address whether the Word of God itself can be a viable tool to counter the negative emotions of Gen Z. An important part of this section will be identifying various things that serve as a barrier to Gen Z's use of Scripture in this way. Finally, I will assess the impact that the gospel has on their emotions in a positive sense. A large part of this section will focus on the positive impact of empathetic faith communities.

My research demonstrated three key findings regarding how faith impacts this generation's emotions. First, Gen Z truly desires to have God's Word be a practical tool in their lives. When believers of this generation are feeling down, stressed, anxious, etc., they want to find rest in the life-giving words of Scripture. Yet second, Gen Z does not necessarily feel equipped to devotionally use the Bible in this way. Third, empathetic faith communities and practical devotional tools are important ways that Gen Z's faith has a direct impact on their emotional well-being. Christ's love is shown to them through the encouragement of their brothers and sisters in faith. Even greater, the joy of the Lord strengthens and keeps them as they fix their eyes and hearts on their crucified and risen Savior through the pages of Scripture.

As Christians, we have a significant message to offer to young believers. We trust in the Holy Spirit who works through powerful means to provide rest, comfort, and joy for his people. We believe in a humble, empathetic Savior whose grace unloads the yoke of our burdens off our shoulders and places them on his own. We have a relationship with God our Father whose love reconciles us to himself and calls for us to cast all our anxieties on him simply because he cares for us and our wellbeing. For this young generation of believers, the promises of God serve as an

emotional foundation for them. The means of grace contribute to both perceived and actual emotional safety and wellness.

Research Methodology

In this thesis, I will emphasize Roller and Lavrakas' approach to qualitative research. This approach stresses: identifying the right target audience, how to choose the right manner of data collection, how to remain unbiased in the collection and analysis of data, determining the right questions and kinds of questions to include in the interview, etc.²⁴

The interviewees who participated in my research were members of two different campus ministry groups. Some of the interviews were conducted as one-on-one interviews, while others were conducted in a group setting. I decided to carry out both kinds of qualitative interviews because I thought that both would be valuable to my research. There were pros and cons to both forms of interviewing. On one hand, many of the interviewees who participated in a one-on-one interview were able to perhaps dive deeper into personal emotional struggles without having the pressure of speaking about such issues in front of their peers. On the other hand, sometimes during a one-on-one interview, the interviewee would have difficulty making sense of a particular question or idea, thus stalling the flow and quality of the interview to some degree. Some questions in one-on-one settings were not thoroughly answered. I believe for some of the interviewees this may have been the case because they might have felt pressure to move along with the next question. Meanwhile, in a group setting, interviewees were seemingly able to

24. Margaret R. Roller and Paul J. Lavrakas, *Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach*, 1st edition. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2015).

understand questions better based on the responses and feedback of their peers. While some would take longer to think about their answer to a given question or prompt, others would begin to speak freely right away. In group discussions, some of the interviewees felt more comfortable taking longer to think through their responses since there were others in the room who were already ready to speak. In one-on-one interviews, it seemed as though the interviewees tended to take less time to thoroughly think through a given response perhaps due to unwanted silence or awkward pause.

All interviewees were aware that their responses would be anonymously used in this paper. They understood that their responses may be quoted directly or paraphrased, with the clear understanding that their thoughts and intentions would be adequately represented through my paraphrasing of their words. They also understood that their responses may not only be used in this paper but also may be used as part of a presentation on the topic as well. All interviewees were also aware that each interview was being recorded and saved. The recordings were deleted at the conclusion of the writing of this thesis.

THE NEGATIVE EMOTIONS OF GEN Z

One of the first questions in my interview process was, “Which negative emotions do you struggle with the most?” followed by, “Why does said emotion impact your life so greatly?”²⁵ In

25. See Interview Questions in Appendix 2.

order to be able to use the Word to address these emotions individually, the idea behind this question was first to identify which negative emotions impact Gen Z the most. Then, second, to observe how negative emotions impact one’s life and faith. It was important to seek to understand the negative impact of emotions before exploring how the means of grace can be used as an emotional tool in the faith-life of Gen Z. “One way to apply [the emotional distress of Gen Z] to our ministry context is to become students of this generation. Certainly understanding their emotions and experience will go a long way.”²⁶

Fear

The single emotion that came up most frequently as a response to my initial question was fear. Barna also reported that fear was one of the most prevalent negative emotions found in their survey of Gen Z. “46 percent say [they feel] discouraged about the future. About one in eight (13%) says they feel full of dread or fear *a lot* in their daily life.”²⁷ While fear was the most common response I received in my interviews; the object of the respondents’ fear varied. Some of my interviewees expressed fear of the unknown of the future as many members of Gen Z are still in school.²⁸ Others expressed fear in their relationships with others. This presented itself as a

26. Kyle Bender, “Loss, Lament, and the Emotions of Young People Today,” *Journal for Preachers* 46.2 (2023): 43–50, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=lsdar&AN=ATLAIACO230213000348&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=ns101346>.

27. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 10.

28. IP1, interview by author. In person, November 2, 2023.

fear of letting others down,²⁹ fear in social situations such as relationships or evangelism,³⁰ or fear of not doing what is best or right in life.³¹ IP7 went a step further and expressed how fear directly impacted them spiritually.

“Fear is a bigger one for me. Because I deal with a lot of anxiety about things, and I would say fear is probably more [of a struggle.] I mean, sadness of course [is also a struggle.] But fear is a bigger negative emotion than the other ones.... I’m struggling. I’m trying to build my relationship with God. It’s kind of hard because I’m scared. I’m not scared of him, but I’m scared that I’m going to get punished for things that I possibly may do like, my sins and stuff like that. I fear about things like that, or my future, or things not going the way I hope they do.”³²

A chief way that negative emotions impact faith is the temptations that they often bring with them. Luther himself “referred to angry outbursts, fears, depression, and physical ailments as assaults of the devil.”³³ These temptations cause doubt, sin, and struggle in one’s life of faith. These effects are not only driven by negative emotions but can be emotionally crippling themselves. IP7’s words here clearly demonstrate the negative effects that fear can have on one’s faith. In this example, IP7’s fear stems from a sense of guilt over sin. From their perception, their guilt drives this fear as if their relationship with God was ebbing and flowing. This is an extremely challenging emotional struggle for a young believer to live with. They desire to feel the peace that Christ alone gives. They understand that they do not need to be afraid of God. Yet their fear tempts them to question whether God is going to punish them for sin.

29. IP2, interview by author. In person, November 2, 2023.

30. IP8, interview by author. In person, November 29, 2023.

31. IP4, interview by author. In person, November 2, 2023.

32. IP7, interview by author. In person, November 29, 2023.

33. Stephen M. Saunders, *Martin Luther on Mental Health: Practical Advice for Christians Today* (Concordia Publishing House, 2023). 63. (eBook page number)

Also included in their response was a fear about the future. This matched Barna's research regarding the fear that nearly a majority of Gen Z faces.³⁴ While uncertainty about the future is common among young people, it can have a specific impact on a young person's faith. Fear about the uncertainties of this life or one's life not turning out the way that they had thought or dreamed can bring a temptation to doubt God's will. Young Christians desire to trust God and his plan for their life, yet fear can bring about temptation and sin that attacks their trust in God's promises.

Sadness

Interestingly sadness was not a common response of the 16 young Christians I interviewed. IP13 however did express how the general negative emotion of sadness impacted them,

“I think that probably sadness would affect my life the most because when I'm feeling sad, it affects my relationships with my friends and my family, and it affects my productivity, and it affects how much I work at getting good grades. It can affect like work life, too. So I think sadness [is] that emotion can just control so many different aspects of my life. And it kind of is the reigning emotion when it's present.”³⁵

As with many of these negative emotions for IP13, the impact of sadness was great. Negative emotions can impact multiple areas of life, and as they put it, “reign” over one's day or week. Having experienced a great deal of sadness in his life, Luther also attributed sadness to the work of the devil.³⁶ “In cases of melancholy and sickness, I conclude it is merely the work of the devil.

34. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 10.

35. IP13, interview by author. In person, November 30, 2023.

36. Saunders, *Luther on Mental Health*, eBook p.73

For God makes us not melancholy, nor affrights or kills us, for he is a God of the living.” There are times when sadness is of the devil in the sense that it tempts us or can threaten our faith. However, it is also good for us to remember that sadness is not always the work of the devil. Jesus himself felt sadness. For example, he felt great sadness at the tomb of his friend Lazarus or while weeping over the lost people of Jerusalem. Sometimes rather than temptation, sadness comes from the negative effects of sin.

Anger

Another emotion that was named by multiple interviewees as one that had a big impact on their lives was anger. IP8 expressed how anger was a negative emotion that was especially difficult to deal with at times since for them it was a learned emotional response from “toxic” family behaviors growing up.³⁷ IP2 vulnerably admitted the spiritual struggle that anger sometimes brings about for them,

“My other one would be anger. I guess just anger at like, why does God let bad things happen to good people? And why did this happen to me? Or, I was good. I was faithful. But this person wasn’t, and like they get the blessings and I get the hardships. Why does that happen? You feel betrayed. And you don’t know how to deal with it. So, my first thing is [to] ball it up inside and it’s anger.”³⁸

Here we see the spiritual trick that anger and vengeance can so easily play on the heart and mind of a believer. In Psalm 73, Asaph laments the prosperity of the wicked with a similar sentiment. When human experience and human emotion betray us, the emotional struggle of doubt of God’s justice and despair amid our own hardships can be driven by anger.

37. IP8 interview.

38. IP2 interview.

Something Different

Meanwhile, some of the interviewees had a difficult time answering specifically when asked about which negative emotions affect them the most. It was common for initial responses to the question, “Which negative emotions do you struggle with the most?” to contain broader ideas such as “self-doubt,” “self-deprecation,” “self-worry,” “being overwhelmed,” or “overthinking.” As I began to pick up on the fact that some of the interviewees were having a difficult time being specific about identifying which negative emotions they struggle with, I used the example of the children’s movie *Inside Out*³⁹ to help explain the question more accurately.⁴⁰ One interviewee⁴¹ gave the idea of using an emotions chart or an emotions wheel⁴² to help in this regard. Once there was an aid in front of them, these interviewees tended to have an easier time identifying specific emotions such as fear, sadness, or anger as ones that chiefly affected them negatively.

Stress

While some benefitted from an emotional diagram to aid them in identifying such negative emotions, their initial responses demonstrated an important aspect of Gen Z’s emotional struggles. Many used the overarching term “stress” to define their emotional struggles. A recent

39. *Inside Out*, (Pixar Animation Studios, Walt Disney Pictures, 2015).

40. The characters of this movie are the various emotions living inside of a little girl named Riley. In the movie, the emotions that live inside her head are Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust, and Sadness. The way this movie portrays the various emotions within us demonstrates how each emotion can have a great impact on the way we think, act, etc. The interviewees found the example this movie provides helpful in distinguishing the various emotions they feel in life.

41. IP3, interview by author. In person, November 2, 2023.

42. Resources that help identify specific emotions by giving people a large list of color-coded emotions.

American Psychological Association survey⁴³ “showed that 13- to 17-year-olds are more likely to feel ‘extreme stress’ than adults.”⁴⁴ When answering the question listed above, IP11 explained the multi-faceted negative impact that stress can have,

“I don't know if you can count stress as an emotion itself, but I kind of do see it as an emotion because it's how you react to what's going on around you. So, stress is one of those big negative emotions that everyone faces all the time. And I think that is one that impacts people the most because it impacts so many different aspects of your life. It impacts you emotionally most importantly, but then also your physical health too relies on your stress levels. So stress in general, and then how it kind of overshadows all of your thoughts.”⁴⁵

Likewise, IP3 shared a similar thought process as IP11 concerning stress as an emotion,

“I think another negative emotion is, I don't know what an actual feeling [would be], or like it's a feeling of being overwhelmed. And maybe, maybe stressed, but I like the word overwhelmed because it seems like how I would describe it is my plate is overflowing and it's [more] than I can handle.... I don't know if anyone can name the emotion, maybe it's stress.”⁴⁶

IP1 explained this idea of stress or being overwhelmed as having a complicated emotional effect at times.

“Sometimes that being overwhelmed is different than a negative stress or negative anxiety. Because I feel like here and now, we have a lot of opportunities to do some really fun, awesome things. And if you really like what you're studying and you really like what you're doing in your free time, that's amazing. But also.... that can turn into a negative thing when you have so much going on.”⁴⁷

43. “American Psychological Association Survey Shows Teen Stress Rivals That of Adults.”

44. Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad M. Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church*, First Edition. (Baker Books, 2016), 134. (eBook page number)

45. IP11, interview by author. In person, November 30, 2023.

46. IP3 interview.

47. IP1 interview.

While one can agree with IP1's sentiment that there are joys and blessings to being able to stay busy and accomplish the things one wants in life, the overall busyness of Gen Z's life can be emotionally difficult due to the young ages in which such stress begins for them.

Another way some have identified the sort of negative emotional impact that such a busy schedule can have is the idea/emotion of "tiredness." Barna reports a large percentage of Gen Z that experience negative emotions in this way,

"The frantic pace of society today impacts even the youngest among us. The most commonly experienced negative emotion across all of Gen Z is tiredness, with nearly three in five (58%) claiming they feel tired *a lot* or *some of the time*. With news cycles and trends that change by the minute, the demands of school, work and social schedules (which, during the distance of the pandemic-era, blurred together) and the rapidly approaching (or newly arrived) horizon of adulthood, exhaustion among Gen Z is unsurprising. Nonetheless, it sparks this question: Will freneticism and workaholicism rule the day for Gen Z, or will they see the wisdom of adopting rhythms of rest and rejuvenation as they establish themselves as healthy adults?"⁴⁸

While this generation has been greatly impacted in many ways by the COVID-19 pandemic, the fact that Gen Z's lifestyle changed entirely during the "shutdown" slowed their learning and growth of abilities regarding time management and balancing a full schedule. The inability to juggle a busy schedule often leaves them overwhelmed and emotionally exhausted. *Growing Young*, a book that equips churches with strategies for ministry toward this younger generation, speaks to the crazy schedules of Gen Z and the effect they can have,

"As today's young people seek a more coherent sense of identity, the stress that formerly hit them in college, or even after college, now begins in middle school (or younger). By high school, many middle-and upper-class teenagers juggle digital calendars jammed with extracurricular activities that begin as early as 6:00 a.m., after-school study sessions, college entrance exam tutoring, and sports team practices that leave them trailing home after 10:00 p.m. Followed by two to three hours of homework. Athletes used to specialize in a single sport in high school; now that starts in elementary school. Previously, musicians and artists could freely dabble in various media and instruments throughout high school; present-day teenagers have to claim their craft in middle school. No longer can a kid flirt with a handful of hobbies, discovering various facets of their personality

48. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 11.

and passions, before choosing what they love. There's so little time for thoughtful and measured exploration in high school that young adults end up exploring their skills and passions well into their twenties."⁴⁹

An important aspect of the book is how stress and busyness affect identity. Questions of identity have an emotional impact on a young person with the stress and anxiety they can bring. A middle schooler or high schooler might already be wondering who they are supposed to be for the rest of their lives. What are they supposed to "do" with their lives? What career will they pursue? Will this career be financially viable in modern society? What strengths, skills, and abilities do they have to offer? This great pressure can create serious emotional distress. The busyness of college-aged members of Gen-Z's lives brings a kind of stress that tends to bog them down emotionally as well. Although it may be difficult to name a specific emotion or feeling here, this stress has a similar impact as other prevalent negative emotions.

The idea of "being overwhelmed" or stressed can be a sort of negative emotion that has spiritual implications as well. "I'm overwhelmed by the world and how much bad is in the world? Why is everything so bad? Why is there so little good? And it's overwhelming when you think of all the people who are hurting or all the people who are suffering. And what do you do about that?"⁵⁰ Now these comments demonstrate an important characteristic of Gen Z. Positively, Gen Z tends to have a strong concern for social injustice, marginalized populations, and widespread problems in society and the world. However, this care and concern can cause stress that may at times lead to spiritual doubt.

49. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 133–34. (eBook page number)

50. IP4 interview.

Sometimes the negative spiritual consequences of stress in young people’s lives are more nuanced, yet serious. *Growing Young* further explains the negative spiritual impact stress can have in this way,

“According to sociologist Tim Clydesdale, much of that pressure stems from the hassles of daily life management. The ongoing tumult of academic, vocational, and relational dilemmas causes young people to put critical parts of themselves, including their religious, political, racial, gender, and class identities, into an ‘identity lockbox.’ This lockbox allows young people to keep their religion and foundational values ‘safe,’ protected from the stress that buffets them daily. But the upside is dwarfed by the downside—while young people are deciding and expressing who they are, their faith and core values are locked up. As they have life-defining conversations, their underlying beliefs remain muted.”⁵¹

Here Clydesdale shares some of the interviewees’ sentiments that the busyness and multi-faceted effects of Gen Z’s lifestyle lead to a sort of chronic stress that has a great negative impact on one’s life of faith. Clydesdale takes this a step further and outlines how the idea of stress as a sort of spiritual “lockbox” not only affects their faith but also their ability to express their faith as witnesses of Christ. As young Christians are overwhelmed with extracurriculars, homework, social lives, etc., that has an impact on their ability to shape their identity as followers of Christ in the world around them. IP15 expressed how being overwhelmed also impacts their Christian living.

“I feel like I find myself getting overwhelmed kind of often. I definitely procrastinate, and I think that definitely has to do with it. I mean, like the other day I was getting all the homework together that I had to do for the rest of the semester, and I just felt so overwhelmed, and then that affects my productivity. There's just so much on my plate and I get so overwhelmed, and I just shut down. And it takes me a couple of days sometimes to get back into picking this apart and having to write everything down on my calendar like set specific times for when I'm going to do everything and really pick it apart so that it's not one big thing anymore. That has to do with homework, but I feel like a lot of times I'll get overwhelmed [otherwise] and then just like shut down. And that can come across as just not doing anything and I sit in bed all day. Or sometimes I'm even like kind of rude to the people around me because I just don't know how to pick apart everything that's happening. And so then, I feel bad afterwards because I was rude to the

51. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 135. (eBook page numbers)

people around me who I love, but I get overwhelmed and flustered kind of easily. And when that does happen, I just shut down.”⁵²

This vocational damage that stress can cause in the life of a young believer can be debilitating. Clydesdale’s lockbox analogy is great for demonstrating how members of Gen Z can struggle to live out their faith in all aspects of life as generational sojourners who are not of this world. Not only does such vocational damage affect a young believer’s ability to witness and love in the world, but it has an impact on their own faith as well.

In a time of life when people typically might be growing in their faith, making it their own, and taking on new vocational endeavors, Gen Z’s busy and stressful calendar can be one of Satan’s tools to prohibit spiritual growth. As Gen Z moves forward through its most formative years, spiritually and otherwise, the impact that negative emotions, or emotion-adjacent issues such as stress, may have lasting consequences through the habits they form from a young age.

Worry

Another overarching theme identified in the various interviews was worry. Again, while worry may not be a specific “emotion,” it has a great emotional impact. Barna recently conducted a survey of Gen Z in 2020 that found that about one in four respondents meet their criteria for people who are considered to be “anxious.”⁵³ They explain this criterion by stating, “Those who are **anxious** *always* or *usually* feel: ‘afraid to fail,’ ‘anxious about important

52. IP15, interview by author. In person, December 12, 2023.

53. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 15.

decisions,’ and ‘uncertain about the future.’”⁵⁴ IP10 detailed exactly how these sorts of pressures can cause such anxiety in a young adult’s life.

“I think something that impacts me greatly, especially now in my college years, would be anxiety, and just being anxious about what the future holds. Because we’re supposed to have everything laid out and have a plan for everything. But it’s not quite that easy. And just that pressure from you know, people that you know and love that like are always asking those questions like, ‘What do you think your future is?’ And it’s really hard to keep in mind that God’s plan is the right way when you have all these outside pressures pushing on you to figure out what’s going like going to happen in your life.... that anxiety builds up trying to figure out ‘what is my next step?’ when you don’t know.”⁵⁵

Also regarding anxiety, IP6 explained how at times there can be “a problem that makes you worry so bad.... [it] could be consuming your whole world.”⁵⁶ This is a strong demonstration of the large impact that negative emotions can have on the day-to-day life of members of Gen Z. Often these emotions are weighty burdens that one carries with them for long periods of time. The emotional impact that something like worry can have may ruin someone’s entire day.

This worry may come from a lack of control of one’s circumstances in life, or as IP6 puts it,

“I really like being in control of situations and in the know [in terms of] how to deal with stuff. I want to be informed and I want to know what I’m doing, [to] feel confident. And any time I’m in a new situation or I feel like something is out of my grasp, out of control, I can start to panic a little bit. Or when I have trouble trusting other people to get a job done or trusting them to accomplish something, I find myself getting worried or wondering if they’re going to follow through. [I take] my hands off and [I see] what happens and [I am] very worried in the meantime.”⁵⁷

This sort of worry or anxiety specifically relates to trusting others. While trust in others is certainly a quality that followers of Christ desire to show in life, IP6 themselves identified the

54. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 14.

55. IP10, interview by author. In person, November 30, 2023.

56. IP6, interview by author. In person, November 29, 2023.

57. IP6 interview.

root spiritual problem involved with worry. They pointed to Jesus' words in Matthew 6 about the lilies of the field to express the sinfulness of this negative emotion.⁵⁸

The purpose of my research was to identify both the prevalent negative emotions that Gen Z faces and how that affects them in life and faith. In order to reach the goal of identifying the gospel's impact on managing negative emotions, first we needed to set the foundation of what exactly those negative emotions look like in Gen Z's lives.

Digital Babylon

The issue of Gen Z and anxiety is greatly impacted by the social media age they have grown up in. In fact, many have attributed much of the negative emotional impact on Gen Z to an uptick in screen times and addicting social media interactions. In his book, *Faith for Exiles*, David Kinnaman writes about Gen Z as sojourners in "digital Babylon."⁵⁹ Kinnaman explains this term in this way, "For a few years now, the Barna team and I have been calling our surrounding culture 'digital Babylon,' to highlight both the outsized impact of always-connected technology and notable similarities between Judean exiles in Babylon in the sixth century BCE and people of faith today."⁶⁰

In the introduction, this paper already established that Gen Z spends an unprecedented amount of time each day on screens. Meanwhile, what is fascinating is Gen Z's own opinion as to how many hours a day are spent on media consumption. "Three in five teens and young adults

58. IP6 interview.

59. David Kinnaman, Mark Matlock, and Aly Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2019), 19.

60. Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 9.

(60%) say their generation spends too much time on screens. One-quarter says they and their peers spend an appropriate amount of time on screens, and 13 percent assert that screen time doesn't matter."⁶¹ Digital Babylon itself recognizes the abnormality of this amount of screentime. Jean Twenge goes into greater detail proposing how Gen Z's social media usage impacts them emotionally in such a negative way,

“New-media screen time (such as electronic devices and social media) is linked to mental health issues and/or unhappiness.... in-person social interaction and print media are linked to less unhappiness and less depression, and both have declined at the same time as mental health has deteriorated. A plausible theory includes three possible causes: (1) more screen time has led directly to more unhappiness and depression, (2) more screen time has led to less in-person social interaction, which then led to unhappiness and depression, and (3) more screen time has led to less print media use, leading to unhappiness and depression. In the end, all of the mechanisms come back to new-media screen time in one way or another. By all accounts, it is the worm at the core of the apple.”⁶²

Regardless of whether or not technology and smartphones are the chief cause of Gen Z's heightened negative emotions, it cannot be denied that this digital age seems to be influencing and impacting the negative emotions of Gen Z. The emotional impact of this digital age is not merely a case-by-case problem. The anxiety of digital Babylon is a broad theme throughout Gen Z.

“Earlier we described digital Babylon as *accelerated* (life moves faster) and *complex* (life is uncertain and difficult to predict). The reaction of many people to these facts of exile is a low-level anxiety that never really goes away and that occasionally ratchets up to high-level anxiety. Three out of five young adults tell us they are “stressed out”; seven out of ten say they are “concerned about the future.” And in Barna's first comprehensive study of Gen Z, the generation coming up after Millennials, anxiety is a recurring theme, especially related to things like education, career, money, and relationships.”⁶³

61. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 34.

62. Twenge, *iGen*, 112.

63. Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 72–73.

As Gen Z's emotions, vocations, relationships, values, and beliefs are challenged throughout their busy and stressful week with free time that is consumed by screens and Snapchat "a Christian identity and a rarely engaged church community are not enough to make someone resistant to the Babylon virus. They never have been."⁶⁴ While stressful schedules and lofty life expectations bog Gen Z down in digital Babylon, social media is perhaps the greatest driver of their negative emotions.

Can the Word be used as a tool to manage negative emotions?

After I identified which negative emotions plagued the interviewees the most, I asked a few follow-up questions related to where they may find rest or comfort from such emotions. First, one question asked where they typically turn when they find themselves struggling emotionally, and then another asked about the impact that the Word of God may have on their negative emotions. What was interesting to see from the various responses was that some immediately expressed that the Word was a place they both readily turn to find comfort from emotional distress and something that truly provided the rest that they were looking for. For some, this was the first source of help they mentioned. Granted, not all the responses were uniform in this way. Even the people who spoke positively about their experience in turning to the Word admitted that this was not always a cut-and-dry solution.

"You can go in the Bible and see all the places [God] says how much he loves us, and all the proof he has for how much he loves us. So, times that I'm feeling down about myself,

64. Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 28.

it's hard, and it's easier said than done, and it takes effort, but just reminding myself that my worth is 100 percent and what God thinks of me has helped me in the past.”⁶⁵

Yet it was encouraging to hear that there were many who regularly make use of the power of God through the Word as they seek to manage their emotions. The interview responses for this section serve as the basis for my third key finding.

Specific Verses for Specific Comfort

One common theme throughout these responses was relying on specific Bible verses as a tool for emotional regulation. For example, IP14 said they use John 14:1 as a specific comfort whenever they feel stressed.⁶⁶ IP3 said, “I have like a good five passages that I know that will give me comfort. So, I go to them and I read those chapters, because I know that they'll give me peace.”⁶⁷ IP6 shared a similar sentiment, “I think I usually pick out verses. It's [specific] verses or parables that stick out.” They continued to explain how often these verses are “those iconic verses that like everybody knows or like worrying won't add a single hour to your life.”⁶⁸ In this regard, IP8 applauded their younger self for choosing the confirmation verse that they did. Back in the eighth grade, they chose Hebrews 13:5, “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”⁶⁹

65. IP15 interview.

66. IP14, interview by author. In person, November 30, 2023.

67. IP3 interview.

68. IP6 interview.

69. All Scripture passages quoted in this paper will be using the New International Version, 2011, unless otherwise noted.

“I feel like 14-year-old me must have been pretty smart when he picked that as my lifelong Bible verse because it has always been a reminder whenever I get scared, or angry, or sad that no matter how much bad luck or bad things come my way, to always remember, always go back to that basic God will never leave you. That is probably practically one of the major reasons why I still trust Jesus to this day. Just remembering that God will never abandon you. That's a pretty comforting message to hear.”⁷⁰

It was a powerful thing to see how so many of these young people relied on specific Scripture to address their negative emotions and to find emotional rest. IP14 said that their mom sends them a Bible verse every morning. They even expressed that almost every time it seems as though the passage of Scripture that they receive from their mom hits home emotionally for them.⁷¹

“There’s that story of walking by all these flowers that are dressed more beautifully than Solomon’s splendor and God takes care of those things that are thrown in the fire later. So, how much more will he take care of you? That kind of thing is good for worry because it really puts in perspective how insignificant all your stuff is. Like something that could be consuming your whole world, a problem that makes you worry so bad, and then once you take yourself out of it or step back or put it into perspective it seems so tiny. And I think those things just give you clarity and another way to think about things. Like I said, it's more just like those iconic verses everybody knows or like worrying won't add a single hour to your life. That also puts things into perspective. How much time are you wasting on something that means nothing? What else could you be doing with that time? So, I think those things in those ways help. [They] make things simple.”⁷²

Here IP6 was explaining how they specifically address worry, one of the prominent negative emotions they face. IP10 spoke of simple, small reminders that still can have a big emotional impact.

“I think being in His Word, even like weekly, doesn't even have to be daily, life's busy as a college student, obviously that's what like we all strive to have. But even those small reminders, it can be like the simplest verses that we've heard since we've been younger or since we've come to faith. That's so important. [That] has so much meaning to it, and can still like change your view, how we're feeling that day on whatever emotion.”⁷³

70. IP8 interview.

71. IP14, interview by author. In person, November 30, 2023.

72. IP6 interview.

73. IP10 interview.

IP10 also mentioned that they place posted notes of Bible verses on their mirror to be reminded of these impactful verses on a daily basis.⁷⁴ IP13 spoke about using the Internet to find specific passages that applied to specific emotional struggles and then journaling about such emotions in prayer. “A lot of times, what I do is I just like lookup [online] Bible verses about, like being stressed, or being sad, or whatever I'm feeling. And then I do this journaling where it's writing a prayer letter to God.”⁷⁵ IP16 expressed how sometimes the specific Word of God that one might need in an emotionally difficult time or situation might be difficult to hear.

“If I’m feeling down and I go to God’s Word, I obviously want to feel better, so ‘which part of Scripture will make me feel better?’ It depends on what I’m feeling bad about, but sometimes I need to hear a tough part of Scripture that’s hard to hear to make me think about why I am feeling bad. Sometimes you have to hear what you don’t want to hear from God to make you have a realization about yourself and why you’re feeling that way.”⁷⁶

IP7 also explained how they address specific emotional struggles with Scripture:

“I highlight my bible and I have a bunch of bookmarks of things that I think are the most important so sometimes if I’m struggling and I think, ‘I’m never going to get through this,’ I go back and I look at [sections about] perseverance.... because nobody is going to help you more than God will.”⁷⁷

IP1 also spoke to using specific sections of Scripture in this way. For them, a main factor in identifying which verses to turn to in a given emotional situation was a bit different than verses that they knew by heart, a confirmation verse, well-known verses, etc. They found emotional application for themselves in the situations and emotions of people in the Bible.

“I feel like I can more relate to specific people in the Bible, especially when it gives more details about their emotions and how they were feeling. I feel like we oftentimes forget that these people were real people. They're not just characters in the Bible. They are

74. IP10 interview.

75. IP13, interview by author. In person, November 30, 2023.

76. IP16, interview by author. In person, December 12, 2023.

77. IP7, interview by author. In person, November 29, 2023.

historical figures, yes. But they also had real emotions and they lived a real life. They did the mundane things in life, and they did the super exciting, crazy things that God put in their lives. I feel like I really take more out of [sections] in the Bible where it talks about like other people who struggled with different things.”⁷⁸

This sort of relatability is extremely attractive to Gen Z. One stereotypical characteristic of Gen Z is that they crave genuine people, genuine content, and genuine conversation. As IP1 expressed why the people and narratives of the Bible are so impactful when it comes to their emotional struggles, this desire for genuine, authentic content plays a key role.

“I really like the Book of Job specifically. I feel like that's probably one of the first places that I turn if I open my bible. When I'm struggling with something I often read Job because it's a real raw story about like lots of struggles. And you hear what job said in those times.... ‘God, I praise you even though....’”⁷⁹

Even in his lamenting of the circumstances around him, Job’s praised the Lord. This narrative impacts IP1’s faith as they face grief and sadness in their own life.

IP1 also spoke of looking at the emotions and emotional struggles of Jesus himself as a source of comfort and encouragement. “[In] the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus wasn't just this God figure person, he was [also] a real human being and he had real stress and real anxiety about what he was doing. But he was still ok.”⁸⁰ This sort of relating to biblical narratives and the people of the Bible is a great way to use the Word as an emotional tool. When you think of a sermon that is based on a biblical narrative, typically the pastor will intentionally use the situations and emotions of the people in that narrative to make application points in his sermon. As Gen Z seeks to make use of God’s Word as an emotional tool to manage grief and stress, I think IP1’s use of the people of the Bible serves their faith well.

78. IP1 interview.

79. IP1 interview.

80. IP1 interview.

IP16 spoke about using specific promises of God to find comfort when managing negative emotions, “There is no one else that brings so much comfort than God and his Word. Re-reading his promises and just knowing that he is going to fulfill those promises, he already fulfilled them, he’s going to keep fulfilling them, he is never changing, that brings so much comfort.”⁸¹ IP11 spoke about specific gospel passages that remind a believer of the identity that they have in Christ to fight off Satan’s emotional attacks.

“[I go] to God's word as a means of taking control of those emotions, and not letting them overcome you. If you go to any Gospel passage anywhere, and then all of a sudden, you remember your identity in Christ, then those negative emotions don't have to be what your focus is on all the time, because that's one of the things that Satan uses all the time to get our focus off of Christ is by [saying] ‘well look at this stressful thing around you,’ ‘look at it over here,’ anywhere but God. So, taking any moment throughout your day to be in God's word, I think is the best tool to battle against those emotions.”⁸²

These interview responses are where my first and third key findings strongly demonstrated themselves. Gen Z has a strong desire to use God’s Word to impact them emotionally and guide them in managing their emotions in a godly way. Not only so, but they also have found various ways to use the Word as a tool in their lives to directly help them in managing their emotions. IP16 compared using Scripture in this way to eating a salad. “Opening your Bible is like buying a salad. You have to actually eat the salad to actually reap the benefits of it. You have to actually read into [the Bible.]”⁸³ As some expressed that they do practice using God’s Word in this way, others shared IP15’s sentiment when speaking about where they go in emotional difficulty, “I wish God was more of a place I went to first.”⁸⁴ To use the Word of God

81. IP16 interview.

82. IP11 interview.

83. IP16 interview.

84. IP15 interview.

as a tool in this way is something that I think for many Christians sounds logical and seems beneficial. Yet I think often this is a strategy that for one reason or another does not frequently demonstrate itself in lives of faith.

Barriers That Get in the Way of the Word as a Tool

While many of the members of Gen Z that I interviewed expressed how God's Word was a part of their toolbox when it came to dealing with their negative emotions, almost every interviewee expressed various ways that using the Word in this way was a challenge. This part of my research is where my second key finding presented itself. While the above section demonstrated both a willingness and an ability to use God's Word to impact their emotions, there still were various barriers that hindered them from doing so. For some, these barriers made it so that they hardly ever turned to the Word for comfort in the midst of emotional distress. For others, this barrier was more situational, or at least they were able to find a way around it. While it certainly is true that for every Christian our sinful flesh and the devil are constantly trying to keep us away from the Word and the comfort it provides, for Generation Z and their faith as it relates to emotions, there are some unique challenges they face in this regard that are worth considering. This section demonstrates my second key finding. Although Gen Z has a strong desire for the Word of God to help them manage their emotions, they feel unequipped to do so.

iGen

Perhaps the biggest barrier for Gen Z is the one thing that they seemingly can't live without, their phones. In fact, "many admit to having experienced 'nomophobia,' a feeling of anxiety any time they are separated from their mobile phone."⁸⁵ Phones are so foundational to this generation that author Jean M. Twenge renames Generation Z, giving it the name "iGen."⁸⁶ In her book, Twenge quotes a young Gen Z girl, "We didn't have a choice to know any life without iPads or iPhones. I think we like our phones more than we like actual people."⁸⁷ For young followers of Christ, as their phones are tempting them to have less interaction with friends and family, they are likewise an obstacle that prevents them from opening up their bible in a time of need.

"If we're feeling down, I think we always want the quickest and easiest way to feel better. So, I want to feel better, 'How do I get to that quickly and easy without as much effort as I need to?' And sometimes going to God and His Word and praying about it, that can involve more effort. And so I think some things that I've resorted to doing is just scrolling on my phone or watching a movie or, you know, talking to my friends instead of just getting to the root of the problem, my emotions, which I know that God can help me work through."⁸⁸

Kinnaman explains the vicious cycle of social media and the impact that it has on Gen Z's consumption of information,

"The average social media user sees only what a computer calculation determines they should see, based on their consumer potential. Users who post the most get the most attention, and those who get the most attention are favored by the algorithm. Not the wisest. Not the most life-giving or humane. Not the most peacemaking. Not the most

85. Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 15.

86. Twenge, *iGen*.

87. Twenge, *iGen*, 2.

88. IP16 interview.

Kingdom-minded. The outcome, all too often, is social and cultural commodification, polarization, and – ironically – *disconnection*.⁸⁹

Now this is not to say that phones inevitably keep young Christians from using their Bibles. However, there's no denying the great impact that social media and smartphones in general have on Gen Z in terms of time management, consumed content, and where they go to encounter emotional “safe-havens.”

Kinnaman and Matlock write, “Even using conservative estimates, the typical young person spends nearly twenty times more hours per year using screen-driven media than taking in spiritual content. And for the typical young churchgoer, the ratio is still more than ten times as much cultural content as spiritual intake.”⁹⁰ IP6 expresses how phones can serve as a barrier to the Word in this way,

“It's so easy to find other things to fill your time or other distractions over [the Word.] Because if you pick up your phone, all of your social media, everything at your fingertips, it's just so easily accessed versus like you can have a Bible app or just pick up a Bible. But I feel like [reading your bible] is more steps or you have less willpower for that.”⁹¹

IP6 readily admitted that this hesitancy to find comfort through the Word at times can stem from a sort of lazy attitude towards the situation. Meanwhile, the internet offers a “fix” that is familiar and appealing to Gen Z. “It's either a problem that you want to fix immediately and get that instant comfort, and you don't want to like take the steps [to read] or [to] put the long-term investment into actually comforting yourself and calm yourself down.”⁹² IP12 shared a similar

89. Barna Group, *The Connected Generation: How Christian Leaders Around the World Can Strengthen Faith and Well-Being Among 18-35-Year-Olds* (Barna Group, 2019), 22.

90. Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 26.

91. IP6 interview.

92. IP6 interview.

idea, “Sometimes it's just kind of an excuse, I'd say. It's like, oh, I can't get off my bed to go grab my Bible, or it's a long walk to get to the chapel. I think it's those little things that are [saying], I can't do this right now.”⁹³ The appeal of the internet for Gen Z is the short-term gratification that allows them to escape their emotional difficulties. The fleeting comfort of getting their mind off their fear, sadness, or anxiety seems better in the here and now.

“I think that especially growing up in a generation where our phones are our biggest [thing], they're always next to us. Our Bible should be, but our phone is instead. And we go and grab [our phone] when we're in these times of need or emotional [situations]. [We] scroll on social media, [yet] there are apps that have the Bible. Why can't we go to that rather than going to TikTok and scrolling for like three hours when I could easily just open the Bible app or go and grab my Bible? So, I think that's the challenge that we immediately turn to our worldly things, rather than focusing on the Scripture. So I think it's really really hard, especially in our generation. Because that's what we go to. [We go to] our phones or social media to fix those emotions when that might not be what actually fixes it at all, or can [even] help.”⁹⁴

IP12's insight here on the effects of social media highlight this barrier well. Much time is spent scrolling through various social media pages. Meanwhile, there are numerous ways in which phones themselves give access to the Bible. In this quote, they show a desire to have the Word be more prevalent in their life. However, when emotional distress plagues Gen Z, they often turn to media instead.

“I'm one of those people who will go straight to the Internet for just to explore, [to] get my mind off things.”⁹⁵ IP8 summarizes this sort of bottling up of negative emotions via the escape of the Internet. In this way, members of Gen Z become masters of deflection. They would rather be entertained by their phones than face the immediate emotional issues at hand. This

93. IP12, interview by author. In person, November 30, 2023.

94. IP10 interview.

95. IP8 interview.

distinction is important in understanding the barrier that technology can place between them and the comfort of the gospel. While the sinful flesh is certainly in play in these circumstances, the issue is perhaps much less of a disregard or a lack of appreciation for the Word itself. Maybe the key issue behind the curtain is that not only does Gen Z often fail to run to the Word for comfort, but sometimes they fail to turn anywhere at all to find direct comfort and pointed answers to the emotional problems plaguing them. This evading approach is often enabled and encouraged by the instant gratification and attention-grabbing nature of social media.

The Bible can be Intimidating

Scripture itself can never be blamed for our lack of use of it. The Bible itself is not unclear, yet often sinful minds have a hard time understanding it. The Bible itself is not intimidating, yet Satan would love nothing more than for us to feel overwhelmed by the Bible's greatness. In many ways, this barrier to Scripture's use as an emotional tool is the one that we as a church can take to heart the most. The reality is that many people, not just those of Gen Z, have a difficult time with a practical use of the Bible in their lives. The specific ways that the bible seemed intimidating for the young people I interviewed were: the vast size of the bible itself, the daunting task of biblical interpretation, a perceived lack of applicability, Gen Z tends to read less than previous generations, and many young Christians feel unequipped for the task of using the Bible as a devotional tool to manage their emotions.

The Size of the Bible

IP2 expressed how the magnitude of the bible even in terms of page numbers can be discouraging when they may want to open it up and find solace.⁹⁶ As noted earlier in this paper, many members of Gen Z like to use specific sections of Scripture that apply directly to their emotional circumstances. While this approach to one's devotional life has pros and cons, if one is seeking to use Scripture in this way it can become extremely difficult to know where to turn in any given emotional situation.

Other interviewees expressed similar sentiments when it came to the practical use of the Word in their lives. IP3 explained how at times they desire to use Scripture in this way, but the ability to pull the tool out of the toolbox can be challenging. "I need uplifting sometimes or I want to read my bible, but I don't know where to start."⁹⁷ IP11 mentioned how the bible can be "a daunting book at times."⁹⁸ IP1 also expressed how it can be discouraging to seek to use your bible only to realize that you don't know what you may be looking for.⁹⁹

Biblical Interpretation

The issue is not just that young Christians don't always know where to go in Scripture or how to begin to use it as an emotional tool. Another major obstacle is biblical interpretation.

96. IP2 interview.

97. IP3 interview.

98. IP11 interview.

99. IP1 interview.

Some of the Gen Z Christians I talked with expressed a fear of misinterpreting the Word in their personal devotional life. IP11 explains this mindset towards encountering Scripture,

“Understanding that one intended sense that God has for it. With our incompetent human minds, that can be really challenging and difficult. And that scares me in a sense, sometimes as far as ‘well, what if I misinterpret [the bible]?’ Then I'm not taking God's word [in the right way.] I'm taking it out of context, not using it how he wants me to use it. So that that can be sometimes what prevents Christians from I guess, taking a deep dive into God's Word out of a fear of misinterpreting it.”

This sort of uncertainty when reading the bible can not only deter the use of Scripture as a devotional cure when struggling with negative emotions, but it can also lead to the impression that God’s Word really is not all that practical to a young person’s life.

“I feel like I don't know how to use it. I know I should use it, but I don't know where to start or like how to use it to help me instead of just like using it to study if that makes sense. I can go and then read about something and [think,] ‘Okay, that's what God says.’ But then how do I apply that to how I'm feeling?”¹⁰⁰

Does it Apply to me?

Applicability is truly where the rubber meets the road. As Gen Z may seek to use Scripture to comfort and guide them in the midst of emotional hardship, they crave genuine application to their given situations. This is an area where Barna’s research and my qualitative research contrasted one another. Interestingly, Barna reported that 46% of Christian members of Gen Z said that “church is not relevant to me personally.”¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, the young Christians I interviewed had a different perspective. My interviewees understood that the Word provides important day-to-day applications for them and desired to use God’s Word as a tool in this way.

100. IP4 interview.

101. Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 72.

Barna described how this generation generally views the relevance of Scripture. They explained how not only does Christianity tend to have an uphill battle with many of the worldly morally corrupt ideas of the society that Gen Z has grown up in, but at times the gospel seems impractical to them.

“*Irrelevance* is a key word for this generation when it comes to faith, truth and church. Not only does Christianity stand in direct contrast with many of the beliefs and attitudes of Gen Z—on the existence of objective morality and spiritual truth, for example—but the practice of the faith, especially as part of a Christian faith community, seems to many teens simply not to be relevant. It doesn’t seem to have a bearing on their real day-to-day lives. Clearly this is a challenge for those who care about making disciples in the next generation: How can you get people to pay attention to something that feels extraneous or nonsensical to their everyday lives? How do you talk about truth in a way that ‘feels’ true?”¹⁰²

While pastors and other ministers of the gospel know well that God’s Word provides an abundance of application for life. For some reason, these truths are not connecting with this younger generation in the greater Christian church. Barna’s research demonstrates a void in Gen Z Christianity’s ability to relate to the truths of the gospel.

However, my experience with the various interviewees is that they very much desired for their faith to be impactful in their lives emotionally and otherwise. *Faith for Exiles* demonstrates a similar idea as to how believers of Gen Z view their faith, “Resilient young Christians desire to connect their faith in Jesus with the world they inhabit. They don’t want their spiritual lives and their real lives to be separate things.”¹⁰³

While Christians understand that Scripture is full of God’s timeless truths that apply to all generations and contexts, sometimes the way that practically plays out in one’s devotional life

102. Barna Group, *Gen Z*, 74.

103. Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 85.

can be elusive. IP15 explained their uncertainty at times when seeking to use the bible as a tool to manage their emotions.

“The other day I was feeling just kind of [down,] and so I opened up my Bible and I was like, ‘okay, I’m feeling good about this, I’m going to do a Bible study.’ And then I read a section of Scripture, and it didn’t really apply to how I was feeling. So then I was thinking, ‘Well, did I not take the right thing away from this? Should I have read a different section? Did I do something wrong?’”¹⁰⁴

In a similar regard IP3 expressed, “I am reading the Psalms right now, and sometimes that Psalm that I’m supposed to read tonight, it didn’t do anything for me. You know what I mean? So, I’m just like, ok, what’s the point of this? And I mean, obviously there’s a point but you know what I mean?”¹⁰⁵ The interviewee’s vulnerability and honesty here are quite valuable. To use IP3’s example of the Psalms, there are hermeneutical aspects such as historical context, Hebrew poetry, biblical allusions, etc., which may be some of the many reasons why a young believer who reads through the Psalms might find difficulty connecting with them.

Gen Z and Reading

At the same time, under the surface of not having higher-level biblical interpretation skills, many members of Gen Z do not read books in general. Twenge gives multiple details and statistics that help understand what is going on with Gen Z and reading.

“In the late 1970s, the clear majority of teens read a book or a magazine nearly every day, but by 2015, only 16% did. In other words, three times as many Boomers as iGen’ers read a book or magazine every day....By 2015, one out of three high school seniors admitted they had not read any books for pleasure in the past year, three times as many as

104. IP15 interview.

105. IP3 interview.

in 1976. Even college students entering four-year universities, the young people presumably most likely to read books, are reading less.”¹⁰⁶

Twenge continues,

“Why? Maybe because books just aren’t fast enough. For a generation raised to click on the next link or scroll to the next page within seconds, books just don’t hold their attention. Twelve-year-old Harper, whom we met earlier makes all A’s in school but says, ‘I’m not really a big reading person. It’s hard for me to read the same book for such a long time. I just can’t sit still and be superquiet. We have to read for twenty minutes a day, and if a book takes a while to get interesting, it’s really hard for me to read.’”¹⁰⁷

Harper, the little girl mentioned in Twenge’s book written in 2017, would be 18 years old now getting ready for college. This is the generation of our modern young adult Christians who are leaving home and are often having to rely on personal devotional life for spiritual growth.

Twenge even writes about how this lack of reading affects the college classroom,

“How are students who rarely read books going to digest an eight-hundred-page college textbook? Most faculty report that their students simply don’t read the textbook, even if it’s required. Many publishers are moving toward more interactive ebooks to try to keep students engaged. As a university faculty member and the author or coauthor of three college textbooks, I think this needs to go even further. iGen’ers need textbooks that include interactive activities such as video sharing and questionnaires, but they also need books that are shorter in length and more conversational in their writing style. They are coming to college with much less experience reading, so we have to meet them where they are, while still teaching them what they need to know. That might mean leaving behind some detail, but that’s better than students’ not cracking the book at all.”¹⁰⁸

If this is the difficulty that college students face when reading required texts for their university studies, what impact does this issue have on the same Christian students reading the life-giving yet often complex Word of God? Twenge mentioned changing college texts to be more conversational and less detail-oriented. This certainly does not seem to be a great option for the bible. As Gen Z seeks to use God’s Word as a tool in their lives, the issue of their generation’s

106. Twenge, *iGen*, 60.

107. Twenge, *iGen*, 61.

108. Twenge, *iGen*, 65.

lack of reading certainly comes into play. Simply put, “their changing media behaviors and vanishing attention spans make a physical medium of Scripture less viable.”¹⁰⁹ At the same time, while hard copy reading numbers are very low with this generation in a broad sense, 28% of 18–35-year-olds say they use books as a tool for spiritual growth on a monthly basis.¹¹⁰ Still, only 22% of young Christians say they read their bible on a monthly basis.¹¹¹

Despite these numbers regarding the generational use of hard-copy books, it would still be too far to say that a physical Bible is entirely out of date for this generation. Meanwhile, God’s Word has changed in its physical form and presentation over the centuries. Could a change in mediums be a possible solution for changing generations? Regardless of the statistics above, my interviews still found a desire from young believers to use the Scriptures as an aid in managing their emotions. This idea of not being able to use the Word of God practically in Gen Z’s lives of faith does not stem from a doubt of the efficacy of Scripture. It does not come from a generation’s lack of appreciation for the powerful Word of God. Instead, it comes from a lack of feeling equipped for the task.

Lack of Feeling Equipped

IP4 expressed that they did not feel properly taught or equipped when speaking to the idea of specifically using the Word as a tool to manage negative emotions, “I’ve never been taught how to do independent Bible study or anything like that. When I was in grade school at a

109. Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 43.

110. Barna Group, *The Connected Generation*, 61. (Percentage Includes non-Christians)

111. Barna Group, *The Connected Generation*, 80.

Lutheran grade school, I was told, ‘Anxiety is a sin because you're not trusting God.’ So then I would just try to stop like, ‘OK, I shouldn't do that.’ But I don't know how to [use the Bible in that way.] So, yeah, I've never been taught how to, I guess.”¹¹² IP15 talked about how they were very grateful for their Lutheran schooling growing up. However, this education may have lacked practical training for using God’s Word in this way.

“Going to a Christian school and a Christian high school and getting fed the Bible every day and learning Bible studies and going through Christ's light and catechism and apologetics and all that kind of stuff. And I think that’s great. But I think sometimes, the academic aspect interferes with it, where I'm just trying to get through this Christ Light lesson. I'm just trying to get through these 43 minutes of apologetics so I can go home. And, sometimes there's times I wish I would have put more effort into these classes.... And so, I'm really glad I did have those classes and did have an upbringing like that.... [yet] in terms of being equipped, I think a lot of times I'll sit down and open my Bible and not really know where to start.... I think it was provided, but it was all in terms of academics, so it wasn't as prioritized as I think I should have had it. Or it wasn't made as important. The fact that we would use it and need it, I feel like wasn't as prioritized.”¹¹³

IP12 explained how now that they are in college and away from their parents and Christian high school/grade school, the way that they turn to the Word directly has changed. Previously for them, they did not use Scripture in this way. Now that they are on their own, they are learning more and more to use the Word practically in their lives.¹¹⁴ IP13 said, “I went to Lutheran schools literally my entire life. And I never once throughout grade school or high school really opened my Bible and did like a prayer journal, or a devotion until [college.]”¹¹⁵ IP10 likewise said, “I've gone to Lutheran schools my entire life. And I think I've kind of taken that for granted for now.... But I think really taking it again into my own hands and being in college, but being

112. IP4 interview.

113. IP15 interview.

114. IP12 interview.

115. IP13 interview.

able to now do that on my own, I think has become so much more important.”¹¹⁶ Similarly, IP16 spoke to the reality that now since they are at a public university and are not attending a Christian grade school or high school they feel a greater need for a strong personal devotion life.¹¹⁷

One resource that multiple interviewees referenced using when searching for specific places to turn to in Scripture was Google.¹¹⁸ “A lot of times, it just takes a quick Google search of ‘where in the Bible does talk about this?’ because personally I’m not good with references. Once you have that, I just turn to God’s word. And that is how he communicates with us is through his words. And that in and of itself is such a comfort and a blessing knowing that this is the Lord speaking to me.”¹¹⁹ Using technology in this way is a blessing, but should our best answer for young Christians who are struggling emotionally be “just google it?”

Now it is important to clarify that this paper is specifically addressing how the means of grace can be used as a tool to positively impact negative emotions. To have a personal devotion life and to use God’s Word as a specific tool in this way can be two separate things. Certainly, it is important for God’s people to be equipped for personal bible study in a more general sense. Yet how could we as a church educate and equip a generation of young believers to use God’s Word as an emotional tool? As Gen Z seeks to find emotional rest through Scripture, equipping them for such a task is paramount to their emotions being positively impacted by the gospel.

116. IP10 interview.

117. IP16 interview.

118. IP1 interview, IP2 interview.

119. IP11 interview.

POSITIVE EMOTIONS

In 2020 Barna surveyed over 1500 members of Gen Z and found that about 25% of this generation feels “empowered.” This term empowered is used by Barna to represent the opposite of anxiety. They labeled young people under this umbrella of “empowered” based on whether they met these criteria: “Those who are **empowered** *always* or *usually* feel – ‘able to accomplish my goals,’ ‘satisfied with my life choices,’ ‘someone believes in me,’ ‘prepared for everyday life,’ ‘optimistic about the future,’ and ‘deeply cared for by those around me.’” Barna also found that there was a great crossover between members of Gen Z falling under both the “Resilient Disciples” label and the “empowered” category.¹²⁰ Their faith had a tremendous emotional impact.¹²¹

“Resilient disciples tend to **have a more positive outlook and greater mental and emotional health** (according to their own self-reporting). More than four out of five feel their perspective on life is positive overall, and they are more likely to report feelings of acceptance, confidence, safety and satisfaction when compared to their peers (see ‘Resilient Disciples & Well-Being’ on page 64). They are twice as likely as habitual churchgoers and nomads to meet the Barna definition of empowered (rather than anxious; see chapter 1, ‘Gen Z & Well-Being’). Overall well-being is positively correlated with resilient faith.”¹²²

120. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 63.

121. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 14-15.

122. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 63.

While Gen Z struggles with negative emotions, there is also a flip side to the story. As Gen Z Christians face these same emotional struggles and temptations, there is also an emotional advantage that Christ-following members of Gen Z have. With all Christians, there are positive emotions that tend to come with faith. For Gen Z, genuine positive emotions play a key role in how they view and express their lives of faith. These positive emotions of faith certainly are uplifting and even help manage the various negative emotions that may plague Gen Z. This section will focus on how the gospel impacts their emotions in a positive sense. “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:7).

Statistics such as these correlating emotional well-being and faith do not tell the whole story. Simply because someone is a believer does not imply that they will be emotionally better off than unbelievers or that they will have more positive emotions than negative emotions. C. F. W. Walther expresses this well in *Law and Gospel*,

“If you are to portray Christians as being exceedingly happy people, utterly without worry and trouble of any kind, you would again not paint a true picture. Christians are in far greater anxiety, worry, and tribulation than worldly people. Yet, spite of all this, the Christian is far happier than worldly men. If God were to come this night and demand his soul from him, he would say, ‘Praise God! My race is run; soon I shall be with my Savior.’ Amidst his tribulations this is his reflection: ‘Surely, it will not be long before I shall come home to my Father in heaven, and all the misery and woe of this earth will be past and forgotten.’ While Christians are weeping, the angels are rejoicing over them. While Christians are in anguish of soul and terror, God is cherishing the most cordial thoughts of love for them and calls them his beloved children.”¹²³

Walther brings to our attention a paradox of faith. Christians do have a certain happiness in the salvation they have through Christ. This happiness is a lasting joy rooted in God’s promises. We

123. C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 55.

are not incorrect to call it happiness. However, The Formula of Concord helps explain how such happiness is or is not experienced in the life of a Christian,

“For the presence, effectiveness, and gift of the Holy Spirit should not and cannot always be assessed *ex sensu*, as a person feels it in the heart. Instead, because the Holy Spirit’s activity is often hidden under the cover of great weakness, we should be certain, on the basis of and according to the promise, that the Word of God, when preached and heard, is a function and work of the Holy Spirit, through which he is certainly present in our hearts and exercises his power there.”¹²⁴

Having faith in Christ does not exclude you from anxiety and worry. Yet as we consider the “empowered” young believers and their emotional well-being that the Barna survey conveyed, emotional blessings of this sort are what we can rightly expect as people who trust in the promises of God and the Holy Spirit’s power through the Word. Luther demonstrated this explaining how God effects godly emotions through the Word.

“For God wants nature to be preserved, not abolished. But He orders that it be corrected, in order that it may become purer and that the emotions may be adjusted better in the godly than in the heathen, who do not control them by the fear of God and by confidence in Him but are dragged along rashly by them and without the sure rule of God’s Word.”¹²⁵

The Word corrects our emotions as it strengthens us in faith and confidence in God’s promises. The Holy Spirit includes this correction of emotions in his sanctifying work. Luther’s words here bring to mind Paul’s words from 2 Timothy 3:16. The Word is useful for believers in this way.

Luther also writes elsewhere about this confidence that comes with faith and its impact on human emotions stating,

“Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God’s

124. FC SD II 56. All quotations from the Lutheran Confessions will be taken from the Kolb-Wengert translation.

125. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 7: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 38-44*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 7 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 261.

grace makes men glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures. And this is the work which the Holy Spirit performs in faith.”¹²⁶

The emotional blessings believers receive through the Word are not separate from knowledge of God’s grace, the forgiveness of sins, salvation, strengthening of faith, the knowledge of God’s grace, etc. Rather, these positive emotions impacted by God’s Word come together with all the spiritual blessings of the Spirit’s work in strengthening faith.

“And further—this is the greatest miracle—it forgives and blots out all sin, creates happy, peaceful, patient hearts, devours death, locks the doors of hell and opens the gate of heaven, and gives eternal life. Who can enumerate all the blessings effected by God’s word? In brief, it makes all who hear and believe it children of God and heirs of the kingdom of heaven.”¹²⁷

“Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet 1:8,9). As we see the various positive emotions that were identified in my qualitative research, let us admire the power of God through his Word to impact the emotions of young believers.

Safety

For a generation that has grown up in such uncertain times, some of the greatest positive impact that the gospel offers Gen Z is in the certainty that it provides. Such certainty found in Scripture offers emotional security for them. Barna reported that 92% of people whom they

126. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 370–371.

127. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 47: The Christian in Society IV*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 47 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 297.

would consider under the category of “Resilient Disciples” say that they feel “safe” in life.¹²⁸

Likewise, IP4 expressed that some of the biggest positive emotions that correlated with faith for them were

“comfort and safety because I'm a very independent person. So, I feel like I have to do everything on my own a lot and figure things out. But when I spend time in God's Word, I'm reminded that he has a plan and he's going to figure it out or he has figured it out. So having that reminder brings me like comfort and then I feel safe in his arms.”¹²⁹

In these words, we again see the common emotional theme in Gen Z of potential uncertainty that is particularly concerned about the future. While external pressures might bring these sorts of negative emotions upon Gen Z, young believers who are a part of Gen Z are able to find a contrasting sense of safety through gospel promises.

“On [Christ’s suffering for you] you may depend as surely as if you had done it yourself; indeed as if you were Christ himself. See, this is what it means to have a proper grasp of the gospel, that is, of the overwhelming goodness of God, which neither prophet, nor apostle, nor angel was ever able fully to express, and which no heart could adequately fathom or marvel at. This is the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure, and content. This is what preaching the Christian faith means. This is why such preaching is called gospel, which in German means a joyful, good, and comforting ‘message’”¹³⁰

The message of the gospel gives Christian members of Gen Z the security they so desperately need in a world full of emotional chaos. “In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety” (Ps 4:8).

128. Barna Group, *Gen Z Volume 2*, 64.

129. IP4 interview.

130. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol.35, 119–120.

Joy, Peace, Thankfulness

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). As might be expected, some of the various interview responses that I received as it relates to the positive emotions of faith, match the fruit of the Spirit that Paul writes about in Galatians 5. This section is an opportunity for us to marvel at the Holy Spirit’s power in young believer’s lives. It was a pleasure of mine to be able to hear their testimony to the Spirit’s impact on their emotions. Some respondents expressed the peace that Scripture provides for them. “I kind of have an expectation of like, peace, or maybe almost a distraction from what's afflicting me. Because you know, if you can turn your mind away from that, God's word will have something in there. That'll kind of calm your nerves in one way or another. So, I guess, peace.”¹³¹ Christ promises this peace amidst the troubles of this life to those who are his. “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Similarly, as it relates to another fruit of the Spirit, IP1 explained the joy that comes with faith in this way,

“Joy and excitement and just anticipation, I'm somebody that thinks about heaven all the time and I'm just so excited. And so, I feel like I look around in all [aspects] of my life and there's just little glimpses of what heaven is going to be like. And that gets me so excited. Especially like when you see all the bad stuff happening in the world. So, I feel like that's the moments and the emotions connected to those moments connected to my faith that I think really, set my heart on fire so to speak, and just get me really excited and motivated to go and preach the good news even more.”¹³²

IP1 not only explained how this joy brings positive emotion that impacts their life, but it also motivates them vocationally. These responses go hand in hand with Barna’s research “A study of

131. IP12 interview.

132. IP1 interview.

Christians between the ages of 18 and 35 indicated that 32% of young Christians said that ‘their relationship with Jesus brings them great joy.’ That number increases to 61% if the respondent also was ‘more enthusiastic’ about their church during their teenage years.”¹³³ Here Barna emphasizes the fact that believers who have had impactful faith throughout their youth, as opposed to not, tended to express more often that joy is a positive emotion that comes with their faith. For these young Christians, they find practical application of the joy of the Lord in their lives. The joy of the Lord is their strength.

“I would say my first thought is joy just complete joy, and also peace and contentment too. I just think of how I will feel singing after going to heaven. Or if I have a really good Bible study with people around me, I do feel that peace and just contentment with where I’m at in life.”¹³⁴ IP2 expressed their sense of “gratitude just knowing that everything you have comes from God.” IP2 also expressed how often this gratitude comes from seeing one’s achievements and abilities in life and knowing that ultimately God is the one who receives the honor and praise for our accomplishments.¹³⁵ IP11, IP15, and IP14 explained how comfort was the greatest positive emotion impacted by the gospel for them.

IP11 said that through the means of grace “joy and comfort are fulfilled, without fail. I do find joy and comfort in Christ every time I turn to his word and to the Sacrament of Baptism, remembering my baptism.”¹³⁶ At first, this confident response stood out to me and gave me pause. Then I remembered Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 1, “Praise be to the God and Father of

133. Barna Group, *The Connected Generation*, 79.

134. IP3 interview.

135. IP2 interview.

136. IP11 interview.

our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ” (2 Cor 2:3-5). In verse 4 Paul writes about our God who comforts us ἐπὶ πάσῃ τῇ θλίψει *in all our affliction*. God’s comfort is not one that we only expect here or there. The comfort that our heavenly Father provides through his Word is a promise made to us. “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa 41:10).

IP11 demonstrates an attitude toward the Holy Spirit’s power in our lives that this paper seeks to highlight. We approach the gospel in Word and Sacrament with confidence knowing that he promises to have an impact on our emotions. This confidence is not superficial or magical. This confidence does not imply that we will be happy-go-lucky all the time as Christians. This also does not imply that our faith is impacted by our emotions or that our emotions or lack thereof validate or negate faith. This is not a theology of glory. Instead, the abounding comfort and joy that we have in Christ crucified and raised for us is one that by the power of the Spirit carries over to the emotional afflictions of young Christians. Comfort and joy go hand in hand as the assurance of our salvation and forgiveness reigns in our hearts and strengthens our minds. Walther again speaks to this sort of joy in the life of a believer,

“When you feel the comfort of the gospel in your heart, that is a glimpse of the light that may come to you on a certain day; but then several days may pass when you will not catch that glimpse again. Always keep this reflection present: ‘For such poor sinners as I am the gospel – the sweet gospel – has been provided. I have forgiveness of sins through Christ’¹³⁷

137. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 49.

In the gospel comfort of the forgiveness of sins and salvation, believers are full of joy and peace even as their outward experience may tempt them to think or feel otherwise. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13).

Faith Community and Fellowship

For many of the interview respondents, one aspect of faith that they felt positively impacted their emotions to a great degree was the fellowship of believers. 1 John 1:3,4 expresses the joy that comes from such fellowship. “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.” The idea of community in faith in one form or another was extremely important to just about every interviewee and their faith life. This was another area in my qualitative research in which my third key finding demonstrated itself. Whether these were faith communities through which these young people would study the Bible together, churches, organized campus ministry groups, organized campus worship services, or simply the impact of Christian friends and family, faith community and fellowship seemed to be one of the chief ways that Gen Z believers’ faith has a strong emotional impact. The importance that Gen Z seemingly places on fellowship and community as it relates to their faith calls us to reflect on our church’s culture. There are many aspects of a genuine faith community that both Gen Z longs for and that serve as a reflection of Christ’s love.

The impact that a solid faith community has on Gen Z’s faith is multiple. To start, IP11 explained how devotionally reading Scripture with fellow believers helps them better understand exactly what they are reading. “I personally do turn to God's word [when managing negative

emotions], but with other people. Because when I'm by myself, I overthink everything all the time. So I by putting myself with people that I'm close to with those relationships that I'm trusting, and then we can turn to God's word and debrief and just having people to discuss with is an important first step.”¹³⁸ IP11 was one who had previously mentioned that biblical interpretation was an issue that made using Scripture as a practical tool difficult at times. By relying on fellow believers and a collaborative approach to devotional life, IP11 feels better equipped to address negative emotions with the Word.

IP5 expressed that Christian community serves them well since often when they find themselves in emotional distress, they need someone else to preach the gospel to them rather than turning to their own personal Bible study.¹³⁹ IP16 also expressed that studying God’s Word with other believers seemed to better serve them emotionally. “I feel like it's more restful, and I almost feel like bad for saying [this, but] going to this Bible study, I find more peace and rest than maybe if I were just opening up my Bible by myself.”¹⁴⁰ This is what Christians are called to do for one another. “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” (1 Thess 5:11).

IP12 expressed that having Christian friends serves as a curb against the laziness of the sinful flesh and holds you accountable in faith, “I think a lot of times, it just comes down to having really good friends around you that will come and just be like, ‘Hey, you want to come with me to this?’ And it's just really important to have that strong support group that's always willing to just encourage you to come with them, or, in some cases, very strongly, nearly forced

138. IP11 interview.

139. IP5, interview by author. In person, November 29, 2023.

140. IP16 interview.

you to come with them, but that's good."¹⁴¹ IP15 spoke to the value of having a Christian support system as well. They explained that having strong Christian relationships can point you in the right direction when you need emotional support.

“Understanding that I have a support system, like my friends, or people at Bible study, or people at camp that I can turn to point me to God, is helpful. Because sometimes, you can make that connection to talk to the people who know about God, and then they point you to God. So, taking that route sometimes is what I need. That's why we have these people in our lives.”¹⁴²

IP5 also spoke highly of the impact that Christian friends and community have on them.

“I have discovered and really been plugged into a Christian community. It is such a relief from of all the stress. Even if I form Christian friends naturally in the world, and I happen to make a friend and they just happen to be Christian, establishing relationships around Christ [is important.] We're here to worship God, and they clearly put priorities in learning about God. We are around the foundation of Christ, [so] that relationship brings so much more relief and I feel so much more comfortable and at ease around those people because I know they have similar values and will support me in my life of faith.”

For IP5, not only is a Christian community a blessing and encouragement in faith, but it also allows them to have genuine relationships rooted in Christ’s love. Relationships and social situations can be extremely stressful for young people. “Immediately adjacent to almost every confusing cultural trend is a young person’s quest for a meaningful relationship with themselves, their community, and the world.”¹⁴³ It is a unique thing for young people to have relationships in which they feel comfortable, relaxed, and unburdened from social pressures. Yet in today’s society, so many young people are searching for these kinds of relationships. Christians who have strong relationships built on the foundation of Christ are able to use them as stress relievers of sorts. Social anxiety and pressure lessen when you know that someone else around you shares

141. IP12 interview.

142. IP15 interview.

143. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 159.

with you in Christ’s love. IP6 expressed how their church serves them in this same way, “I feel like every time I go to [church], it's just a lot of people who I have gotten to know; their stories, their personalities, who they are and what they stand for. That inspires me and makes me feel accepted. And there's comfort in that, being with people who are like you and who share something in common with you.”¹⁴⁴

As faith communities seek to form strong Christian relationships, *Growing Young* explains how young members of Gen Z can feel a lack of belonging through pressures such as social media, and why this is an important aspect of Gen Z’s life for churches to consider.

“Young people use social media for one major reason: *connection*. Digital media offers young people desperate for community unprecedented access to their friends, family, and the rest of the world. But churches growing young appreciate and empathize with how technology is a double-edged sword for young people eager to belong. Digital media magnifies any cracks or holes that exist in young people’s social support structure. Pictures and social media posts about Tuesday afternoon study sessions and Friday night parties can make young people feel like ‘everyone else’ has more friends. For teenagers and young adults desperate for a sense of belonging, technology provides quick bursts of momentum that can end up unfortunately petering out.”¹⁴⁵

The point made here is extremely valuable. Churches can develop strong faith communities for young believers by preemptively understanding the social needs and difficulties that members of Gen Z face in day-to-day life. Churches need to be aware of these believers’ need for belonging and strong relationships where they can interact in a stress-free environment. For churches, youth groups, and campus ministries, the fight against the negative emotional effects of social media does not just involve various “do’s and don’ts.” Instead, *Faith for Exiles* would have us be intentional with the culture of our Christian communities.

“Pay attention to emotions. The places we want to go and the people we want to hang out with are full of feelings – and these can be positive, negative, or neutral. This is one of

144. IP5 interview.

145. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 140–41.

the things that most commonly defines the perceptions we uncovered in *unChristian* and *You Lost Me*: human beings are quick to discern when they don't feel welcome. The implication is that we must assess and build an emotionally healthy context for relationships. This happens (or doesn't) in our families. This occurs (or doesn't) in our churches.... We have a responsibility, whatever our age or role, to contribute to this kind of healthy environment."¹⁴⁶

This means that while the faith and teaching aspect of "faith community" certainly will always play an important role in our churches, youth groups, etc., we cannot forget the "community" aspect as well. There will never be any substitute for the Word of God itself and the power it has on hearts and minds. Church culture is not a replacement for solid theology and gospel proclamation. However, church culture is an area in which we can be more intentional about not creating barriers to faith and gospel proclamation.

"In addition to what we say, we can also build an emotionally healthy context by offering our most precious resources: our time and our attention. If you think about it, most of what church leaders are compensated for is running worship services and programs, which are important and valuable. And most of the ways we measure and experience 'church' involve doing things *for* people, not necessarily being *with* people. We have to change this imbalance of program over presence. Doing so will help us create a healthier emotional climate, together."¹⁴⁷

Kinnaman's emphasis on the ministry of presence is important. Community and fellowship are aspects of faith that only occur once we spend quality time together and after we have been intentional about making young believers feel seen and cared about. What might a church culture of empathy and presence look like? That very well may vary from congregation to congregation. Many of these interview respondents participate in midweek "growth group" bible studies as a part of a campus ministry group. Sometimes their gathering together is less formal as a faith

146. Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 132.

147. Kinnaman, Matlock, and Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 134.

community while they study together, participate in fun activities together, and simply spend time together.

When we emphasize fellowship and community with the young people in our congregations, empathy becomes a culture and love becomes our practice. This empathy demonstrates the love for neighbor that Christ calls us to in Matthew 22:39. Galatians 6:2 also outlines this love in the form of empathy. “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” When faith relationships are genuinely loving and empathetic, we reflect Christ’s image like a mirror. When we demonstrate our care for our young people’s emotions and mental struggles, we become trusted and relationally qualified by Gen Z to preach law and gospel in an equally genuine and caring way. Barna reports that “over 80 percent of the young people in the congregations we surveyed agree that their church involvement decreases their stress.”¹⁴⁸ A strong Christian community serves as an emotional haven for Gen Z. “We couldn’t help but notice that young people who are surrounded by empathetic adults often become more empathetic themselves. When teenagers and emerging adults are appreciated, understood, and valued, they become conduits through which empathy flows.”¹⁴⁹ This is the sort of multiplication of empathy and comfort that 2 Corinthians 1 lays out for us. As we are comforted by God through his Word, so also we share with others so that we can in turn comfort them.

IP6 also expresses how this sort of culture of empathy and connection aids and motivates them in their ability to evangelize to other young people around them.

“I think it’s a great feeling being with other Christians, and it makes me want to have the same for other people. There are a lot of other people in my life that are going through

148. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 135–36.

149. Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 125.

either stress, anxiety, or I could just tell that they need someone or something and I'll bring them here [to church or a campus ministry event]. Now I want to recreate that feeling that I have, for them. And sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't. It's just a matter of time and [if] this is what God wants, what his will is for them, it's just me trying to do my part.”¹⁵⁰

IP1 also expressed how their church community impacts their desire to bring others into the fold,

“I feel like our emotions, like those positive emotions that come with being a part of church and this community make me want to share the gospel even more. Because I am so excited. I'm so happy. I'm just completely enthralled with everything that comes with being a child God that, like, I want to share this, and I want to be a part of evangelism projects and things like that. Because you want everybody to have those same joys when they come to faith.”

Believers of Gen Z want to be proud of their churches and bible study groups. Often in settings such as a public university Christian groups are looked down upon. When Christian communities are able to combine the power of the gospel with a culture of empathy, young people are emotionally blessed and attracted to such community. Believers of Generation Z are emotionally impacted and uplifted by faith-filled, genuine fellowship with other believers.

150. IP6 interview.

CONCLUSION

Gen Z Christians have grown up in a society that threatens their faith from all sides. This may happen directly from a world that has no room for the objective truth of Scripture. Yet most of the time the attacks on Gen Z's faith are more indirect. From social pressures to social media, there are a host of reasons why Gen Z suffers a great deal emotionally. The young believers in our classrooms, pews, youth groups, and campus ministries face these emotional challenges on a regular basis. However, this emotional struggle does not have to be fought alone for members of Gen Z who hold firmly to the promises of a loving God. Some of the young believers that I interviewed already have been using God's Word as a tool in their lives. They use it to manage the negative emotions bogging them down in life. In turn, the gospel fills them up with the joy, peace, and comfort that the Spirit provides. However, many young Christians still feel unequipped to practically use Scripture in this way.

The three key findings this paper presents will help us further this discussion on Gen Z and emotional wellness. The means of grace impacts them emotionally as the gospel strengthens and renews them to be able to better manage the emotional struggles they face. Gen Z truly desires to have God's Word be a practical tool in their life. When believers of this generation are feeling down, stressed, anxious, etc., they want to find rest in the life-giving words of Scripture. Meanwhile, Gen Z does not necessarily feel equipped to devotionally use the Bible in this way. So, what is the answer? What may guide them emotionally and spiritually as they sojourn through the coming years? Finally, empathetic faith communities and practical devotional tools are important ways that Gen Z's the gospel has a direct impact on their emotional well-being.

The church has a great opportunity before her regarding this generation and emotions. As a Lutheran church body, we are well-equipped to take on this task. What may be required of us? Our ministry to Gen Z needs to be distinctly Lutheran in nature. In practice, we need to use the Word of God in line with our trust in the Spirit's power through the means of grace. As we seek to have Spirit-filled congregations full of Spirit-filled young adults and teenagers, taking the time to patiently teach and equip them is necessary. Further research on what that sort of training might look like could be valuable. This paper was not set on coming up with the specific details of that solution. At the same time, our ministry for this generation can look distinctly Lutheran in how we live vocationally as we approach relationships with them. As pastors, teachers, lay leaders, fathers, mothers, friends, etc., the Lord has called each of us to be his servants in the lives of these young people. The encouragement that we share with them through the distinct vocations that the Lord has called us to is what creates the kinds of faith communities that Gen Z needs. As we work to serve this generation of believers may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

APPENDIX 1. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research. My name is Clayton Fury, a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. I am conducting this study as part of my senior thesis project (TH3300) on the topic of Generation Z and how this generation's faith impacts their emotions. This project is in partial fulfillment of my MDiv degree. You have been invited to participate in this research because I believe that you can provide valuable information on the topic. I will be asking you questions about how your faith impacts your emotions, and questions regarding the emotional challenges and blessings in your life as well. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes.

Your involvement in this research will be shared in the following ways: All information you share with me will be used anonymously. Your name will never be used in the actual thesis paper, presentations regarding the thesis, etc. Some quotes from the interview may be directly referenced or paraphrased in my paper. Your interview responses will be accurately represented as your answers will serve as a part of an overarching approach to observe the responses of various members of Generation Z as a whole.

If you agree to the audio recording of the interview, the recording will be deleted after the research project is completed.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you may choose not to answer any or all questions. You may fully withdraw from the interview at any time and information that you provided will not be reported in the research.

“By signing this consent form, I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information, and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I voluntarily agree to allow my child to participate in this study under the conditions described.”

Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

“I furthermore agree to the audio recording of this interview, and understand that the recording will be deleted upon completion of the research project.” _____ (initials)

APPENDIX 2. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Do you think that negative emotions have a big impact on your life? If so, please explain how.

Which negative emotions do you struggle with the most? Why does *said emotion* impact your life so greatly?

When you're experiencing negative emotions, where do you typically turn to find rest or comfort? Why?

Do you feel like you're able to use God's Word as a tool in your battles with negative emotions? Why or why not?

When you're negatively affected by your emotions, what are your expectations as to the impact that the means of grace have on you emotionally?

Are there certain emotions that you think correlate with your faith? If so, what about your faith impacts those emotions?

In your opinion, is there a negative correlation between the relationship of your faith and your emotions? Or would you say there is a positive correlation between the relationship of your faith and your emotions?

Would you say that things like going to church, reading your bible, attending a bible study, or talking to fellow believers about God's Word, faith, etc. serve as emotional rest for you? Why or why not?

Would you say that your life of faith satisfies you emotionally? Why or why not?

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