
When Sally Became Harry and the Church Went OMG: Gen Z, Gender Identity, and the Christian Church

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In this investigation I review unobtrusive data sources that reveal those significant differences embodied in Generation Z (“Gen Z,” born after 1996), to help understand how their particular social, emotional, and ideological make-up align (or not) with the Christian faith. In doing so, my query and discussion focuses on several Gen Z distinctives which are discordant with traditional views of the person—gender and sex; self-identification vs assignments by social entities; religious ideologies; and other differences. How are these ideological positions, behaviors, gender and physical transformations in Gen Z being received by the Christian Protestant church? How is the church responding? Christian parenting is also brought to the forefront in the discussion, as are their efforts at moving faith to the next generation. Such is contrasted with youth engagements by the church and its youth programs. Finally, I question whether our Christian anthropology is capable of opening wide enough to accommodate differences of intersex births and gender dysphoria, given its present orthodox theology and understandings of persons and bodies. This investigative discussion ultimately ends by suggesting the church ought incorporate Miroslav Volf’s “embrace” of the ‘other’ as it relates to Gen Z—our deepest challenge here: to love Gen Z without judgment, discipling and welcoming them into our congregations—*they/them*, and all.

*When you are born has a larger effect
on your personality and attitudes
than the family who raised you.
—Jean Twenge, Generations*

Introduction

One doesn’t have to roll the time needle back too far to encounter the beginnings of the “*gender moment*,” a movement already running its first leg with the start

of the present century. ¹ By 2000 the landscape of gender and sex itself had begun to change dramatically, due in particular to earlier writings by such queer theorists as Judith Butler, who, in the 1990’s, began to question *gender binarism* and treat it as “an oppressive duo” (Butler 2006). ² Later came figures whose ‘transitions’ became public, the likes of Laverne Cox (2006), Jazz Jennings (2007), Chaz Bono (2009), and the famously outed *transformation* of Bruce to Caitlyn Jenner (2015). In 2017, National Geographic

¹ “The gender moment” summarizes a dynamic social period wherein traditional notions of gender are being questioned, redefined, and expanded. It comprises social, cultural, legal, and technological changes that collectively result in positions about gender which differ broadly from historical ones. Some believe this cultural change period can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable understanding of gender.

² See also Butler (1993). *Queer Theory* challenges normative understandings of sexuality and gender, and suggests these identifiers are not fixed, inherent, but rather socially constructed and thus fluid. It questions and then attempts to deconstruct, “destabilize,” societal norms and discourses that “privilege certain identities over others” to “free the self from social contrivances and lexical impositions.” (Paraphrased from Butler’s cited works.)

documented the rising requests of teens to transition in its landmark feature volume on the Gender Revolution.³

Labels and acronyms were also changing fast—by 2010, it was no longer MTF (male to female) or FTM (female to male) transitions and neologisms that had entered lexical imaginaries and become real possibilities: gender itself had become a *spectrum*.⁴ Those in the zone of transformation now had their pick of landing platforms: one could simply be *questioning*, or not decide which place to land as *nonbinary* (*'enby'* [NB] for short); or even be all that you were meant to be, or *pangender*. You could decide you had *no* gender, and state yourself as *agender*.

Orange may have become the new Black in the process; but now, Sally *could* become Harry, or *Salandharr*, *Harrandsal*, *Nosalnoharr*; take a new name, adopt new monikers that befit their emergent identity and discard any “assigned”; assignments of the type Butler (2024) has insisted are not only oppressive, but ring of fascist impositions.

Speaking of *assignments*, novel gender ideology questioned the idea that a genetic test at birth ought to determine one’s sex. Biology became marginalized by the very process of lexically minimalizing its influence and its importance in self-understanding (Butler 1993).⁵ By extension, if one was “sex assigned” this would then presumably influence one’s gender. Butler insured that by arguing we *perform our sex assignment*, we also *perform gender*; that “gender performativity” would then cement the desired correlation between birth sex and gender performance.

Thus, both were seen as imposed on the person by other entities—which underscored the lack of control a person had over who they *really* were, their being—material and emotional. New acronyms followed: There’s AMAB (*assigned male at birth*), and AFAB (*assigned female at birth*), the very idioms an effort to insure one knew that *sex is assigned*—and assigned via social contrivances and institutions; all, other than biology itself or the person itself. Use of the terms *sex* and *gender* as synonyms became normed, and trended to be both seen as assignments not founded on one’s body, but on one’s acquired performances (Gil 2022, 49-50).⁶

Generation Z (1997-2012)

Into this new world came Generation Z, born after 1996 and encountering the millennium as they started preschool. Much has been already written about Gen Z, now one of the most studied generations, for multiple reasons. These were the first truly *digital natives*, never experiencing anything other than a digitized world from birth. They’ve grown up with smart phones and tablets as Nannies; learned to scroll and thumb through media, games, blinking lights, before they could actually utter a comprehensible full sentence. They’ve thus spent more time on internet, media, gaming, than talking to real people of any age—never mind their parents—or more ‘remotely,’ their grandparents (Barna Group 2022a). This is also the generation that suffered COVID in isolation during their most vulnerable and significant years of

³ National Geographic, *The Gender Revolution, Special Edition*. January, 2017. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/pdf/gender-revolution-guide.pdf>.

⁴ By 2018 the American Medical Association had all but adopted policies aimed at insuring their affirmation of the “medical spectrum of gender.” Its policy resolution, H-65.962, passed and modified November 18, 2018, is explained by AMA Board Member William E. Kobler, MD in a press release that day, as follows: “*Sex and gender are more complex than previously assumed. It is [therefore] essential to acknowledge that an individual’s gender identity may not align with the sex assigned to them at birth. A narrow limit on the definition of sex would have public health consequences for the transgender population and individuals born with differences in sexual differentiation, also known as intersex traits.*” <https://www.healio.com/news/primary-care/20181115/ama-affirms-medical-spectrum-of-gender>. Here again is the conflation of biological sex with the socio-psychological construction of gender; the prioritizing of gender variance by protecting it from [unstated, undetermined] “public health consequences”—at the same time expanding the definition of sex beyond *male*, *female*, *intersex*, and into an unspecified breadth, i.e., not “a narrow limit.” What, then, does “sex” now define if not its own *unspecified spectrum*—its endpoint yet to be known . . . limitless also? Debra Soh (2022) has already contested these assumptions and provided biological facts to show their errors.

⁵ Contested in Gil (2023).

⁶ See also Butler (1993).

teenhood—and thus also suffered many losses to their education, their social skills development, as well as their self-confidence.

Barna Group has noted in multiple surveys, year after year, that this generation embodies the most significant array of mental health issues compared to prior generations (Barna Group 2022b). That said, Gen Z also offers up convincing evidence of come-backs, resilience, even involvements with social justice issues despite their own concerns.⁷ Gen Z'ers are not easily categorizable, although similarities of experiences and outcomes certainly run through their gauntlet.

Gen Z and Gender

Gen Z also inherited the running train of the gender moment, growing up and into teenhood with saturations of gender fluidity via countless media exposures, school friends who've 'outed,' engaging spectral possibilities and gender nonconformities for self-identification that go way beyond historical or customary views of gender, and which by extension also reinterpret the meaning of sex (Gill 2022). This remarkable ascendancy of gender theory *as fact* has prompted a sea change in how Gen Z conceptualizes, articulates, and ultimately renders their self-understanding (Twenge 2023b).

And it is evident in their lexicon: Gen Z speaks the current language of gender effortlessly, something that still confuses many Gen X (1965–1980) and Millennial (1981–1996) parents. Aside from the more common terms now in use, like *cisgender* ('*cis*' for short), or *transgender* (now meaning anyone *not cis*), there's an interesting array of terms like *demiboy*, *demigirl*, to self-refer. Included in this lexicon are all the pronouns, now staples of self-identification: *he/him*, *she/her*, *shim*, *neutrois*, *they/them*. This generation feels it's important to state your pronoun(s), much as you state your name. (In many cases novel onomastics do not link names with gender, so yes, one *can't customarily*

tell from a name who he/she/they/them are.) Gen Z is also reported to be the first generation in which a majority believe there are more than two genders (Twenge 2023b, 2).⁸

There's a certain comfort one feels Gen Z has with gender exploration—if not about themselves, certainly comfortable with friends who are exploring, 'daring' to be who they feel they are and not who they were 'assigned' to be. There may even be a certain hoopla when telling of friends who've come out as trans.⁹

This right to explore gender 'options' coincides with shifts in values and norms that emphasize an individual's fundamental right to self-rule. The core feature here is not just individual rights, but the right to *self-identify* and thus to *self-represent* without regard to customary biological, social, or legal parameters. Elsewhere, I've explored the trend and called it *a social movement of self-representation* (Gil 2021, 2). No-one, no entity, ought to define *you*. You should not be presumptively placed into established categories of being and be required to stay in those frames—your consent never asked for, anyways. Binary normativity based on sexual dimorphism is irrelevant, thus chromosomal inheritance is of no value to identity. The body—well, that's been called a "mute facticity"—a fact that doesn't speak at all to one's *being* or one's *becoming* (Butler 2006, 129).¹⁰ As a matter of course, the only validity that remains is what one *believes* and *feels* about one's self. Such sentiment often appears now as a rather institutionalized rebellion against the binary, even in some cases *any* gender label (Davis 2017).

And the changes are striking. Jean Twenge, who with colleagues has copiously analyzed recent longitudinal data on this and other generational cohorts, reports:

The number of young adults reporting they identified as transgender quadrupled between 2014 and 2021, while the number of transgender persons in older age groups stayed about the same.

⁷ Gil, V.E. "Gen Z'ers Are Changing Relationships More than Ya Think. Ya." <http://drvincegil.com/downloads>.

⁸ See also Twenge (2023a).

⁹ Bernstein, Samuel Rae. "Transgender Is Not a Scary Word." TedX Talk, Laguna Blanca School. Viewed at: <https://amara.org/videos/10LI03oJ63j/en/2159483/>

¹⁰ Rebuttal to Butler's ideas about the body being mute on communicating sex and gender to the brain comes from Gil (2023) and Soh (2021).

Transgender identification was virtually identical across age groups in 2014; but by 2021, four times more young adults identified as transgender. (Twenge 2023b, 4)

She thus notes the “skyrocketed” numbers of 18-26 year-olds that identified as *trans*, growing the population of transgender young adults in the U.S. from around 220,000 in 2014 to around 900,000 in 2021—an increase of about 680,000 new *trans*persons. While the 2021 ratio of transgender among Boomers stood stable at 1:1,000 (one-tenth of 1%), the ratio among Gen Z young adults was 23:1,000 (2.3%); or put another way, 20 times more. Moreover, the 2021-2022 aggregated data Twenge reviews conclusively show that 1 out of every 18 young adults in the U.S. now identify as *some category* other than male or female (ibid., 6).¹¹

Gen Z Females vs. Males and Gender Trouble

Digging deeper, one finds there is indeed a significant imbalance in the sex ratio of who is wanting gender identity and/or sex change today. Among Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials, those who’ve wanted a change in gender or sexuality were about

equally born as males or as females—this per birth records.¹² Among Gen Z, over *two thirds* of those seeking other statuses during the same period examined by Twenge and others were *born females at birth*,¹³ underscoring the immense generational differences in the sex ratios of those wanting a gender/or/sex alternative.

These trends are confirmed by CDC’s data from the *Behavioral Risk Factors Surveillance System (BRFSS)*, which also highlight changes aren’t *just* a generational differential; it’s also fact that *it is the younger female population of Gen Z*, those born from early 2000’s forward and now in their teens-to-20’s, that show a cumulative jump of 48% identifying as *trans*, and an even higher 60% identifying as nonbinary (trans figure included in this percentage in some years’ data).¹⁴

Not only has the trans trend accelerated, but the increase in predominantly teen-to-young adult *females* who now identify as *enby* or *trans*—who want new nomenclature and/or body alterations—statistically and otherwise lend credence to socio-cultural and psychological variables as motivators. (For a sidebar on this position, see footnote below.¹⁵)

¹¹ Also, U.S Census Bureau, *Household Pulse Survey 2021, 2022*. At <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/household-pulse-survey/data.html>.

¹² U.S. Census Bureau Data: *Live Births in the U.S. Data Tables for 1965-1994*. At <https://www.census.gov/topics/health/births-deaths.html>.

¹³ Aside from Twenge (2023b), see Shrier (2021) and Grossman (2023).

¹⁴ Center for Disease Control. *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2000-2024 Data*, at <https://www.cdc.gov/brfss/index.html>. The terminology gets confusing since *trans* is now a generic label for anyone that does not identify as *cisgender* (male or female). The use of the term *nonbinary* is also often used coincidentally as a synonym for *trans*, given that the nonbinary individual isn’t conforming (either) to a ‘cisgender normativity’. You can be *trans* and *nonbinary*; and survey responses often reflect this trend. Thus, in some years’ datasets the *trans* label predominates, while in other years the *nonbinary* label predominates. Regardless, the percentage jumps are so significant as to not be due to chance!

¹⁵ *Sidebar*: Notions that there are socio-cultural and psychological variables fueling the now statistically significant upswing in transgender adolescents and young adults (AYA), especially females, emphasize a social contagion hypothesis. Here, already sensitive AYAs, many experiencing mental health issues if not socially conforming pressures, are heavily influenced by social media trans groups and friends who are “considering” they may be *enby*, *trans*, *questioning*. In this view, AYAs begin to attribute their psychological problems to gender dysphoria. There are factual reports of ‘online friends’ influencing decisions; that the only way to overcome feelings of depression, anxiety, body issues/dysmorphia, is to transition (See Ludden, 2023; also, Dishion and Tipsord (2011); as well, *TransgenderReality* website, at <https://transgenderreality.com>. There’s also the popular trans-affirming site *4thwavenow*, at <https://4thwavenow.com/>).

In other writings I have likened this phenomenon to a *culture-bound syndrome* (Gil 2021, 27, 51, 200-201). Culture-bound syndromes are composed of certain behaviors, affects, somatic feelings that are out of the ordinary in a culture, which occur among certain groups, and thus are reasons for distress and discomfort. ROGD exhibits all the qualities of a culture-bound syndrome affecting a particular subgroup. See Morandini (2023); Diaz and Bailey (2023). (This last paper was *retracted* in

Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria

In 2018, Lisa Littman began to document this trend, which she theorized and called *rapid onset gender dysphoria* (Littman 2018). ROGD is not a diagnosis but a type of dysphoria which occurs in adolescents, and those who experience it are overwhelmingly female. These teens showed no signs of gender dysphoria before puberty but reported a sudden shift in gender: a conflicted gender identity as teens, thus the condition being labeled *rapid-onset* gender dysphoria.

In such cases, and confirmed via research, the impact of social media on this shift cannot be understated. A scoping review by Hilty et al. (2023), reveals the deleterious effect social media have on adolescent mental health and by extension, gender identity development. These teens encounter repeatedly diverse identities online and encouragements to explore their own gender ‘truth’. Peer dynamics only exacerbate the questioning, teens seeing peers or influencers openly discuss and sometimes video their transitions online (Hilty 2023).¹⁶

Do These Transitions Stick? Desistance and Gen Z

Proponents of gender self-affirmation have historically cast doubt on both studies of desistance and data regarding the reality that desisters not only exist, but that most adolescents with initial gender conflicts will overwhelmingly change their minds by

later teenhood.¹⁷ There are two terms that need to be understood here: *desistance*, and *detransition*. In desistance, the teen ‘grows out of’ or in other ways stops believing that they have gender dysphoria, often becoming increasingly convinced (either by their morphing body or by other equivalencies) that they are congruent in their sex and gender. They therefore *desist* in pursuing notions of gender change or body modification(s), in effect renouncing a prior transgender identification. In *detransition*, the teen who was involved in gender/sex change does an about-face and pursues *reversing* the change. Detransition occurs mostly when the teen has already begun the process of change, via a new name, being administered puberty blockers, and/or is receiving actual alternate hormone administration. Detransitioning in its most technical sense means attempting a *reversal* of the process of physical gender/sex reidentification.¹⁸

Those who have renounced a prior transgender identification are now increasingly visible (Littman 2024).¹⁹ In the cited Littman study of individuals 18-33 years who previously identified as trans and had stopped, even after a mean trans identification of 5.4 years, the study reports 53% felt they had experienced a form of ROGD. Most astounding, fewer than 17% had *actually met the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for GD in childhood/adolescence when diagnosed as GD*.²⁰ And again, most were natal females—who after desisting, began identifying themselves as exclusively homosexual in orientation.²¹

November, 2023 due to growing article censorship on writings that affirm reports by parents as accurate. Diaz and Bailey’s data validated their reflecting on ROGD as a “socially contagious syndrome,” a position which proponents of gender transition decry.)

¹⁶ See also Morandini (2023).

¹⁷ Zucker (2012); Mayer and McHugh (2016). Also see Callahan (2018); and most importantly, Steensma (2013).

¹⁸ At some point, detransitioning is not possible—particularly when the administered sex hormones have truncated the ability of sex glands to produce natal hormone(s), usually beyond the sixth month of administration. Within eight months to a year of alternate hormone use, the body reaches the tipping point: there is definitive chemical castration, and individuals become irreversibly infertile at this point. However, the process varies and is dose-dependent: each body reacts differently. Physiological body changes are often not reversible, save some which may be amenable to surgical reconstruction such as when breast tissue has been excised.

¹⁹ See also corroborating studies: Jedzejewski (2023); Irwig (2022).

²⁰ The diagnostic criteria can be found in the *DSM-5TR* at 302.85 (F64. 9), “*Gender Dysphoria in Children and Adolescents*.” American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, Revision 5TR (2017ff).

²¹ It should be clear to the reader that *sexual orientation* refers to whom the individual is erotosexually attracted; while *gender identification* is the individual’s inner sense of a gendered self. *Sexual identity* is understood to be one’s bio-hormonal/physical-

Taken together, these data results and trends ultimately suggest that among Gen Z, the variegation now visible in gender self-identification, coupled with the significant urgings from media and peers, contributes to the commonality of gender identity self-exploration and questioning I have described, and not witnessed in earlier generations. Such volume increase does not appear as the result of a more precise medical detection of gender dysphoria, or less social discrimination, ‘more awareness’, or even federal guarantees of equality; given that the rises occur in particular age and sex cohorts in Gen Z, not in Gen Z as a whole; and not in any proximate, contemporary generation.

If one also takes into consideration the significance of mental health issues experienced by Gen Z overall, one begins to see coterminous parallels with social contagion and culture-bound syndromes, these potentially accounting for the growth in teen females who want transitions. Moreover, studies reviewed also suggest that medical protocols for diagnosing adolescent and young adult GD are often *not followed*—fewer cases actually meeting compliance standards for adolescent gender dysphoria designations, yet nevertheless being given this diagnosis.²² Finally, studies also reveal that living in role and name change do not always or significantly affect

prior mental health issues of these youth. Many of their depressions and body issues remain unchanged, as do suicidal ideations in those who had them prior to any transition (Morandini 2023, abstract).

Gen Z, Sum of its Parts

To sum up the status of Gen Z, one can propose this generation embodies the full complexity of the age, its characterologic uniqueness, much of which is fueled by those extraordinary experiences of this generation in its time, social, emotional, and physical spaces. Gen Z is quite distinct when compared to other generations that precede it; certainly, in living the duality of a real and even bigger online life while attempting to sort out the factual from the imaginary.²³ We see difficulties with social-emotional development; at times codependency on the internet and social media for information, social support; gaming for social networking and for adrenaline needs. Many wear bruises from conditions they’ve had to tolerate—the isolation, loss of friendships, education, family disruptions; and the list can go on.

At other times Gen Z evidences breaking the boundaries of such gauntlets, forging forward with their requisites for equality, authenticity, self-understanding, self-identification and becoming—‘no matter what’. It is

genital make-up, which identifies the person as either *male*, *female*, or *intersex*. It is not uncommon to find desisting individuals coming to terms with earlier confusion between sexual orientation and gender identification: see Callahan (2018). See also, de Vries (2014) and Marchiano (2020).

²² NHS England, which recently conducted an independent review of its gender identity services (2023-24), concluded there is “scarce and inconclusive evidence to support clinical decision-making” for minors with gender dysphoria, and that for most who present before puberty it will be a “transient phase,” requiring clinicians to focus on psychological support and to be “mindful” of the risks of even social transition. (*National Health Services—England*. “The Cass Review: Independent Review of Gender Identity Services for Children and Young People.” Report Summary, April 2024.)

Experts are also questioning the evidence underpinning adolescent GID guidelines. Professor Mark Helfand at Oregon Health and Science University identified several deficiencies in WPATH’s (World Professional Association of Transgender Health) recommendations, such as lack of a grading system to indicate the quality of the evidence; while Professor Gordon Guyatt at McMaster University found “serious problems” with the Endocrine Society guidelines, including pairing strong recommendations with weak evidence. Helfand explains that calling a recommendation ‘evidence-based’ should mean a treatment has not just been systematically studied, but that there was also a finding of high-quality evidence supporting its use. (See Block 2023.)

²³ Current research continues to show that young people tend to land on social media as their “third space,” these being *digital natives* from the start. Here, in the third space of the internet we find this generation’s collective identity; an extended worldview that comes with growing up on the internet and interacting with multiply different perspectives and peoples to satisfy their ongoing loneliness. Myriad opportunities present themselves online for parasocial relationships; for them to explore their identities and understand how *others identify*; how identities “shift” and change, and storylines they willingly believe to be authentic. See the current study from UCLA (2023) “Teens & Screens,” authored by Stephanie Rivas-Lara, et al., and funded by the Center for Scholars and Storytellers. <http://www.scholarsandstorytellers.com/css-teens-and-screens-2023-report>.

this generation in particular which during 2020-2021 demonstrated *en masse* in the agora against racial and other prejudices that were choking the U.S.

Gen Z: Religion, Religiosity, and the Church

With significant generational distinctions in view, it is now possible to explore Gen Z's configuration and query its 'goodness of fit' with that of the normed Christian (and in particular) Protestant orthodox church.

Gen Z is Less Religious

Studies again confirm that Gen Z is less religious and less involved with religious affiliation than prior generations. In a recent Center of American Life survey (2022), over a third identified as believing "nothing in particular," or "agnostic," "atheist." Data also confirm that only about a quarter of Gen Z attend or visit a religious service regularly (thus overall, "religiously unaffiliated"); and slightly less than half retain any certainty in the belief a God exists. It stands to reason that prayer to a deity is also much less common among this generation (Cox 2022).

One can well identify influences which have shaped this dwindling religiosity and religious values in Gen Z: increasing secularization and a broad societal acceptance of secular vs. religious viewpoints have obviously played influential roles in the declining religious adherence among the younger population, even among their parents.²⁴ These influences, coupled with a social push for greater individuation and the general sentiment that what one believes is of greater significance than what organized religion teaches, render a noticeable trend among Gen Z to accept their own conclusions vs. that of established religious doctrine.²⁵ Moreover, being born in the digital age with vast access to information—whether verifiable,

accurate, or inaccurate seems to make little difference in an age of unvetted 'truths'—allows this generation instant exploration of diverse perspectives, and encourages a mindset of "*thus, I know best*" (Twenge 2018, 166).²⁶

For many, there's also distrust of religion, because Gen Z has come to believe religion promotes outdated ideas and behaviors which Gen Z feel ought be acceptable (e.g., cohabiting vs marrying; being gay; gender individuation). More young people now associate religion in general, and Christianity in particular, with rigidity and intolerance (Twenge 2018, 167). If Gen Z is to invest time and energy in the pursuit of the spiritual, these will most often form personal belief systems that align with 'spirituality' and alternative forms of meaning-making, such as meditation, 'mindfulness', and non-traditional spiritual practices.²⁷

Gen Z and Formative Religious Experiences

There are significant differences between the formative religious experiences of Gen Z and their preceding generations. Developmental involvement in formal religious activities is far less common for young people today than it was even among their Millennial parents. Gen Z who have Christian parents report being much less involved in attending worship services as children and as teens. Less than half of Gen Z (40%) say they attended church (in any format) weekly. This, with less participation in the 'formative' aspects of growing a Christian faith, such as via Sunday School, discipleship classes, or some type of religious education program (excluding those that attended a religious elementary/or other school.)²⁸ At home, generational differences evidence a decline in this generation being consistently exposed to a modeled Christianity; being read stories of a religious nature or with religious characters, and in reading of Scripture at

²⁴ Pew Research Center (2019b). See also Pew Research Center (2019a).

²⁵ Springtide Research Institute (2021). See also Twenge (2018). The notion of Gen Z being "spiritual" but not "religious" is refuted by Twenge, who feels Gen Z is "less spiritual than their elders" (p. 158) and argues with facts that "spirituality has not replaced religion among the young" (p. 158).

²⁶ One of the most significant shifts here is the declining reputation of Christianity, especially among young Americans. See Barna Group (2007). See also Kinneman (2012).

²⁷ Barna Group, in association with Impact 360 Institute. *Gen Z, Vols. 1, 2.* (2021, 2022). At <https://barna.com/resources>.

²⁸ Pew Research Group (2019b).

home.²⁹ I will return to home life and parental involvements below, for further comments.

'The Church' and Gen Z: Goodness of Fit or Misfit?

The Christian church is aware of the challenges and opportunities that Gen Z represents, particularly in discipling a generation that has problems adhering to traditional doctrines and understandings without significant questioning.³⁰ Neither are they bound to believe in "*sola scriptura*" as the overarching doctrinal compass for their Christian faith.³¹ And it's not that the questioning is out of order—every generation sifts through their faith and challenges it: in particular, Gen Z is very sensitized to perceived hypocrisy within the Christian church, especially when such pertain to political affiliations by the church, or how it engages social issues (Murrie 2021).

Gen Z responds best to a Christian faith which is consistent in its applications; is not selective or aligns only with certain political ideologies. Gen Z has discovered the value of *authenticity* and promotes it ('authenticity' being in large part what fuels their self-identification and need for "living out their truth.")³² Yet living out Christian ideals and principles authentically and communally is problematic for many Gen Z'ers based on conflictual elements these have witnessed in churches—the church having persistent problems by surrendering to exclusive socio-political alignments; problems embracing social justice equilaterally; decrying racism, and its membership living up to the moral integrity being taught (Ammons 2024). These become roadblocks to Gen Z in that disjunctions of faith and practice force the question,

How can I be integritous and authentic in this religious climate? (Murrie 2021, 4).

It may be evident after the paragraphs above that Gen Z does not 'fit' as neatly into Christian Protestant denominations and conservative church culture as did prior generations.

Gender and its Troubles

A significant area of challenge needing discussion here brings us back to two of the main issues in this investigative piece: highlighting sex and gender as viewed by contemporary culture and Gen Z, and what has consistently been the Christian church's views.

I've argued elsewhere the church needs a more open and nuanced perspective to deal with this "gender moment" (Gil 2021). This means the church working to retain its foundational doctrinal beliefs about sex and gender while correcting dogma and suppositions that can no longer retain validity in contemporary life (ibid.). Here, my focus is specifically on how Gen Z'ers who may believe in a gender *spectrum*, and also even see physical sex as possibly *nonbinary*, relate to the Church's normative position on both gender and sex. Some may be already questioning or labeling themselves trans *despite being in a Christian faith*.

Vice-versa, how does the Christian church move itself to some level of reconciliation with Gen Z, who may themselves be experiencing gender trouble, or have friends who have transitioned and are accepted by them. Is our Christian anthropology of self and body reconcilable in ways amenable to both the church and Gen Z?

²⁹ Springtide Research Institute (2021).

³⁰ Pew Research Group (2019b).

³¹ *Sola scriptura* is the belief that canonical texts of the Bible are alone the authoritative source for Christian doctrine. Gen Z's values, which often highlight individualism and personal autonomy, can and do affect their interpretation of *sola scriptura*. Gen Z is generally inclined toward a more 'personal spirituality'—meaning a subjective interpretation of their faith, sometimes at the expense of traditional doctrines. (See Barna Group, *Gen Z*, Vols 1, 2.) That said, the broad trend in contemporary Protestantism is to balance interpretations with historical and sociocultural contexts, respecting the integrity of the textual message but integrating interpretive contributions and communal discernments, which many denominations of Protestantism now feel is critical for maintaining a living, robust and informed theology. Generally speaking, Protestant denominations strongly disciple adhering to interpretations of doctrinal truths as *revealed truths*, held as inspired and God-ordained, and thus not 'personally negotiable'. A majority of Protestant faiths subscribe to the *sola scriptura* position, albeit some having their own historical interpretations of the canon alongside it as a guide to faith and practice.

³² Gil, V.E. "Gen Z'ers Are Changing Relationships," *op.cit.*, 1. <http://drvincegil.com/downloads/>.

This section, however, is not intended to discuss all the nuances or the issues involved in contemporary positions of gender or attempt a critique of how the church is handling these. Those, I've already undertaken (Gil 2021). The goal here is to discuss how the church is 'performing' in fostering Christian Gen Z inclusion, particularly for those with gender fluidity or questioning gender.

Body and Identity Concerns

From my own and other's research on Christians with gender dysphoria and gender nonconformity cited earlier, there is evidence some Protestant churches have shifted how these view body and identity. Some are aligning more with the societal (and thus generational) positions on gender fluidity and non-binarism. Any differences adopted are now most evident in *non-denominational (unaffiliated) congregations* of the Protestant faith, and not nearly as much in mainline affiliated denominations. There is virtually no change in views in evangelical/orthodox churches (Smith 2017). Thus, what is seen now as 'permissible', 'factual', 'acceptable', depends on which denomination or branch of Protestant Christianity one is referencing. There is no longer one, dogmatic viewpoint on gender; or stretching it—even binary sex (Lipka and Tevington 2022).³³

Feeling Vulnerable, Ashamed

My experiences with gender questioning or trans young adults who are Christian lead me to believe these feel most vulnerable when their church sees their issues as psychological and/or spiritual *confusion*, and reject in part or all other possible diagnoses (Gil 2021).³⁴ These Gen Z feel blamed for their feelings even when blame hasn't been outright verbalized: they are made to feel ashamed, a shame that urges a change of mind and heart, since their feelings put them "at

odds with God's will," and even "God's image." This, they do hear.³⁵

These churches retain a view of sex as binary; and as corollary, gender identity as also binary and solely stemming from bodily sex. Some congregations make distinctions between *gender nonconformity* and *gender dysphoria*, well and good; but remain adherent to the inappropriateness or sinfulness of any body modification to appease dysphoria (Gil 2021, 137-173). In this view, gender dysphoria is 'psychologically malleable', changeable; thus subject to being corrected through a deeper understanding of the sanctity of the body and God-ownership of it.³⁶ Elsewhere, I have discussed the difficulty of making space in these church environments for intersex born (DSD) individuals as well as those with accurately diagnosed, often historical gender dysphoria—Christians who may have transitioned and feel their transition in fact opened a new life in God for them (Gil 2021).³⁷ The open question which remains is what these more orthodox churches wish for those that question gender, or have in fact transitioned: Discipling them into repentance? Detransitioning? Can such persons be incorporated into the life of the church *as they are, and not as the church presumes they ought to become now*—assuming these desire that inclusion?

Feeling as Not Belonging

It is not uncommon today to find young persons who have 'grown up' in church, have a history with a Christian faith, now *questioning* or outright beginning some level of gender transition, '*rebranding*' of their identity. As stated, these have significantly different experiences negotiating any change while living out their faith in a congregational setting—a lot depending, again, on their church climate. Here are four quotes:

³³ This Pew research is illustrative of the wide difference now existing among Protestant denominations, who show a distinctive fractioning into views other than gender being determined by sex at birth, and the view that gender can be more than binary. Some have also embraced the inclusion of intersex persons, making the binary a threesome: male, intersex, female.

³⁴ See chapters 3 and 7.

³⁵ See Moon (2019). Her original publication appears in Tobin and Moon (2019).

³⁶ As example, see Walker's arguments in Walker (2017).

³⁷ See chapter 3.

Part of me is welcomed in the church and part is not. I get it, but it's hard for me to leave a part of myself outside the church door.

I wondered whether I was stepping off a cliff, transitioning not into living as my true self, but rather dying as a despised and humiliated fool who had compulsively thrown away a perfectly good life . . . Could I find a home in the church? I asked [Reverend XX] 'Are transgender people welcomed here too?' He replied, 'Yes', then I pressed: 'And what about present members?' 'No, we've never met one [a transgender] before.'

I walk with a 'limp' (not literally, but) . . . aware of the ways my religion and culture keep me and others broken and afraid. My roots in Augustinian anthropology mean that any self-respect gets tied up in selfishness and shame. Luther wrestled with this constantly. But not to present myself honestly to the world is to deny the work of my Creator. I am not simply male, I am transmasculine, and that is important and holy to me. My faith gives me the freedom to refuse assimilation. (Anonymous 2017)³⁸

Nobody [in the church] seems to understand the dimensional social spaces within which 'we' who've transitioned have to navigate. That my church didn't provide a more sustaining environment—even if just for the sake of loving a troubled individual through their crisis—is both a testament of loss and a statement of how much work the church needs to still do.³⁹

Theology aside here, the feeling of *not belonging* or *belonging only partially* is as real here as it is with minorities of different sorts; the kind of emotional angst which doesn't let a young adult fully root because they feel at the margins.

When we look at how often church folk interact outside their circle of comfort with *others not alike them*, we find startling statistics: In a 2017 poll by the

Public Religion Research Institute (see References below), most conservative Protestants have not had close contact with *any trans person* (only 9% of them have). Similarly, mainline protestants fare little better (15%). Later polls by Pew Research (2022) up these percentages only slightly, but not significantly, even after five years (Parker et al. 2022). Unfamiliarity can breed misinformation, fear, and contempt.

Addressing theological discrepancies with differing views, interpretations, is of course much more difficult; particularly when clergy members are themselves a different generation than Gen Z and hold orthodox theological positions on sex and gender. Gen Z, as stated, can bring to the table weighty and discrepant views on gender and body sex, often shaped by norms and values of the culture at large—yet nevertheless requiring the attention of the church.

One certainty here: Gen Z is not easily persuaded that their points of view can be incorrect. Americans have been steeped in an "argument culture" (Tannen 2020), but Gen Z doesn't generally like to argue—they've heard enough of that between parents. Gen Z prefers dialogue of the sort that one can have with others (as these do online), that tries to find common ground through accommodation and prioritizes *authenticity* and emotional intelligence. Getting Gen Z to see another viewpoint thus requires clarifications, demonstration of facts that are themselves '*authentic*' and relatable; ultimately, trustworthy as based on some measure of accuracy (Murrie 2021). Religious doctrines, however, seldom accommodate change via dialogical processes and often require acceptance 'by faith' and not reason or even 'scientific accuracy'.⁴⁰

So, how *is* the Protestant Christian church reaching Christian Gen Z'ers and those with gender conflicts?

Ecclesial Culture, Discipling Gen Z, and Home Life (Again)

Significant literature has been recently produced by Christian writers, ministers, counselors on how to best approach, engage, disciple Gen Z.⁴¹ Thematically,

³⁸ Quotes from various sections of the article.

³⁹ Quotation from 'Kyler', a FTM trans, as quoted in Gil (2021, 55).

⁴⁰ For a good discussion on this and related points, see Collins (2006), especially "Part Three: Faith in Science, Faith in God," pp. 145-213.

⁴¹ See Grenell (2023); McKnight (2021); Fritz (2018); Carlson (2022); White (2017); and Kinneman, Matlock and Hawkins (2019).

recommendations for clergy converge around four foci:

- This generation requires a more relational ministry, where young people feel seen, respected, valued, and understood. This means inclusion and affirmations.
- Use of apologetics and education targeted to young persons, shared by a younger generation of ministers who have a solid footing in the faith. Here, methods aim to equip young people with a foundational rationale and grounding for their faith; helping these to navigate their surrounding culture and its pressures; and helping to address tough theological questions such as those of gender ideology and sex. Making theological education personally meaningful through shared stories and engagements become the more satisfying means by which Gen Z learns.
- Digital engagement is a requisite. Gen Z is deeply immersed in social media, indeed, digital culture in general, and thus, it is necessary to incorporate and engage them through social media and online platforms specifically dedicated to the young adult. The successful church has created content that resonates with this generation, that embodies their experiences, and which provides them perspectives that are biblically sound *yet speaks their language*.
- Addressing consistency. This is where the necessity to foster attention, recognize the high level of youth today ‘on the spectrum’, and thus with difficulties not only concentrating, but following through on attendance; tasks done to completion before engaging other tasks; are paramount. From activities to tasks to programmed instruction, all must take into consideration the fault lines of this generation. Additionally, the *authenticity* that Gen Z wishes and tries to live up to requires that the church itself be consistent in how it applies its doctrines and dogmas, treats persons, moves

toward inclusiveness, and addresses the larger social issues. Holism comes to mind here.

Reaching and discipling Gen Z thus require well-thought through and inventive programs, personal and yet communal, combining robust theological education with authentic relational engagement. The church must also address inconsistencies in how it practices its truths. It must be confessionally open to its fault-lines and sincere in its truths. As well, it needs to leverage discipleship for this generation through the use of digital platforms to reach them *consistently*, given that these may, or may not show up to physical services with any regularity.

All well and good . . . but discrepancies remain: Gen Z Christian youth aren’t being convinced so often that religion, church attendance, and “walking in a faith tradition” is generally as necessary as prescribed (Twenge 2018, 157). Where are the inconsistencies?

Who’s Inconsistent: Church Ministries or Parents?

Studies by the Barna Group provide significant insights into this arena—how well are Christian churches engaging Gen Z? And is home life reinforcing their faith or contributing to its faults? If the goal is to impart a vibrant, lasting faith to this next generation, Barna data are *not promising*: Christianity has less of a hold on Gen Z than on any previous age group.⁴²

In these surveys, parental responsibility for passing on the faith is expressed to be of high import (82%), *but parents themselves don’t discuss at home difficult topics of the faith* (80%), or issues with contemporary culture. Only 20% of parents feel comfortable having conversations about difficult topics like sexuality (20%), moral relativism (15%); too many also say they are ill-prepared to address “tough” questions about Christianity, God, the Bible, and social issues (86%) (Barna Group 2018a, 4).

These and other data from Barna studies raise the specter that Millennial and Gen X parents aren’t providing the necessary groundwork, or modeling Christianity *at home* for their Gen Z kids to engage, reflect, and follow the faith of the family; nor negotiate the moral/ethical dilemmas contemporary culture poses for Christian orthodoxy.

⁴² Barna Group (2018a); Barna Group (2018b); and Barna Group (2022a, Vol. 1).

Implications from these and other data reviewed and cited suggest Gen Z Christians may be living out a duality still unresolved: On the one hand, their contemporary culture has engaged acceptance of differences—ethnic, racial, gender, sexual—and they mostly have as well, to the degree that a majority of Gen Z Christians “don’t mind” and often “enjoy” having friends that are *gay, trans, bi, nonbi, questioning*. These are seen as individuated expressions, and none should be denied either acceptance or friendship (or be judged) because of how/who they “are.”

On the flip side, Gen Z Christian teens encounter a religious culture and set of doctrines that most often declines these gender and sex expressions as normative; counts them as “wrong” or “confused,” in need of psychological if not spiritual reorientation and repentance. While their church may be ‘welcoming’, they are not ‘accepting’, or so many teen/young adults feel.

Neither do Gen Z families engage regular discussions of ethical or moral issues that their teen’s generation find acceptable. Gen Z’ers don’t discuss these contradictions with family, *nor do families regularly posit worthy queries that may lead to conversations*, and which may help their teens navigate them.

Is it any wonder, then, parents are surprised when their own son or daughter “outs” with a statement of self-identification that resembles that of their peers? Such, disavowing the compass provided by a faith which may enable answers and empathy while these sort through gender and sex questions . . .

Youth Ministers, Programs, and Parents

A majority of parents and teens agree that youth programs for teens—some weekly, some monthly—do provide a place for communal peer worship, asking of serious questions, and for ferreting out Christianity. However, “*the most common struggle that youth pastors report is [again] parents not prioritizing Gen Z’s spiritual growth*” (Barna Group 2018a, 7).⁴³ Lack of *parental faith engagement*, particularly among those that also do not attend church regularly, creates a disjunction between what the church is trying to

accomplish in teen discipleship and what may be consistencies in the teen’s home.

Youth ministers also underscore that they spend “*too much time dealing with practical life topics* [which should be discussed at home] *and not enough time talking about foundational beliefs*” (Barna Group 2018a, 7).⁴⁴ In addition, ‘mixing’ trying to reach the unchurched youth who do attend, and grow those ‘who have a faith’ is a struggle for many youth pastors (ibid., 7-8).

Barna Group data—which at present are the most thorough, deep-dives on Gen Z and Christianity—demonstrate clear faith fault-lines between parental and Gen Z generations (Barna Group 2022a).

In particular, the admitted unpreparedness of parents to deal with both life issues and tough theological questions with their teens and in the home *is alarming*; Lack of parental follow-through in engaging a lived faith as demonstration for their children is clearly in view.

Youth pastors, while nearly all feeling they are prepared to their best capacity to address worldview topics and biblical theology with the youth these serve, nonetheless feel the acute disjunction between what parents live out, reinforce at home, and what church programs can facilitate. Regardless of the many recommendations in the cited literature on programs tailored to Gen Z, the *one* element which all *leave out*, but which Barna data capture so well, is this rupture between the good wishes of parents, their own faith’s visibility, and how these in fact handle their children’s faith heritage *at home*.

Revising a Christian Anthropology to Include ‘The Other’ and an ‘Embrace’

The Church as a Safe Space.

For those with gender conflicts, the church needs to become a “safe space”—meaning providing opportunities where people struggling with a secret gender identity, those questioning or already identifying as trans, can risk “outing.” Similarly, “safe spaces” where families struggling with children and adolescent issues can risk discussing their situation. Taking the step to open ourselves up to that *other*,

⁴³ Italicized for emphasis here.

⁴⁴ Bracketed phrase, mine.

enfolding him or her, *they or them*, with the same embrace that God enfolded us with generates the capacitation to explore their issues; and this, not in isolation.

The church should foster the kind of social agency capable of creating just, truthful, and peaceful spaces; where dialogue can help bring to individuals that necessary embrace, truths that can reconcile them to themselves and to God. This shapes a cultural climate in the church where people can thrive and not feel they live at the margins or be continually judged. To do this well, I've recommended pastors and clergy teach their congregations *civility* (Gil 2021, 182).

A Christian Anthropology of Self

To speak here as if an old surfer, "*the gnarly truth*" is that our Christian anthropology of self and body seldom makes room for all of us born outside the Garden. Daniel Patterson, in his dense tome *Reforming a Theology of Gender* (2022),⁴⁵ argues we have disordered our theological anthropology by always returning to Eden and the images of Adam and Eve "as paradigms for human beings rather than as progenitors."⁴⁶ And it is in *procreation*, not creation, that we find the troubled bodies of all others. Outside of Eden, our procreated bodies and their genetic composition, propensity for variability over time, *do toss aside* binary bodies and sometimes produce *intersex* offspring.

The eunuchs of old also bring dimensionality to the argument of different bodies, different selves, the result of different conditions and actions. Jesus does not reject the eunuchs, nor Phillip one on their way to Emmaus. Isaiah (56:3-6) prophesied of the eunuch's special place in the yet-to-come for those who follow Yahweh. Moreover, in ancient Talmudic/Rabbinical Judaism we find persons identified and religiously accepted who are *neither male nor female* (*tūmtūm*); or which are *both male and female* (*'andrōgynōs*); some recognized as *feminine men* (*sāris*), while still others acknowledged as *masculine women* (*'aylōnīt*) (Gil 2021, 156-160). These were not ostracized from

Judaic communities; they were accepted, given roles, and not labeled as perversities (ibid., 160-161).

We have therefore work to do on several fronts. One is segregating what's coming from a social move to self-represent and self-identify which conflicts with biology, and which embraces individualization above all else. Another, to recognize what is genuinely nothing more than a *stretching of gender stereotypy*, breaking it free from conventions of the sort that trap men and women into roles not wanted or self-presentations not desired. Yet another, to acknowledge that in God's kingdom there is room for embracing differences—of the type *already embodied*: those born intersex, not as anomalies but as bearers of *imago Dei*. And by extension, room for those that have historically suffered the *disjunction of body and brain* we now understand to be gender dysphoria.⁴⁷ All these require our Christian anthropology to investigate them and respond severally with theological acumen and doctrinal clarity. What needs reformulation now requires action. What needs restatement now requires we voice it authentically and with godly wisdom.

We should embrace those Gen Z'ers who are questioning gender, their natal sex, and help them sort with grace and understanding. If we don't make room for conversations, aren't we disavowing Pauline admonitions of 1 John 3:18-19? A Christian anthropology of self and body which does not make room for the 'embrace' that Miroslav Volf (1996) suggests be part of our welcome of the other, is not worthy of its namesake. No-one should have to leave a part of who they feel they are outside a church door. Can we encourage Gen Z to "Come as you are" (Matthew 11:27-30) and get our hug?

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⁴⁵ I reviewed Patterson's work in *OKHJ*, 7(2), July 2022.

⁴⁶ First stated in this manner by Megan DeFranza (2015, 153).

⁴⁷ How an individual ultimately deals with their dysphoria is not for us to judge; nor is it our duty to try and change their minds under the guise of 'discipleship'. The renewal of any mind is tasked to the person and the Holy Spirit (Rom 2:12; Eph 4:23).

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