

EVANGELIZING THE NEXT GENERATIONS IN A POST-
CHRISTIAN AGE: REACHING GENERATIONS Z AND ALPHA
THROUGH AN ASIAN AMERICAN LENS OF GOSPEL MINISTRY

The Association of Youth Ministry Educators

Dallas, TX, October 25th, 2026

Abstract

How do we reach a generation that has grown up largely without the Christian faith? Growing up in a post-Christian culture, the morality of young people today is more akin to the communal honor-shame cultures of the East than the individualistic guilt-innocence culture of the West. Reaching this generation anew with the gospel requires adapting our missiological principles and learning from faith communities that have a history of functioning as a pilgrim people from the margins. This paper analyzes the current moral framework of Gens Z and Alpha through recent reports, showing their group-oriented view of morality. Evangelizing these generations requires more than simply an updated approach; it requires an entire reconstruction of evangelistic methods to contextually reach them with the gospel. Ministry practitioners can learn evangelistic models from the Asian American Church to reach the next generations with a contextualized gospel and appropriate evangelistic posture.

Key Words: Generation Z/Alpha; Asian American Church; honor-shame gospel; post-Christian mission; evangelism; John Livingston Nevius.

Dr. Clark Fobes IV, D.Miss

Clark is the Associate Pastor at FirstSF, a diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-generational congregation in the heart of San Francisco, and California's oldest Protestant church. He also currently serves as the Editorial Director for the Asian American Christian Collaborative and as a Steering Committee member for the Rooted youth ministry Asian American initiatives, which he helped start in 2015. Being half-Korean, Clark has often written and spoken on the intersection of culture, theology, and missiology. Over his seventeen years in pastoral ministry, he has served in a variety of Asian and multi-ethnic churches, and ministered to students (youth and college) for the entirety of his career. He received his M.Div. from Talbot School of Theology (BIOLA) and his Doctor of Missiology from the Southern Seminary. He is a contributing author to the *Jesus I Wish I Knew in High School*, *Jesus I Wish I Knew in High School: Asian American Edition*, and *God With You* teen devotionals. He lives and ministers in his home city of San Francisco with his wife and two daughters.

Introduction

How can a whole generation be evangelized with the gospel without a basis for universal morality? I remember hearing this comment at a conference from a youth pastor nearly fifteen years ago as Generation Z was coming of age into youth ministry. It's a question I've often heard repeated by colleagues seeking to reach the next generation. If young people today do not have a concept of universal morality, how can we hope to show them the problem of sin and their need for a savior? As many have shown, young people today increasingly base their morality on their own autonomous decisions.¹ This morality of the autonomous self is evidenced in cultural icons of Generations Z and Alpha, such as the once-popular slang "You-do-you," themes of "speaking your truth" prevalent in popular media, and the rise of non-traditional and non-binary sexual ethics in younger generations.² As morality becomes increasingly defined by the individual, it is natural to wonder how the gospel can remain a potent message of salvation. Rather than giving in to despair, however, this shift in moral definition presents the Church with a unique opportunity to evaluate our current evangelistic models and question whether there are more valid—and more biblical—ways to reach the next generation.

Any discussion of evangelism and evangelistic models must also acknowledge the cultural climate Generations Z and Alpha find themselves in.³ As many have written in recent decades, the majority of Western countries find themselves in a "post-Christian" setting. Dutch missiologist Stefan Paas defines this era of post-Christianity as one of "diminishing importance

¹ In his landmark book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, theologian Carl R. Trueman terms the moral convictions of young people today as "expressive individualism," and traces this line of reasoning to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. See Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

² Gallup, "LGBTQ+ Identification in U.S. Now at 7.6%," Gallup.Com, March 13, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/611864/lgbtq-identification.aspx>.

³ While viewpoints differ on the years demarcating the birth cohorts of Generations Z and Alpha, I have adopted Mark McCrindle's definition of Generation Z having been born between 1995–2009, and Generation Alpha between 2010–2024. Mark McCrindle, *Generation Alpha* (Sydney, N.S.W: Headline Home, 2021), 8. McCrindle's demarcations follow the typical fifteen year birth cohorts of previous generations; his research company was also the first to study, and thereby, name, Generation Alpha.

and relevance of Christian beliefs and practices” in culture, and where Christians have become a minority—whether in population, voice, or both—in society.⁴ Despite this shift away from the previous eras of Christendom and post-Christendom, many of our evangelistic models have remained stagnant.⁵ Diagnosing this reality, Paas further notes that the majority of our missionary models “[are] still too implicated in the Christendom experience.”⁶ In his short book, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, written in a much earlier phase of post-Christendom and post-Christianity, Douglas J. Hall similarly argued that the future of Christian mission in the West must not ignore this sociological shift, but rather “give up trying to cling to the Christendom model.”⁷ Reaching the next generation with the gospel, therefore, must call into question both our evangelistic and youth ministry models, in favor of new missional approaches better suited to our post-Christian reality.

In addition to the sociological shift in the Western Church, Generations Z and Alpha have experienced a drastic change compared to previous generations. Alongside the growth of secularism in the West, religious affiliation among younger generations has also declined. While Christianity has declined across all birth cohorts over the last few decades in America, younger generations are reportedly the first to be a majority non-Christian.⁸ Though it is difficult to determine the causal relationship between younger generations’ religious atheism and the advent

⁴ Stefan Paas, “Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences,” *Mission Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2011): 11.

⁵ Paas differentiates the Christendom and post-Christendom eras from post-Christianity as those times in the history of the Western Church in which society as a whole was involved in “massive participation in Christian rites, the propagation of Christian politics, or a Christian culture” (Christendom), or those periods after which Christianity is in the decline from social power and influence, and the church finds itself no longer as the “narrative [to] be assumed,” but as one of many institutions within society (post-Christendom). See Paas, “Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe,” 12, 15.

⁶ Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 101.

⁷ Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 19–20.

⁸ According to the Pew Research 2023–24 Religious Landscape Study, the percentage of American adults identifying as Christian has declined significantly since 2007 (from 78% to 62% of all adults). Amongst U.S. adults born from 1990 to 2006, however, only 46% identify as Christian. Gregory Smith et al., “Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off” (Pew Research Center, 2025), 15.

of post-Christianity in America, what is clear is that younger people today are far less religious—and far less Christian—than any preceding generation.⁹ At the very least, this religious shift among young people reflects the broader shift in the West toward post-Christianity and calls for a critical evaluation of the evangelistic and ministry methods that remain in American Christianity as relics of previous generations.

While Christian circles often highlight the religious diversity of the next generation, young people's racial and ethnic diversity is equally important. Generation Z was tracking to be the most diverse generation in America, with racial statistics placing them around half White.¹⁰ Generation Alpha, however, has now eclipsed this halfway point, becoming America's first majority minority generation.¹¹ Due to the combined factors of continual immigration trends and mixed-race marriages, Generations Z and Alpha are changing the racial and cultural landscape of America as a whole.¹² While research and resources have noted the importance of engaging with diversity among young people today, they often do not proportionately reflect that diversity in their authors, interpretive lenses, and research questions. The majority of religious and statistical reports being conducted about young people continue to be helmed by White-led organizations

⁹ Despite some recent claims that Generation Z is experiencing a small-scale religious revival, and that young people are flattening out the curve of religious decline, the statistical data of young peoples' religious engagement shows that they are still far below the average for older birth cohorts. Ryan Burge, "Is There a Religious Revival Occurring Among Generation Z?," *Graphs About Religion*, June 26, 2025, <https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/is-there-a-religious-revival-occurring>. For claims on religious revival amongst Gen Z, see "New Barna Data: Young Adults Lead a Resurgence in Church Attendance," *Barna Group*, September 2, 2025, <https://www.barna.com/research/young-adults-lead-resurgence-in-church-attendance/>. On the steadying of religious decline, see Gregory Smith, "Religion Holds Steady in America" (Pew Research Center, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.58094/dkgp-6k90>.

¹⁰ The Annie E. Casey Foundation, "What Is Generation Alpha?," The Annie E. Casey Foundation, November 4, 2020, <https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-is-generation-alpha>.

¹¹ According to the 2020 U.S. Census Data. See William H. Frey, "New 2020 Census Data Shows an Aging America and Wide Racial Gaps between Generations," *Brookings*, August 1, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/new-2020-census-data-shows-an-aging-america-and-wide-racial-gaps-between-generations/>.

¹² James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 45–46. White first made this observation based on Census and other research data for Gen Z in 2017. These effects of immigration and multi-racial families have only grown for Gen Alpha.

and researchers.¹³ A brief look at the top books on researching and reaching Generations Z and Alpha shows a list almost entirely made up of White authors.¹⁴ The lack of diversity in research surveys has inevitably led to culturally biased methodologies and interpretive lenses that ignore or overlook alternative anthropological lenses. In Youthscape’s *Translating God* survey, which sought to understand how young people respond to aspects of the Christian faith, they rightly advocate for a contextualization that is spoken “in a language that makes sense to them,” and which takes into consideration the words that “carry ideas that are unique to each culture.”¹⁵ However, the five statements used in their research survey show an understanding of the Christian faith that is still highly Western and individualistic.¹⁶

The rapid decline of Christianity amongst younger generations has caused enough concern to force Christian institutions to recognize the need to reach the next generation, as the future of Christianity in America remains uncertain. Where ministry to youth was once viewed as secondary to “real ministry” to adults, church leaders today have put tremendous resources and energy towards reaching young people. As positive as this endeavor is, the lack of diversity in

¹³ Reports on generational studies from Christian organizations are generally led by Barna Group, Fuller Youth Institute, YoungLife, Springtide, and OneHope—all of which are organizations with a White majority in leadership positions.

¹⁴ See Dave Boden, *Raising Gen Alpha: Helping Kids Navigate Everything from Anxiety to AI* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2026); Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024); Tanita Tualla Maddox and Chap Clark, *What Gen Z Really Wants to Know About God: Seven Questions About Life and Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2025); Matt Markins, Mike Handler, and Sam Luce, *Forming Faith: Discipling the Next Generation in a Post-Christian Culture* (Chicago: Moody, 2024); Mark McCrindle, *Generation Alpha* (Sydney, N.S.W: Headline Home, 2021); Sean McDowell, J. Warner Wallace, and Foles Nick, *So the Next Generation Will Know: Preparing Young Christians for a Challenging World* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2019); Tim McKnight, *Engaging Generation Z: Raising the Bar for Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2021); Rebecca McLaughlin, *10 Questions Every Teen Should Ask (and Answer) about Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021); Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Raymond Chang, *Future-Focused Church: Leading through Change, Engaging the Next Generation, and Building a More Diverse Tomorrow* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2025); Shane Pruitt and Shelly Melia, *Reaching Generation Alpha: A Ministry Guide for Discipling the Church Beyond the Screen* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Books, 2026); Thom S. Rainer and Ryan P. Burge, *The Anxious Generation Goes to Church: What the Research Says about What Younger Generations Need* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2025); Paul David Tripp, *12 Truths Every Teen Can Trust: Core Beliefs of the Christian Faith That Will Change Your Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025); James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017).

¹⁵ Chris Curtis and Myles MacBean, ‘Feel-Good’ News, *Translating God*, Part 2 (Youthscape Centre for Research, 2024), 28.

¹⁶ Curtis and MacBean, ‘Feel-Good’ News, 29–30.

both the research and resources used to reach the next generation has left a gap in our evangelistic strategies. Though churches and Christian institutions recognize the need to evolve beyond the Christendom models we've inherited, the American Church as a whole has yet to acknowledge the racial deficit in those models when it comes to reaching young people. If we hope to reach a new generation that is as ethnically diverse as it is religiously—being a generation made up of both Christians and Whites as the minority—then our thought leadership and research would greatly benefit from reflecting that diversity.

Reaching this “majority minority” generation, therefore, should employ those segments of the Christian church in America that have already learned to function as a minority people. While a variety of perspectives may prove helpful in this regard, one I believe to be particularly relevant to evangelizing the next generation is that of the Asian American Church. On the one hand, Asian Americans have often been labeled as “perpetual foreigners” in America, despite our long history of settlement and citizenship on our nation’s coasts.¹⁷ This perpetual foreignness has forced Asian Americans as a whole, and the Asian American Church specifically, to learn to function as an exile people in America. Even more relevant to reaching young people today is the similarity between Asian American culture and the worldview of the next generation. Analyzing the research of young people today reveals a cultural belief system that is reminiscent of the communal, honor-shame paradigm of Eastern cultures, one which Asian Christians are uniquely poised to address for future evangelistic mission to the next generation in the West. In my effort to propose a methodology for reaching and evangelizing the next generation, I will show how young people today exhibit a cultural worldview akin to an Eastern, honor-shame one, after which I will offer some evangelistic solutions from the experience of Asian American Christianity.

¹⁷ Michael Luo traces the history of this concept through Chinese immigration into America in the 1800s. See Michael Luo, *Strangers in the Land: Exclusion, Belonging, and the Epic Story of the Chinese in America* (New York: Vintage, 2025). As a term, “perpetual foreigner” first appeared in Frank H. Wu’s, *Yellow*, in his chapter titled, “The Perpetual Foreigner.” See Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 79–130.

Understanding the Next Generation through a Communal, Honor-Shame Paradigm

One key defining trait of younger generations has been hyper-individualism. For Generation Z especially, individual expression and autonomous freedom are often highlighted as the primary hurdles to reaching young people with the gospel.¹⁸ Proponents of this view often cite as evidence the drastic increase in the percentage of young people identifying as LGBTQ+ compared to previous generations.¹⁹ Along with this sexual diversity, young people's proximity to ethnic and religious diversity has made them far more inclusive, affirming, and compassionate toward those unlike them. Their access to a wealth of information and the highly personalized algorithms of smartphones and social media have further fueled this curation of the autonomous image.²⁰ These factors have purportedly made them the most highly individualistic generation yet. Analyzing the worldview of Generation Alpha in their book, *Reaching Generation Alpha*, authors Shane Pruitt and Shelly Melia argue that compared with previous generations, young people today have shifted from a "'we' (collectivism) to 'me' (individualism)" in such a way that they "[have] been taught to follow their heart and believe in themselves, almost regardless of how their decisions impact other people."²¹ Reaching the next generation, by this measure, must start with revealing the lostness of radical individualism and showing young people the destructive patterns of charting their own, unhindered paths.²²

Elements of this hyper-individualism are certainly evident in younger generations, as teens in recent years have had far more opportunities to differentiate themselves as unique individuals. From social media to online gaming, teens today have a multitude of avenues for

¹⁸ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 48.

¹⁹ PRRI, *A Political and Cultural Glimpse into America's Future* (Washington, D.C., 2023), 8. According to a 2023 Gallup poll, more than 22% of Gen Z identify as LGBTQ, more than double that of Millennials. Gallup, "LGBTQ+ Identification in U.S. Now at 7.6%."

²⁰ Boden, *Raising Gen Alpha*, 94.

²¹ Pruitt and Melia, *Reaching Generation Alpha*, 20.

²² Pruitt and Melia put this forward as their primary suggestion in reaching Generation Alpha, especially when it comes to sexuality and gender. Pruitt and Melia, *Reaching Generation Alpha*, 59–63.

curating whole online images and personas.²³ However, to conclude that all these signs point to a radical individualism in the next generation may be more a result of older generations imposing their own hyper-individualistic views upon them. For instance, after bemoaning the shift towards individualism in younger generations, Pruitt and Melia warn that this individualism “has had inroads into the church as well, where individual worship styles and personal convenience have replaced conventional/sacrificial consistency in attendance.”²⁴ The problem with this conclusion is that it blames Generation Alpha, a generation just entering its teenage years, for the individualism in churches led by Millennial, Gen X, and Boomer leaders. James Emery White rightly notes, “Generation Z is the cultural product of decisions made by earlier generations as opposed to their own.”²⁵ Though young people may be growing up in a highly individualistic world, it has largely been crafted by their highly individualistic predecessors. Just as young people are not asking the same theological or apologetic questions older generations once did, so we should also be slow to assume they are interpreting and internalizing the signs of the times the same way older generations are.²⁶

So how are the next generations interpreting our world and crafting their worldview? Surveys on morality might support the claim that they are a highly autonomous generation, driven solely by a desire to recreate their image and the world they live in on their own terms. A recent Barna study found that 42% of Gen Alpha teens believe that right and wrong are decided by the individual. However, when asked about absolute morality, 52% responded that right and wrong are universal.²⁷ Barna’s study on Gen Z corroborates this complexity in young people’s moral views. In their seven-year-long study, Barna Group found that, compared to 2016, teens in

²³ Boden, *Raising Gen Alpha*, 94.

²⁴ Pruitt and Melia, *Reaching Generation Alpha*, 20.

²⁵ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 47.

²⁶ Jared Dodson, “Gen Z Isn’t Asking Why Bad Things Happen to Good People,” *Christianity Today*, May 13, 2026, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2026/05/gen-z-why-bad-things-happen-to-good-people-theodicy-evil-suffering/>.

²⁷ Barna Group, *Reimagining Ministry for Gen Alpha* (2026), 53.

2023 were more likely to disagree with the statement, “What is morally right and wrong changes over time based on society” (20% in 2016 vs. 27% in 2023).²⁸ Though a majority still agree with this statement, the increase suggests a moral landscape that may be more complex than once thought.²⁹ The next generation still sees individual choice as a key factor in morality, but growing evidence suggests morality is being shaped around certain absolutes—just not the traditional ones set by a universal law or religious standard.

Group-Morality and “Cancel Culture”

While the West has traditionally defined morality through religious ethics or an absolute God, young people are growing up as America’s first fully post-Christian generations.³⁰ This does not mean, however, that Gens Z and Alpha have no moral standards other than individual freedom, as some have suggested. Without a religious benchmark to measure right and wrong, young people's moral boundaries seem to have shifted to be defined by their social group. The increased awareness of diversity of younger generations—and American society at large—has led to a “cancel culture” in which transgressors are outed by online sleuths, doxxed, and publicly condemned online.³¹ Many of these cases have led to real-world ramifications of job loss, relational ostracism, and even suicide.³² If younger generations define morality only by individual standards, then “cancel” shouldn't be a “culture” today.

²⁸ Barna Group, *Gen Z: Vol 3*, 76.

²⁹ Commenting on this split in moral views, the 2023 Barna report noted: “Gen Z’s worldview seesaws between the individual and the universal. Their famously ‘yes, and’ approach to serious conversations about beliefs still leaves room for ‘yes, but’ exceptions.” Barna Group, *Gen Z: Vol 3*, 79.

³⁰ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 49.

³¹ Abdu Murray, “Canceled: How the Eastern Honor-Shame Mentality Traveled West,” *The Gospel Coalition*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/canceled-understanding-eastern-honor-shame/>. Murray gives a number of examples of how cancel culture leads to retribution against individuals, even for past transgressions that occurred years ago.

³² Curtis Lancaster, “Alexander Rogers: Student Suicide Prompts ‘cancel Culture’ Warning,” BBC, November 14, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdd0gyjlqyvo>.

Cancel culture resembles the group-oriented morality upheld in honor-shame cultures. American anthropologist Ruth Benedict first identified the difference between “shame cultures” and “guilt cultures” in her book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. Though Benedict is prone to the same reductionist and morally biased errors as many Western authors seeking to understand Eastern cultures, her work helped highlight differences in moral grounding between East and West.³³ In guilt cultures, morality relies upon “an internalized conviction of sin” based on a moral law. By contrast, shame cultures “rely on external sanctions for good behavior.”³⁴ In Western cultures, morality is defined by a codified law, and one is found guilty or innocent based upon that law. In Eastern cultures, however, morality is defined by a set of social codes established by the group. Failure to uphold those social codes results in shame from one’s group, even to the point of being ostracized—canceled—and cast out. Fascinatingly, Benedict noted, even in the 1940s, that “shame is an increasingly heavy burden in the United States and guilt is less extremely felt than in earlier generations.”³⁵ She briefly surmised that America had been losing its moral footing because, as a nation, it had not prepared to rely on social norms to uphold morality and was still relying on citizens’ internal conviction of sin to uphold social

³³ Though honor and shame have become popular topics of study for anthropologists and missiologists since Benedict, many—if not all—works have been written by Westerners seeking to understand Eastern culture, inevitably leading to a variety of misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The only contemporary work on shame from a Christian Eastern author is by Asian American, Toni Kim. Toni Kim, *Shame Redeemed: Learning to Live in Christ’s Freedom* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Formatio, 2026). For works by Western authors, see Mischke Flanders, *Honor, Shame, and the Gospel: Reframing Our Message and Ministry* (Littleton, CO: William Carey Library, 2020); Jayson Georges, *The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures* (Timē Press, 2014); Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016); Roland Muller, *Honor and Shame: Unlocking the Door*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia.: Xlibris, 2001); E. Randolph Richards and Richard James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020); and Brad Vaughn, *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul’s Message and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

³⁴ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, 1st ed. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1947), 223. The United States government commissioned Benedict to understand Japan as a people and a nation while the two countries were at war. Her work is noble in that she seeks to help Westerners understand the culture differences of the Japanese.

³⁵ Benedict, *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 223.

order.³⁶ Even eighty years ago, Benedict recognized the need to understand morality through a public, communal order dictated by honor and shame.

Cancel culture also points to the strong desire for retributive justice evidenced in the next generation. Though most Gen Zers still believe that morality is determined by the individual, they increasingly feel that justice is needed. In Barna's 2022 study on Gen Z and their impact in the world, researchers found that the majority of teens were justice-motivated (75%) and believed in the importance of protecting the well-being, fairness, and equity of all people.³⁷ The slight increase in belief in a universal morality among young people can also arguably be attributed to increased awareness and visibility of injustice in the world. As much as readily available access to information through smartphones and the internet has increased anxiety and mental health issues, it has also shed light on injustices that have often gone unnoticed by Western eyes.³⁸ As a result, some have labeled Generation Z as "Generation Judgment." The increased attention to worldwide injustices has given them a "moral consciousness, upholding safety, valuing diversity and expecting accountability where injustice is perpetuated." However, this moral consciousness has also been paired with an increased judgment towards both self and others, leading them to be "very cautious about their speech, fearing that expressing something wrongly will lead them to be judged or cancelled."³⁹

The heightened exposure to injustices likely also explains the high value of empathy and compassion among young people today.⁴⁰ Writing on younger generations' desire for justice,

³⁶ Benedict, *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, 223–24.

³⁷ Barna Group, *The Open Generation Vol. 3: How Teens Around the World Can Make an Impact* (2022), 16,24.

³⁸ Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024), 38–39: "If world events played a role in the current mental health crisis, it's not because world events suddenly got worse around 2012; it's because world events were suddenly being pumped into adolescents' brains through their phones, not as news stories, but as social media posts in which other young people expressed their emotions about a collapsing world, emotions that are contagious on social media." See also Springtide Research Institute, *Navigating Injustice* (2023).

³⁹ Lucie Moore, *Troubling Jesus*, Translating God, Part 3 (Youthscape Centre for Research, 2026), 69.

⁴⁰ YoungLife, *RELATE: Connecting with the Next Generation* (2026), 33–35. Empathy is one of the top priorities for Gen Alpha.

Gen Z Bible professor Jared Dodson notes that young people are no longer asking the popular Gen X and Millennial question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Rather, they are asking quite the opposite: “Why don’t bad things happen to bad people?”⁴¹ Their desire for justice to prevail in the world reveals a morality that is becoming more fixed and universal.

Honor-Shame and the Desire for Belonging

If cancel culture reveals the height of moral corruption by cutting off an individual from the group, then the opposite must also be true: the height of moral virtue is revealed through one’s honor and belonging *to* the group. Belonging is a core desire for humanity as a whole; but in honor-shame cultures, it is intrinsically tied not just to one’s identity, but to one’s moral standing. Just as cancel culture shows that exclusion equates to being deemed unworthy and morally evil, so too does belonging mean not just being included, but being deemed worthy and virtuous. Similar to honor-shame cultures where morality is tied to what the group says about an individual, for young people today, their moral standing is closely tied to their public approval. In discussing cancel culture, one teenager in Youthscape’s *Translating God* project expresses this connection between morality and social status. “[How] you are treated depends on who your friends are, and that social status can protect you from the stigma of some kind of moral failure.”⁴² While traditional honor-shame cultures differ from the shame culture young people exhibit online, our modern form of honor is made tangible through likes and follows.⁴³ The more likes and followers a person has, the more honored and trusted they become within the

⁴¹ Dodson, “Gen Z Isn’t Asking Why Bad Things Happen to Good People.”

⁴² Moore, *Troubling Jesus*, 45. The full quotation of the teenager is as follows: “If you do something bad say if you used to bully someone, if you were a lower level in society, just to put it stereotypically, then you would still be held accountable for that years later. If you are more popular or whatever, then you wouldn’t necessarily be held accountable for it because you’re seen as above everyone else, you’re seen as better. It’s less extreme as well.”

⁴³ Andy Crouch, “The Return of Shame,” *Christianity Today*, March 10, 2015, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2015/03/andy-crouch-gospel-in-age-of-public-shame/>. Crouch notes that the shame culture of young people today is different from traditional cultures by being a “fame-shame” culture. However, he also notes that this online measure of one’s value is “reconnecting us to one of the most striking features of cultures we consider traditional and premodern: the importance of shame.”

tribe or community. Individual members can either withhold or bestow honor on others through these digital tools. Even cancel culture, as devastating as it can be, is ultimately a pursuit of purifying and maintaining the honor of the group. Allowing a transgressor of the group's social codes to go unpunished devalues the honor of the whole group; canceling, therefore, is necessary to uphold the group's moral boundaries. Belonging, then, becomes the key determinant of one's public honor and status.

Belonging has seemingly always shaped teenage social status. From the popular "Plastics" in *Mean Girls* to the near-celebrity status of the high school football team in *Friday Night Lights*, the group has often been at the center of status shaping for young people. For a generation that is desperate for belonging, though, the group has subsumed more than simply status. Belonging to a group is now an ultimate pursuit for Gens Z and Alpha, one that can provide security and safety in a volatile world. Their desire for belonging is in large part due to the loneliness epidemic experienced by young people today. In Springtide's 2020 study on *Belonging*, researchers found that nearly 40% of 13- to 25-year-olds felt lonely, left out, and with no one to talk to.⁴⁴ While it seems logical to connect this loneliness with technology and social media usage, Springtide found no significant differences in loneliness between heavy social media users and those who never use it.⁴⁵ Despite this, technology undoubtedly has had an effect on Gen Z's and Gen Alpha's ability to relate to one another. However, it may not be as simple as concluding that technology has stunted relational growth, thereby creating loneliness due to an emotional deficiency in young people.

Though young people today are lonelier than ever, they are also more connected than ever.⁴⁶ Through smartphones, social media, and online gaming, young people—especially Gen Alpha—are growing up in a hyperconnected world in which they are constantly in

⁴⁴ Springtide, *Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation* (2020), 16–18.

⁴⁵ Springtide, *Belonging*, 8.

⁴⁶ Boden, *Raising Gen Alpha*, 83ff.

communication with friends and family.⁴⁷ The belonging teens desire, therefore, is not simply to be connected to others, but to belong in such a way that they are fully seen and known.⁴⁸ As much as technology may pose a significant barrier to this type of belonging, young people often report fear of judgment as their greatest relational fear.⁴⁹ This fear of being known yet accepted leads to a hesitancy in seeking out belonging. In YoungLife's 2026 *RELATE* report, Gen Alpha teens noted that genuine belonging "is conditional or earned," especially in a culture of "intense pressure surrounding social visibility, comparison, and validation."⁵⁰ For this reason, 63% of teens still feel more comfortable expressing themselves in online spaces than in real life, despite 64% saying that they prefer face-to-face over digital connections.⁵¹

How do we account for these seemingly contradictory yearnings and experiences of Gens Z and Alpha? Again, it may be too simple to conclude that, having been relationally stunted by their smartphones, they lack the tools to overcome these self-imposed barriers. However, belonging seems to be at the heart of online interaction. Much like in honor-shame cultures, finding belonging is a complex endeavor, dependent not just upon individual effort, but group invitation and acceptance. A fear of rejection can hinder any attempts to pursue relationships due to the high risk of incurring shame. As much as young people today desire to be accepted for who they are in their own individual expressions, the desire to belong seems to be stronger. One teen in YoungLife's report shared this notable reality: "'We really care how we're perceived . . . but we act like we don't.'"⁵² As much as they wish to be known and accepted "irl" ("in real

⁴⁷ Pruitt and Melia, *Reaching Generation Alpha*, 93.

⁴⁸ Springtide, *Belonging*, 63.

⁴⁹ Springtide, *Belonging*, 68–69. YoungLife's *RELATE* report showed that for teens globally, empathy, attentiveness, and non-judgment were the most important factors in building relational trust. YoungLife, *RELATE*, 33–34.

⁵⁰ YoungLife, *RELATE*, 14.

⁵¹ YoungLife, *RELATE*, 35–36, 5.

⁵² YoungLife, *RELATE*, 14.

life”), digital spaces allow them to grasp at this belonging, even if it is only a shadow of the in-person belonging they hope for.

Belonging, therefore, is not just a pursuit of relational connection, but relational safety, trust, and the honor it brings to the individual. This honor may be public recognition, but often it is the internalized honor of feeling dignified and worthy enough to belong.⁵³ Even the high pursuit of belonging itself is a sign of a more group-oriented shift in younger generations. Finding community has already been a hallmark of our highly individualistic culture, as signs for community building can be found on nearly every business sign on urban streets.⁵⁴ For Gens Z and Alpha, however, their high priority for relational safety seems to trump all. Gen Alpha teens are especially more risk-averse than previous generations, and find themselves equally content staying home in the security of their homes and with their families.⁵⁵ Young people today are arguably more security-driven because they desire, to a greater extent, the relational safety belonging offers. Similar to those in honor-shame cultures, teens today understand that belonging to a group requires a great deal of trust and vulnerability. However, once that belonging has been found, the group provides the safety and security to enable the individual to thrive in a volatile world.

The Rise of Shame in the West

The concept of our culture at large, and teens especially, embracing more of an honor-shame moral worldview is not a new one. For the past decade, a select few missiologists and

⁵³ YoungLife’s report connects these ideas of belonging and being worthy of being loved. YoungLife, *RELATE*, 12.

⁵⁴ In my own city of San Francisco, such signs can be found on nearly every type of storefront, from gyms to golf-clinics, to health spas, and even taprooms.

⁵⁵ Reports on Gen Alpha almost unanimously show that Gen Alpha finds their greatest relational trust and safety in the home. See Fuller Youth Institute, *The FYI Report on Gen Alpha & Faith, Part 1: Insights on an Emerging Generation* (Fuller Theological Seminary, 2026), 9,13; Barna, *Gen Alpha*, 19–21; YoungLife, *RELATE*, 13; OneHope, *Gen Alpha: The Next Generation* (2024), 20–21;

researchers have noticed this cultural shift happening in the West.⁵⁶ Writing at HonorShame.com, Jayson Georges noted in 2017 that “shame is becoming a more dominant factor among younger people,” with teens reporting a moral shame score 38% greater than those in their 60s.⁵⁷ A 2016 Lifeway Research study similarly found that between guilt, shame, and fear, most Americans reported that shame was the dominant emotion they seek to avoid (38%, compared with 31% for guilt, and 30% for fear).⁵⁸ Andy Crouch also discusses this rise in shame, both in his 2015 *Christianity Today* article, “The Return of Shame,” and more recently on the *PostEverything* podcast in 2024.⁵⁹ Crouch notes that shame and honor have become the new measure of morality in our culture, where what the group thinks of a person is more important than their own perceived individual morality. This replacement of a guilt-innocence morality is evidenced in how public personas can be convicted of legal crimes, yet still praised in public by their groups and tribes. Crouch points to President Donald Trump as a supreme example: despite being convicted of various felonies and accused of various others, he remains untouchable by his loyal followers.⁶⁰ Crouch also connects the “[yearning] to feel included in the group,” the fragility of society, and the need to find protection with the honor-shame signs of our society.⁶¹ Due to the complex amalgam of factors of the rise of secularism, the decline of guilt-innocence morality, and the influence of social media, our culture as a whole in America seems to be creeping further

⁵⁶ Though online articles and podcasts abound concerning the topic, little to no scholarly work has been done in this regard, and the majority of sociological research has overlooked this aspect of the next generations.

⁵⁷ Georges bases his data off his own culture test that is available via his website. Jayson Georges, “The Rise of Shame in America,” *Honor Shame*, February 8, 2017, <https://honorshame.com/rise-shame-america/>.

⁵⁸ Lifeway Research, *American Views on Honor and Shame* (2016), 4.

⁵⁹ Crouch, “The Return of Shame”; Brad Edwards and John Houmes, “How Christians Are Formed By Power with Andy Crouch,” episode 32, *PostEverything*, April 10, 2024, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/how-christians-are-formed-by-power-with-andy-crouch/id1676174977?i=1000652004394>.

⁶⁰ Andy Crouch, in Edwards and Houmes, “How Christians Are Formed By Power,” *PostEverything*. Trump has himself noted that his followers would remain loyal to him even if he “[said] the stupidest things.” Mark Joyella, “Trump Tells Supporters: ‘I Could Say The Stupidest Things And You’d Clap,’” *Forbes*, October 10, 2026, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markjoyella/2026/10/10/trump-tells-supporters-i-could-say-the-stupidest-things-and-you-d-clap/>.

⁶¹ Crouch, “The Return of Shame.”

towards an honor-shame culture in which morality is dictated by tribes and social groups, and belonging has become the prime currency of honor.

What cultural commentators have observed in America at large, ministry practitioners to youth have observed in particular for Gens Z and Alpha. Connecting the gospel to young people through an individualistic, guilt-innocence paradigm most common in the West no longer seems relevant or effective. And though much of the church has asked how to evangelize the next generation, it is Youth Ministers that seem to have noticed the need to shift our gospel paradigm towards an honor-shame one.⁶² Thus, it behooves the broader American Church to give ear to the segment of the global church that has already learned to contextualize and internalize the gospel into this honor-shame lens, namely, the Asian American Church. Observing younger generations' shift toward an honor-shame morality, Youth Pastor Sean Dotson calls for such a posture of learning from Asian Christianity: "It is time we learn from our brothers and sisters worldwide and use this ancient tool that our Asian brothers and sisters have been using for a while."⁶³ The following section examines some practices in Asian Christianity that can help the post-Christian church in the West reach and evangelize the next generations.

Reaching the Next Generation Through an Asian American Christian Lens

Christianity has existed in Asian countries and diaspora communities for centuries. From the witness of the Apostle Thomas in India at the inception of the Christian faith, to the

⁶² It is also noteworthy that the majority of Youth Ministry practitioners that have observed this shift are from, or have worked within, Asian American contexts. See "How to Share the Gospel with a Generation That Doesn't Care About Heaven Feat. Josh Chen," *City Gospel Movements*, November 5, 2019, <https://citygospelmovements.org/resource/chen/>; Sean Dotson, "Preaching the Gospel to an Honor/Shame Generation," *Youth Pastor Theologian*, November 1, 2023, <https://www.youthpastortheologian.com/blog/preaching-the-gospel-to-an-honorshame-generation>; Clark Fobes, "Ministry to Modern Youth: Challenges and Opportunities," *The Gospel Coalition*, August 9, 2024, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/tgc-podcast/ministry-modern-child/>; Tina Griffin, "Honor-Shame Dynamic of Asian American Customs and Gen Z Cancel-Culture - Kevin Yi," episode 862, *The Counter Culture Mom Show with Tina Griffin*, August 5, 2025, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/honor-shame-dynamic-of-asian-american-customs-and-gen/id1512805826?i=1000720952116>; Jay Holland, "Sharing the Gospel with Generation Z with Josh Leucht," episode 317, *Let's Parent On Purpose*, February 13, 2023, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ep-317-sharing-the-gospel-with-generation-z-with-josh-leucht/id1190973394?i=1000600368844>;

⁶³ Dotson, "Preaching the Gospel to an Honor/Shame Generation."

Nestorians in China in the eighth century, and the more recent involvement of Baptist and Protestant missionaries throughout Asia in the 1800s, Asian Christianity is far from its infancy.⁶⁴ Christianity is older in Asia than it is in North America.⁶⁵ Despite the longevity of Christianity in Asian communities, Asian theology has remained underdeveloped; even where it has developed, it has often been subordinate to Western theologies.⁶⁶ As culture changes, so theology should not remain static, but continually adapt within its setting—not to fundamentally rewrite or change Christian theology, but to contextually express theological concepts to a new culture, and develop new theologies where old ones have been deficient.

Discussing this theological process, anthropologist Charles H. Kraft argues for a dynamic relationship of theology to culture:

All theologizing is culture-bound interpretation and communication of God's revelation. Good theologizing is Spirit-led, even though culture-bound. In spite of the impression often given that theology is an absolute, once-for-all kind of thing, theologizing is a dynamic, continuous process. Static, once-for-all theologies are dead theologies.⁶⁷

Applying this same principle of dynamic theology to his ministry context in Korea, former Presbyterian (PCA) missionary and professor Harvie M. Conn argued for the need to contextualize the gospel into Confucian language: “theology must be biblical, but it need not be borrowed. Even evangelical theology will have a different look when it is shaped in a context

⁶⁴ See Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Volume I: Beginnings to 1500 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), especially 289–91 for the Nestorian beginnings of Christianity in China.

⁶⁵ Allan Varghese Meloottu, “Tale of Transregional Interactions to a Polyvalent Christianity: A Brief History of Christianity in South India,” in *Christians and Christianity in India Today: Historical, Theological, and Missiological Assessments*, ed. Lalsangkima Pachuau and Allan Varghese Meloottu (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2024), 5–7.

⁶⁶ Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 11. “...despite the dramatic growth of the Majority World church, the center of theological education and Christian scholarship remains in the Western world. In fact, despite the growth of Majority World Christianity and the corresponding decline in the vitality of Western Christianity, there remains the view that Western theological writings and reflection somehow represent normative, universal Christian reflection whereas non-Western theology is more localized, ad hoc, and contextual.”

⁶⁷ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 291.

where Confucius, not Kant, is king.”⁶⁸ This contextual approach to theology is not just necessary on the mission field, but within every culture the gospel hopes to take root. Contextualizing both gospel and theology, therefore, should be an ongoing endeavor of both missionary and minister seeking to reach their culture and place.

In recent years, Asian American theologies have finally been more widely developed to serve the Asian diaspora church. From foundational introductions like Daniel D. Lee’s *Doing Asian American Theology*, to Janette Ok’s Asian American hermeneutical contributions in *The New Testament In Color* commentary, to specific Asian American systematic theologies like Sang Hyun Lee’s *From a Liminal Place*, Asian Americans seem to have finally found a voice in the Christian academy.⁶⁹ Though still limited, the development of Asian American theology is not solely a self-serving endeavor for the Asian American Church. Given the shifting cultural lens of the next generations, Asian American theology is poised to serve the broader American Church in reaching young people today. Though Asian American Christianity has a multitude of insights to offer the broader church, three evangelistic responses are particularly helpful to address the cultural shifts mentioned above: 1) an honor-shame contextual gospel; 2) a humble evangelistic posture; and 3) the embodied witness of community.

Proclaiming an Honor-Shame Contextual Gospel

If reaching the next generations with the gospel requires appealing to their moral conscience, then contextualization requires crafting new strategies for effectively communicating the gospel into communal, honor-shame language. Evangelists to Gen Z, even those from non-

⁶⁸ Harvie Conn, “Contextual Theologies: The Problem of Agendas,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 1 (1990): 63.

⁶⁹ Daniel D. Lee, *Doing Asian American Theology: A Contextual Framework for Faith and Practice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022); Esau McCaulley, Janette H. Ok, et al., eds., *The New Testament in Color: A Multiethnic Bible Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2024); Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

Asian backgrounds, have been calling for such contextualization in recent years.⁷⁰ It is those from Asian backgrounds, however, that have noticed the cultural nearness between their ethnic heritage and younger generations. Reflecting on this personal connection, Cru campus minister Josh Chen spoke in a 2019 interview:

We spent 10 years in Asian-American ministry sharing the Gospel in the light of shame and honor because that is the language that resonates with Asian-Americans. [My wife] was speaking to 1,000 college students about sharing the Gospel considering shame and honor and afterwards staff and students were telling her, “You are putting words to how I have felt all my life.”⁷¹

Toni Kim, in her book *Shame Redeemed*, similarly notes how shame has become pervasive in American culture: “Shame is now everywhere, because it is the controlling force in the [sic] social media cancel culture. Scrolling through beautiful, picture-perfect lives breeds in us a deep sense of our inadequacies. We see posts of our friends doing things together, and we feel shame for not being invited.”⁷² Kim’s book is a pastoral treatise on how the gospel addresses this shame embedded in her Asian American heritage, now prevalent in American culture at large.

Despite these calls of Asian American Christians, White Christianity remains hesitant to adopt a contextual message for the core of the Christian faith. In his largely helpful volume on evangelism, *Tell the Truth*, Will Metzger vehemently opposes contextualizing sin into social categories. Citing J. I. Packer, Metzger argues that sin is an “[awareness] of a wrong relationship with God—not just with self or others, or a general sense of need,” and that true conviction of sin is “not psychological or merely sociological,” but “a sense of guilt for particular wrongs.”⁷³ Written first in 1981, Metzger’s narrow view of the gospel exposes his own post-Christendom, Western entrenched view of Christianity. Though sin is, ultimately, a transgression against God

⁷⁰ See Judah Robinson, “Three Key Strategies for Effectively Reaching Gen Z,” *Thrive*, January 24, 2024, <https://thrive.asburyseminary.edu/article/three-key-strategies-for-effectively-reaching-gen-z/>.

⁷¹ Josh Chen in “How to Share the Gospel with a Generation that Doesn't Care About Heaven,” *City Gospel Movements*. Readers should be aware that Chen cites a City Cru study to corroborate his anecdotal evidence, however, I was unable to locate this study or find more information concerning it.

⁷² Kim, *Shame Redeemed*, 9.

⁷³ Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel Wholly by Grace Communicated Truthfully & Lovingly*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2013), 113–14.

and his law, the missiologist goal throughout history has always been to use the law of the land to turn peoples' awareness of their social sin to sin against God.

Apart from the unique theocratic situations of Israel and Islamic states, societies have never viewed morality solely based upon divinely revealed law. Even in the Christendom age of the West, societal laws encompassed more than just the Decalogue, and were determined by a set of agreed-upon laws. The job of the Christian was to use those laws to lead the non-believer to a recognition of sin before God, not to reject any sense of societal guilt as inadequate for evangelism. Metzger's enculturated view of evangelism unfortunately follows in the footsteps of colonial-era missionaries who too often saw conversion as merely adopting the foreign garb of Christianity—both literal and theological.⁷⁴ Failure to contextualize the gospel in the moral framework of the present culture is a failure to allow the gospel an opportunity to take root at all.

Even if we continued to be faithful to these outdated forms of evangelism, how could we lead a whole generation to accept Jesus as a savior if they have not accepted the fundamental concept of sin?⁷⁵ As missiologist Paul G. Hiebert often noted, missionaries and ministers must learn to be “human exegetes” in order to get people beyond mere behavior or belief, but to experience the transformative power of the gospel. “The task of the mission theologian is to translate and communicate the gospel in the language and culture of real people in the particularities of their lives so that it may transform them, their societies, and their cultures into what God intends for them to be.”⁷⁶ Proclaiming a contextualized, honor-shame gospel, then, is the first foundational step in evangelizing the next generations.

⁷⁴ Paul G. Hiebert, “The Missiologist Implications of an Epistemological Shift,” *Theological Students Fellowship Bulletin* 8, no. 5 (May 1985): 16. Hiebert wrote of the naivety of Western missionaries who failed to see the cultural dimension of their Christianity, resulting in a “Gospel [that] was unnecessarily foreign. ...the foreignness of western culture such as dress, buildings, pews, translated hymns, western leadership styles and imported technology.”

⁷⁵ In their research study, *Translating God*, Youthscape noted that we can no longer “assume young people accept the idea of sin,” and that most “Gospel presentations often invite people to acknowledge a state of fallenness, but for many young people this is not a given.” Curtis and MacBean, *‘Feel-Good’ News*, 93.

⁷⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 45.

Contextualizing the Gospel for an Honor-Shame Framework

How, then, should we contextualize the gospel into an honor-shame framework for the next generations? Thankfully, there is no shortage of models for contextualized gospel for Eastern cultures. Western missionaries to Asian cultures have written at length toward this endeavor.⁷⁷ In his book, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, Timothy Tennent acknowledges the shame-based view of sin from an Eastern perspective, then shows how throughout the Old and New Testaments, the Bible comprehensively addresses shame.⁷⁸ This honor-shame motif can even be seen in the atonement—a fundamental Christian doctrine that has almost exclusively been understood and taught from an individualistic, guilt-innocence paradigm. Tennent shows that “shame and honor [highlight] the *public* aspect of Christ’s work,” as “he publicly bears our shame and sheds his blood on our behalf,” and thus publicly restoring honor to his people so that they might “have ‘publicly acknowledged worth.’”⁷⁹ This public restoring of honor in the atoning work of Christ is a direct balm to the public canceling younger generations witness regularly, and which they often live in fear of.

As helpful as these observations from Western missionaries can be, the voices of Asian Americans themselves, who have learned to embrace the gospel in honor-shame language, can offer a more cogent contextual message. The story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 is a parable beloved by Christians throughout church history; but for many Asian American Christians, it is the primary story through which we understand the gospel. Though the son had committed atrocities worthy of dishonor and disownment by asking for his inheritance before his father’s death, the father shows grace in granting his request. The son’s licentiousness is not simply a mishandling of finances; his life incurs further shame by failing to honor his father’s name. In his shame, he returns to the father in hopes of being reinstated as a mere slave. However, in the

⁷⁷ Other examples can be found in Georges and Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, and Muller, *Honor and Shame*.

⁷⁸ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 83–89

⁷⁹ Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 94–95.

father's own display of shame, exposing his undergarments by running to the son, he embraces his lost son and bestows upon him the gifts of honor reserved for an heir. This restoration does not stop in the home, however; the father kills the fattened calf and invites his household and the surrounding community to celebrate in honor of his son who has been found.⁸⁰ In this detailed display of grace, Jesus shows how God the Father publicly restores honor to his shamed children and welcomes them back into his home to receive anew the status as sons. This gospel of radical welcome and restoration is palpable for a generation constantly anxious about their state of belonging and fearful of the shame incurred by one wrong word or action.

Understanding the gospel through an honor-shame lens can aid ministers in their evangelism to Gens Z and Alpha. Western missionaries have especially given attention to this endeavor in the past few decades as they've sought to reach Asian cultures overseas. However, reaching young people on American soil may now be the missionary task of Asian American Christians as they utilize their own contextualized and internalized messages of grace. Just as Western missionaries must take the task of cultural learning and contextualization seriously, so those seeking to reach younger generations would do well to adopt a similar missionary posture. This posture can begin by learning from the "near cultures" of Asian American Christians to best communicate the gospel in this cultural moment.

Adopting this missionary posture to understand the moral questions and frameworks of Gens Z and Alpha follows the example of the apostle Paul. As Paul is in Athens in Acts 17, he gives a speech before the ruling body of the Areopagus in language and themes understandable enough for them to both believe *and* be offended by the truth of the gospel. Paul's evangelistic presentation in Athens is a striking contrast to the Western assumption that sin must be communicated in a guilt-based framework. By this account, Paul is a complete evangelistic failure, never once mentioning the words sin, Jesus, atonement, or faith. Instead, Paul communicates the concept of sin in their philosophical framework of honoring the gods (17:24–

⁸⁰ Kim gives a retelling of this parable in language that addresses shame through the father's covering with honor. Kim, *Shame Redeemed*, 44–46.

27), the truth of the God of Israel through the Athenians' own poetry about the deities (17:28), and the need for repentance through their value of understanding versus ignorance (17:30). Paul could have only been able to use this language by first understanding the cultural and moral worldview of the Athenians. In doing so, he embodied a posture humble enough to learn first about his hearers before rushing to propositional preaching. This posture in evangelism is the second lesson the Asian American Church can teach us to reach the next generations.

A Humble Evangelistic Posture

Evangelism has commonly been seen as a propositional activity, one in which the Christian speaks with the answers to life, and the non-Christian listens as the seeker in search of truth. Evangelistic methods have often followed suit, offering packaged gospel presentations for people to hear and assent to. From the two-questions method of Evangelism Explosion in the 1960s, to the Four Spiritual Laws, to more contemporary methods like the 2 Ways to Live or 3 Circles approaches, evangelism has primarily been viewed as a message to be preached.⁸¹ As much as a propositional approach may have borne fruit in previous generations, modern evangelistic methods have largely reproduced this same approach with little to no question.⁸² Additionally, proponents of a propositional approach have forgotten that these methods were formulated within a post-Christendom culture in which the majority of non-Christians still had the basic assumptions and understandings of Christian principles.⁸³ In a post-Christian culture, though, even those basic assumptions have been lost.

Just as theologies are formed within a cultural context, so evangelistic strategies are also developed within the cultural setting they seek to reach. The majority of evangelistic

⁸¹ These modern methods can be seen at <https://twowaystolive.com/> and <https://www.namb.net/evangelism/3circles/>.

⁸² With the exception of T4T (Training 4 Trainers), most, if not all, evangelistic methods employed by the American Church have been developed in the West with a Western (and White) cultural lens. Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution: The Story Behind the World's Fastest Growing Church Planting Movement and How It Can Happen in Your Community!* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2011).

⁸³ Evangelistic methods often hinge on four doctrinal points of God, sin, Jesus, and faith, each of which require a Christian cultural background to even begin the basis of an evangelistic conversation upon.

methods still in use today were formulated within a White majority, post-Christendom context. Evangelizing the next generations, then, does not simply happen by updating the language of old methods. In *Evangelism Next*, Soong-Chan Rah poignantly notes that “evangelism in the United States is deeply shaped by its entanglement with Western cultural assumptions,” and that reinvigorating evangelism for a new generation requires deconstructing the old forms for new ones to be reconstructed.⁸⁴ These Western forms of evangelism stem from the colonial era of missions, in which empire was equated with Christianity, leading to conversion through “power, domination, and conquest.”⁸⁵ Though the American Church no longer exists in a Christendom era, many of its evangelistic methods are still based upon the Christendom assumptions of power and conquest. Lesslie Newbigin regularly exposed this syncretism of Christianity with Western power: “Missions will no longer work along the stream of expanding Western power. . . . we [must] learn afresh what it means to bear witness to the gospel from a position not of strength but of weakness.”⁸⁶ Rah similarly concludes that in order for a new generation to carry on the task of evangelism, it may need to deconstruct the forms it has inherited. “The subsequent generations’ desire and need to de-construct the previous generations’ expression of evangelism (which may actually prove to be dysfunctional and irrelevant to the current iteration of Christianity) could be a positive step in the appropriate re-formation and reformation of our faith.”⁸⁷

A Humble Posture for Relational Trust

The posture of weakness Newbigin called for begins with the humility to recognize the need to dismantle the marriage of faith and empire in previous evangelistic strategies. But it also

⁸⁴ Soong-Chan Rah, “Introduction,” in *Evangelism Next: De-Constructing and Re-Constructing Evangelism*, ed. Soong-Chan Rah, Julie B. Scott, and Sean M. Watkins (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2026), viii.

⁸⁵ Soong-Chan Rah, “Re-Forming Evangelism,” in *Evangelism Next: De-Constructing and Re-Constructing Evangelism*, ed. Soong-Chan Rah, Julie B. Scott, and Sean M. Watkins (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2026), 18.

⁸⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 5.

⁸⁷ Rah, “Re-Forming Evangelism,” 6.

includes humility in our very posture by which we bring the gospel to the next generations. In generations and cultures where truth is based on a set of moral principles, evangelism might be as simple as convincing hearers of the truth of Christian principles over their own. In a culture in which truth is established by a social norm or group, though, no matter how convincing one's argument might be, the hurdle of leaving behind their social group and its morals is a much higher barrier to overcome. If Gens Z and Alpha view morality through this communal lens, then an evangelistic posture to young people cannot start with the same confrontational approach of the past.⁸⁸

As reports on Gens Z and Alpha have shown, younger generations highly value relational trust and safety, to the point where conversations will not even be entertained if they perceive a judgmental tone or a lack of compassion.⁸⁹ While this may initially sound like a barrier to the traditional mode of propositional evangelism, it poses an advantage to a mode of evangelism centered around conversation and relationship. Young people consistently report that they seek moral advice from highly trusted people in their lives, even more than the internet or AI.⁹⁰ Though younger generations may not be inclined to listen to a stranger telling them what to believe, they are highly influenced by those they trust. Their higher group-oriented morality means that their moral compass is often influenced by the people they are in deep relationships with. This also means that for Christians seeking to reach the next generations, the more relational trust that is built, the more opportunity for moral influence we may have. Attaining this opportunity for influence, however, cannot happen in a single conversation, but takes time to invest in young people.

⁸⁸ Rah refers to this as the posture of the church *owning* truth versus *pursuing* truth. See Rah, "Re-Forming Evangelism," 8.

⁸⁹ YoungLife, *RELATE*, 15. "Participants admitted that they will instantly shut down the moment they feel judged, dismissed, or realize an adult is distracted."

⁹⁰ YoungLife, *RELATE*, 27. 70% said they would seek advice from a trusted person over online or AI. Barna's *Gen Alpha* report found that of those trusted people teens would seek advice from, the top two answers were mom and dad, followed by friends, Jesus, and an adult mentor. Barna Group, *Gen Alpha*, 22.

Western Christians have often pointed to the emphasis on preaching throughout the book of Acts to make their case for a propositional approach to evangelism through chance encounters. However, even a brief survey of the apostle Paul's missionary methods reveals a different picture. Throughout Paul's missionary journeys, Luke's account mentions eighteen various cities in which Paul conducted any significant ministry. Out of those eighteen, twice he is found evangelizing in a public space "with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17, ESV). Two other times he goes to Gentiles who are God-fearers. The other fifteen times—the vast majority—Paul is found first entering the synagogue and reasoning with Jews on the Sabbath. In a high honor-shame culture, existing relational connections were important for sharing information and influencing others; thus, Paul's choice to prioritize the synagogues and God-fearing Gentiles showed his strategy to leverage the relational trust he would have already had as a Jew. This concept is based upon the Greek understanding of the *οἶκος* (*oikos*), or family network. The *oikos* was more than just one's nuclear family, but included extended relatives, friends, and servants and slaves.⁹¹ In his landmark work, *Bridges of God*, Donald A. McGavran calls this move of the gospel through relational networks "people movements." He notes that until the advent of Western individualism through upward and lateral mobility (migration), most peoples were more communal in nature, and thus evangelism occurred through these networks of the *oikos*. In the pages of the New Testament, the "People Movement among the Jews spread rapidly among relatives."⁹² Paul's missionary emphasis to those within his ethnic and religious network shows his priority of relational connection with those he sought to reach.

This connection of relational trust to moral formation is reminiscent of Asian honor-shame cultures. As one's morality is more closely tied to the group of belonging, changing one's moral allegiance—be it through religion, politics, or cultural perspective—rarely happens apart

⁹¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 300. This word is used of Cornelius' "household" who are saved by Peter's preaching. Cornelius includes "his relatives and close friends" in this *oikos* gathering (Acts 10:24, ESV).

⁹² Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955), 9,21.

from attachment to a new group of belonging. When evangelizing to honor-shame societies, hearers may even say they agree when asked if they believe in Jesus through a direct approach common in Western evangelism. However, if asked later what they genuinely believe, they may show no sign of moral change or transformation.⁹³ When asked why they previously affirmed their belief, they often cite not wanting to cause the speaker to lose face amidst rejection.⁹⁴ In this context, evangelism is less about speaking the right truths as succinctly—and even contextually—as possible, but more about building embodying the labor of relational and contextual love of Christ, who came contextually and lived among those he sought to save.

A Humble Posture for Conversational Evangelism

In many Asian cultures, it is not those who are loud and direct with their opinions, but those who are humble and wait their turn to speak who are revered and listened to. This poses a direct opposition to the typical Western modes of evangelism through confrontational speech, and may be the very posture of humility needed to regain a voice with young people today. Expanding on the need to separate Christian witness from power, Newbigin argued that “[the] role of the Church is the humble one of witness. The purpose is not the aggrandizement of the Church, but that God’s name should be hallowed.”⁹⁵ This humble witness may often look like the honorable posture in Asian cultures, waiting for the right moment to speak, and letting others speak first. A humble posture allows Christians to listen first before speaking, being curious enough to ask questions to know an individual before telling him or her what they should believe

⁹³ Hiebert gives numerous examples of this type of surface level conversion throughout his books, *The Gospel in Human Context* and *Transforming Worldviews*. See Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*; Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

⁹⁴ This was my own experience with evangelism while living in an East Asian country, as hearers would often agree with me when I shared the gospel with them, only to find out they were merely trying to save me the embarrassment of being rejected.

⁹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, “The Future of Missions and Missionaries,” *Review & Expositor* 74, no. 2 (May 1977): 217. This quote bears striking resemblance to Nevius’s assertion on the church’s humble witness: “The Gospel of Christ does not perform its work upon nations in the aggregate. Its sublime mission is that of conquering and subduing nations by subduing its individual members, bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.” Nevius, *China and the Chinese*, 364–65.

and how they should live. Evangelism, then, becomes less a message to be preached or a speech to be prepared, and more a conversation to build relational trust and best contextualize the gospel to one's hearer(s).

Exhibiting the curiosity to ask questions before speaking takes humility when engaging in evangelism. This very humility is exhibited by the apostle Paul in Athens. Before he was brought before the Areopagus, Paul slowed down enough to recognize their own altar inscriptions and even quote their own poets (Acts 17:23,28). When he first evangelized in Athens, Luke specifically tells us that he “reasoned” in the synagogues and marketplace, the Greek word being *διαλέγομαι* (*dialegomai*), from which our English word “dialogue” is derived. Rather than publicly preaching in the town square, Paul engaged in regular conversation over days and weeks with those he met. Contrary to popular thought, this dialogical approach is not unique to Athens. Of those eighteen cities in which Paul engaged in ministry, the manner in which he engaged with people is described thirty-five times. Of those thirty-five, thirteen use the generic terms for “evangelize” (*εὐαγγελίζω*) or “speak” with no further description.⁹⁶ Seven times, Paul is found speaking boldly or proclaiming—however, Luke does not use the typical verb form for “preach” (*κηρύσσω*) that Paul uses throughout his epistles, but a more generic term, “announce” (*καταγγέλλω*). Twice, Paul is found teaching from the Scriptures in the synagogues. The remaining thirteen—again, the majority of descriptive evangelistic instances—Paul is reasoning, persuading, and conversing (usually used in conjunction with one another). If we were to evaluate our Western evangelistic methods against the apostle Paul's, our concept of propositional evangelism would seemingly fall short of Paul's ideal.

Paul's dialogical approach to evangelism was similarly employed by a Presbyterian missionary to China in the nineteenth century, John Livingston Nevius. In seeking to establish indigenous Chinese churches, Nevius noticed that most of his missionary colleagues were

⁹⁶ The verb form of “gospel,” *euangelizo*, has traditionally been translated as “preach the gospel,” following the Western assumptions of evangelism being equated with preaching. However, this word is broader than preaching, as it includes announcing good news or heralding a message of victory (BDAG, *εὐαγγελίζω*).

employing the “Old Ways” of public preaching to crowds, with little to no fruit to show for it. Bucking the trend, Nevius was convinced that the apostle Paul set forth an evangelistic strategy centered on a conversational approach with small groups and individuals.⁹⁷ This conversational approach allowed him to more aptly contextualize the Christian faith to each individual or group he met with. In his *Manual for Evangelists*, written in Classical Chinese to train local believers, Nevius exhorted: “When we teach others, our aim should be to align our teachings with the recipients. To do so, we must understand what kind of people they are. Thus, in the place of preaching, if circumstances allow, we should sit and converse with them.”⁹⁸ Nevius believed that if evangelists were involved in one-sided speech, they would prove to be ineffective and unable to tell what the hearer thought.⁹⁹ He also recognized that in this Asian, group-oriented culture, the more Christians were involved in conversation, the more genuine relationships could be built for relational trust.

[Engaging in calm discussion] will foster genuine affection, creating a bond as close as brothers. We will discuss their personal matters, share in their joys and sorrows, naturally winning their hearts, making them more receptive to our words, thereby making our teachings more effective and fruitful.¹⁰⁰

When evangelizing in this personal and conversational way, Nevius saw the gospel spread through the *oikos* of the new believers, “from family to family and from village to village.”¹⁰¹

As the Asian American Church has been forced to live on the margins of society, its people have learned to exist as a missional presence apart from the assumption of power and influence that undergirds Western forms of evangelism. Without the protection of privilege in public spaces, Asian Christians have been less supercilious in their evangelistic approach. Some

⁹⁷ Helen S. Coan Nevius, *The Life of John Livingston Nevius: For Forty Years a Missionary in China* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1895). 353–54.

⁹⁸ John Livingston Nevius, *Xuandao Zhi Gui* [*Manual for Evangelists*] (Shanghai: Meihua shuju, 1866), 35v. Translation is my own.

⁹⁹ Nevius, *Xuandao Zhi Gui*, 43v.

¹⁰⁰ Nevius, *Xuandao Zhi Gui*, 36r.

¹⁰¹ John Livingston Nevius, “Mission Work in Central Shantung,” *Chinese Recorder* 11, no. 5 (October 1880): 361.

White counterparts may view this as a lack of boldness for the gospel, but what is less publicly evident is the Asian American Church's faithful witness within its *oikos*. In my seventeen years in pastoral ministry, I have never witnessed as many regular baptisms of new believers as in my former Chinese American church. Though Chinese Christians lacked the protections of racial privilege to evangelize publicly, they made up for it in the "silent influence of private Christians" by ministering to friends and family faithfully over the years.¹⁰² This type of humble witness may be exactly what is needed to reach a generation that has grown more fearful and suspicious of outsiders, and more withdrawn and withholding of their personal lives and beliefs as a result.¹⁰³ A humble posture of conversational witness, devoid of the cultural entrapments of Western privilege and power, may prove just as effective today as Nevius saw in nineteenth-century China by building up the church through "laboring for and with individuals, rather than random preaching to crowds."¹⁰⁴

The Embodied Witness in Community

Given the strong desire for belonging amongst Gens Z and Alpha, one of the greatest evangelistic methods is to embody the belonging God offers us in Christ. Since young people today live in fear of constant judgment—due to cancel culture, social media, and increased social anxiety from the norm of what young people typically face—proclaiming the unconditional welcome and belonging believers have with God must absolutely be part of our evangelistic strategy. However, to simply preach a gospel of welcome and belonging with God would fall

¹⁰² This "silent influence of private Christians" was Nevius' hallmark strategy to see the gospel "speedily and widely propagated" by the indigenous church. John Livingston Nevius, "Historical Review of Missionary Methods—Past and Present—In China, and How Far Satisfactory," in *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China, Held at Shanghai, May 7-20, 1890*, ed. W. J. Lewis, W. T. A. Barber, and J. R. Hykes (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1890), 173.

¹⁰³ Many of the current reports on Gen Alpha show an increase in social anxiety and fear, a general increased worry in the state of the world, and a heightened comfort to stay within the safety of the family and home. See YoungLife, *RELATE*, 42,46); Barna Group, *Gen Alpha*, 21–22,25–26. Fuller's report notes that Gen Alpha often worries about being judged, and thus may be less willing to open up in conversation. Fuller Youth Institute, *Gen Alpha*, 6,24.

¹⁰⁴ John Livingston Nevius, *China and the Chinese* (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1869), 373.

back onto an individualistic, guilt-innocence gospel, in which believers only see their vertical spiritual belonging. Western Christians for too long have forgotten that the greatest way belonging with God is intended to be experienced is through the radical welcome and belonging with God's people. Throughout his first epistle, the apostle John constantly reminds believers that their love for God is made known—manifested—by their love for one another. In one of the Bible's most famous passages on love, we often miss the direct connection between the experience of God's love for his people through his people's love for one another. "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God *abides in us* and his love is *perfected in us*" (1 John 4:12, ESV; emphasis mine). In a world where young people too often feel like it is "hard to measure up" due to the "constant risk of being judged, and that mistakes [follow] you," a community that embodies the love of Christ can be a powerful witness, not just to the truth of the gospel, but the experiential reality of it.¹⁰⁵

The value of community is important for many streams of churches today, but in most, where leadership is driven by a White majority, the ideal of church community often resembles a group of good friends. Friends regularly see each other, ask each other for advice, and have shared interests or hobbies. But friends always come secondary to other primary priorities, like work and family. Throughout the Scriptures, the call for the body of Christ is to be not just friends, but family—a new *oikos* that is interdependent upon one another (Acts 4:32–37); willingly burdens one another with their needs, and is willing to be inconvenienced by one another to bear them (Gal 6:2); and sticks together despite disagreements and conflict (Phil 4:2–3; 1 Pet 4:8–10). Though many churches certainly model this ideal of the church as family, few do so as well as ethnic minority and immigrant churches in America.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Moore, *Troubling Jesus*, 112.

¹⁰⁶ In his book, *When the Church Was a Family*, New Testament professor Joseph Hellerman argues for a reading of the church in the New Testament that replaced the family for the heavily persecuted believers. Hellerman notes, at times, that Eastern/Asian cultures are more similar to these biblical ideals than Western ones. See Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009).

Asian American churches—especially immigrant ones—have a unique perspective on this embodied witness of the church community. In her book, *We Mend With Gold*, Kristin T. Lee reflects on her experience as a child in the Asian immigrant church that is familiar to many of us with immigrant roots. “[My] parents’ lives revolved around church. . . . Their social circle, their place of service, their community: These were all wrapped up in church.” Lee explains how the Asian immigrant church served as a community hub for new immigrants to find their footing in a new land that perpetually ostracized them. “Congregants offer rides to the airport, babysitting, places to live, connections to jobs, and other needed services. The church functions as a true family.”¹⁰⁷ In being inconvenienced and burdened by one another, the church had the very opportunity to demonstrate the gospel, where Jesus is ultimately inconvenienced and burdened by our sin and shame, yet loves us at great cost to himself. Perhaps due to the rising middle-class standard of the average White church in America, this type of interdependency is harder to come by where needs are far and few between. In an age of technology where those with means can simply call an Über or DoorDash some food, we no longer need one another for basic necessities.¹⁰⁸ Though segments of the Asian American Church have followed this upward mobility and adoption of technological conveniences, the ethos of the church as a family is still embedded in its DNA through its recent past. This value of the church community—exhibited through hospitality, regularly shared meals after church services, and the general desire for togetherness—can provide an embodied witness of the very community young people are often searching for today.

The Asian American Church is by no means perfect in this pursuit of embodied witness. The close ties that made our churches as connected as they were often came at the expense of “outsiders.” Those who looked different, or were even of a different Asian ethnicity,

¹⁰⁷ Kristin T. Lee, *We Mend with Gold: An Immigrant Daughter’s Reckoning with American Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2026), 12–13.

¹⁰⁸ This idea was sparked from Elizabeth Oldfield’s book, *Fully Alive*, in a section in which she talks about the lack of relational connection that interdependency forged. See Elizabeth Oldfield, *Fully Alive: Tending to the Soul in Turbulent Times* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2024), 103–6.

were often excluded.¹⁰⁹ If the Asian American Church is to be a model of an embodied witness, then it must be willing to open the same depth of belonging it offers its own people to those outside its fold. The axiom that young people today “belong before they believe” has become a commonly spoken one. While this is true for many church youth groups, Asian American Churches experience this beyond the youth group. In search of community, Asian American teens, college students, and young adults will often join church activities to help them find their footing in a new city, even if they exhibit very little belief in Christianity—much like their immigrant forebears. By allowing belonging to come before belief, safety and trust can be fostered for a generation hesitant to make themselves known. As relationships are built within community, the offer of belonging can become the fertile soil for belief to spring up within.

An embodied witness in community also dispels the reduction of evangelism to an act of individual proclamation. Rather than training ministers to youth to evangelize young people individually, embodying the gospel in community turns the act of evangelism into a holistic process, one in which words are still spoken, but deeds often pave the way where words may be immediately rejected (1 Pet 2:12). Though not all will find the church an attractive space of belonging, the Asian American Church offers a picture of the gospel made tangible through sacrificial love. As a community born on the margins of American society, Asian American Churches embraced Peter’s call to live as “sojourners and exiles,” evangelizing through their embodied witness apart from any social status or power (1 Pet 2:11).

Conclusion

Generations Z and Alpha are the least Christian generations to date on American soil. This does not mean, however, that the American Church must despair and clamor for methods of the glory days to cart young people back to faith. On the contrary, this new uncharted territory presents an opportunity for new, creative solutions—ones which are necessary to divorce the

¹⁰⁹ Lee, *We Mend With Gold*, 30–31. I clearly remember instances when I arrived at church only to be asked, “Why are you here?” due to my White-passing face. Similar instances occurred for friends of different ethnic backgrounds when visiting Asian churches.

Christian faith from its marriage to the cultural entrapments that came through empire, White supremacy, and secularism.¹¹⁰ However, in seeking creative solutions, we need not attempt to create something new or novel—as if it were even a possible endeavor. The very solutions to the faith crisis of young people today may be found in part in the faithful witness of the Asian American Church that has learned to operate from the margins, without voice, power, or prestige. Asian American Christianity, though still young in its formal development, has much to offer the broader American Church in the twenty-first century. From the honor-shame gospel paradigm that addresses the rising shame culture of Gens Z and Alpha, to the humble posture of conversational evangelism, and the embodied witness of the whole community, the Asian American Church presents a legacy of gospel faithfulness since its inception in the 1850s. As ministers, sociologists, missiologists, and theologians begin to notice the quiet, humble witness of this often overlooked diaspora, they may find the very answers to the faith questions they have been asking to more effectively reach young people and future generations.

¹¹⁰ For an indictment of the American Church in these regards, see Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barna Group. *Gen Z: Vol 3*. 2023.
- Barna Group. *Reimagining Ministry for Gen Alpha*. 2026.
- Barna Group. *The Open Generation Vol. 3: How Teens Around the World Can Make an Impact*. 2022.
- Benedict, Ruth. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. 1st ed. Secker & Warburg, 1947.
- Boden, Dave, and Leah Boden. *Raising Gen Alpha: Helping Kids Navigate Everything from Anxiety to AI*. New Growth Press, 2026.
- Burge, Ryan. “Is There a Religious Revival Occurring Among Generation Z?” *Graphs About Religion*, June 26, 2025. <https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/is-there-a-religious-revival-occurring>.
- Conn, Harvie. “Contextual Theologies: The Problem of Agendas.” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 1 (1990): 51–63.
- Crouch, Andy. “The Return of Shame.” *Christianity Today*, March 10, 2015. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2015/03/andy-crouch-gospel-in-age-of-public-shame/>.
- Curtis, Chris, and Myles MacBean. *‘Feel-Good’ News*. Translating God, Part 2. Youthscape Centre for Research, 2024.
- Dodson, Jared. “Gen Z Isn’t Asking Why Bad Things Happen to Good People.” *Christianity Today*, May 13, 2026. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2026/05/gen-z-why-bad-things-happen-to-good-people-theodicy-evil-suffering/>.
- Dotson, Sean. “Preaching the Gospel to an Honor/Shame Generation.” *Youth Pastor Theologian*, November 1, 2023. <https://www.youthpastortheologian.com/blog/preaching-the-gospel-to-an-honorshame-generation>.
- Dray, Peter. “Gen Z and the Re-Emergence of Shame.” *Peter Dray*, April 4, 2019. <https://peterdray.wordpress.com/2019/04/04/gen-z-and-the-re-emergence-of-shame/>.
- Edwards, Brad, and John Houmes, hosts. *How Christians Are Formed By Power with Andy Crouch*. Episode 32. PostEverything, April 10, 2024. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/how-christians-are-formed-by-power-with-andy-crouch/id1676174977?i=1000652004394>.
- Fobes, Clark. “Ministry to Modern Youth: Challenges and Opportunities.” *The Gospel Coalition*, August 9, 2024. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/tgc-podcast/ministry-modern-child/>.
- Foundation, The Annie E. Casey. “What Is Generation Alpha?” The Annie E. Casey Foundation, November 4, 2020. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-is-generation-alpha>.
- Frey, William H. “New 2020 Census Data Shows an Aging America and Wide Racial Gaps between Generations.” *Brookings*, August 1, 2023. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/new-2020-census-data-shows-an-aging-america-and-wide-racial-gaps-between-generations/>.

- Fuller Youth Institute. *The FYI Report on Gen Alpha & Faith, Part 1: Insights on an Emerging Generation*. Fuller Theological Seminary, 2026.
- Gallup. "LGBTQ+ Identification in U.S. Now at 7.6%." Gallup.Com, March 13, 2024. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/611864/lgbtq-identification.aspx>.
- Georges, Jayson. "The Rise of Shame in America." *Honor Shame*, February 8, 2017. <https://honorshame.com/rise-shame-america/>.
- Georges, Jayson, and Mark D. Baker. *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials*. IVP Academic, 2016.
- Griffin, Tina, host. *Honor-Shame Dynamic of Asian American Customs and Gen Z Cancel-Culture - Kevin Yi*. Episode 862. The Counter Culture Mom Show with Tina Griffin. August 5, 2025. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/honor-shame-dynamic-of-asian-american-customs-and-gen/id1512805826?i=1000720952116>.
- Haidt, Jonathan. *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. Penguin Press, 2024.
- Hall, Douglas John. *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*. Wipf & Stock, 1997.
- Hellerman, Joseph H. *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community*. B&H Academic, 2009.
- Hiebert, Paul G. *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions*. Baker Academic, 2009.
- Holland, Jay, host. *Sharing the Gospel with Generation Z with Josh Leucht*. Episode 317. Let's Parent On Purpose. February 13, 2023. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ep-317-sharing-the-gospel-with-generation-z-with-josh-leucht/id1190973394?i=1000600368844>.
- "How to Share the Gospel with a Generation That Doesn't Care About Heaven Feat. Josh Chen." *City Gospel Movements*, November 5, 2019. <https://citygospelmovements.org/resource/chen/>.
- Kim, Toni. *Shame Redeemed: Learning to Live in Christ's Freedom*. IVP Formatio, 2026.
- Kraft, Charles H. *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Orbis Books, 1979.
- Lancaster, Curtis. "Alexander Rogers: Student Suicide Prompts 'cancel Culture' Warning." BBC, November 14, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdd0gyjlqyvo>.
- Lee, Daniel D. *Doing Asian American Theology: A Contextual Framework for Faith and Practice*. IVP Academic, 2022.
- Lee, Kristin T. *We Mend with Gold: An Immigrant Daughter's Reckoning with American Christianity*. Broadleaf Books, 2026.
- Lee, Sang Hyun. *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology*. Fortress Press, 2010.
- Lifeway Research. *American Views on Honor and Shame*. 2016.
- Luo, Michael. *Strangers in the Land: Exclusion, Belonging, and the Epic Story of the Chinese in America*. Vintage, 2025.

- McCaulley, Esau, Janette H. Ok, Osvaldo Padilla, and Amy Peeler, eds. *The New Testament in Color: A Multiethnic Bible Commentary*. IVP Academic, 2024.
- McCrindle, Mark. *Generation Alpha*. Headline Home, 2021.
- McDowell, Sean, J. Warner Wallace, and Foles Nick. *So the Next Generation Will Know: Preparing Young Christians for a Challenging World*. David C Cook, 2019.
- McGavran, Donald A. *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions*. Friendship Press, 1955.
- Metzger, Will. *Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel Wholly by Grace Communicated Truthfully & Lovingly*. 4th ed. IVP Books, 2013.
- Moffett, Samuel Hugh. *A History of Christianity in Asia*. Volume I: Beginnings to 1500. Orbis, 1998.
- Moore, Lucie. *Troubling Jesus*. Translating God, Part 3. Youthscape Centre for Research, 2026.
- Murray, Abdu. “Canceled: How the Eastern Honor-Shame Mentality Traveled West.” *The Gospel Coalition*, May 28, 2020. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/canceled-understanding-eastern-honor-shame/>.
- Nevius, Helen S. Coan. *The Life of John Livingston Nevius: For Forty Years a Missionary in China*. Fleming H. Revell, 1895.
- Nevius, John Livingston. *China and the Chinese*. Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1869.
- Nevius, John Livingston. “Historical Review of Missionary Methods—Past and Present—In China, and How Far Satisfactory.” In *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China, Held at Shanghai, May 7-20, 1890*, edited by W. J. Lewis, W. T. A. Barber, and J. R. Hykes. American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1890.
- Nevius, John Livingston. “Mission Work in Central Shantung.” *Chinese Recorder* (Shanghai) 11, no. 5 (1880): 357–64.
- Nevius, John Livingston. *Xuandao zhi gui [Manual for Evangelists]*. Meihua Shuguan, 1866.
- “New Barna Data: Young Adults Lead a Resurgence in Church Attendance.” *Barna Group*, September 2, 2025. <https://www.barna.com/research/young-adults-lead-resurgence-in-church-attendance/>.
- “New Research: Belief in Jesus Rises, Fueled by Younger Adults.” *Barna Group*, April 7, 2025. <https://www.barna.com/research/belief-in-jesus-rises/>.
- Oldfield, Elizabeth. *Fully Alive: Tending to the Soul in Turbulent Times*. Brazos Press, 2024.
- OneHope. *Gen Alpha: The Next Generation*. 2024.
- Paas, Stefan. *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society*. SCM Press, 2019.
- Paas, Stefan. “Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-Modern Europe: Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences.” *Mission Studies* 28, no. 1 (2011): 3–25.
- Pachau, Lalsangkima, and Allan Varghese Meloottu, eds. *Christians and Christianity in India Today: Historical, Theological, and Missiological Assessments*. Fortress Press, 2024.

- PRRI. *A Political and Cultural Glimpse into America's Future*. Washington, D.C., 2023.
- Pruitt, Shane, and Shelly Melia. *Reaching Generation Alpha: A Ministry Guide for Discipling the Church Beyond the Screen*. B&H Books, 2026.
- Rah, Soong-Chan. *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*. IVP Books, 2009.
- Rah, Soong-Chan, Julie B. Scott, and Sean M. Watkins, eds. *Evangelism Next: De-Constructing and Re-Constructing Evangelism*. Pickwick, 2026.
- Robinson, Judah. "Three Key Strategies for Effectively Reaching Gen Z." *Thrive*, January 24, 2024. <https://thrive.asburyseminary.edu/article/three-key-strategies-for-effectively-reaching-gen-z/>.
- Schnabel, Eckhard J. *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*. IVP Academic, 2008.
- Smith, Gregory. *Religion Holds Steady in America*. Pew Research Center, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.58094/dkqp-6k90>.
- Smith, Gregory, Alan Cooperman, Becka Alper, et al. *Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off*. Pew Research Center, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.58094/4kqq-3112>.
- Smith, Steve, and Ying Kai. *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution: The Story Behind the World's Fastest Growing Church Planting Movement and How It Can Happen in Your Community!* WIGTake Resources, 2011.
- Springtide Research Institute. *Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation*. 2020.
- Springtide Research Institute. *Navigating Injustice*. 2023.
- Springtide Research Institute. *Thirteen*. 2024.
- Tennent, Timothy C. *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think about and Discuss Theology*. Zondervan, 2007.
- Trueman, Carl R. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Crossway, 2020.
- White, James Emery. *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World*. Baker, 2017.
- Wu, Frank H. *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*. Basic Books, 2002.
- YoungLife. *RELATE: Connecting with the Next Generation*. 2026.