

Session Eight: Why are Gen Zs Exiting Churches?

Let's talk about the really big question in a woke culture...



If you care about the viability of churches in North America, the stats on Gen Zs (those born 1998-2015) aren't encouraging. Gen Zs make up only 11% of evangelical churchgoers. 65% drop out of church in their twenties. Only one out of five American teens has attended church. 40% say that God, the Bible and religion aren't even on their radar. Barring a spiritual revival, how small will our aging congregations be in 20 years when the 60% of current attenders who are over 50-years of age begin to die off? A bigger question is what will happen to your children and grandkids in a world where Christianity is marginalized? Or even worse, if your next generation loved ones aren't with you in eternity?

Don't despair. As long as there's time, there's hope. That's why Legacy Imperative equips Christians to build gospel bridges to their kids and grandkids. In the next three weeks in this series, we want to help you answer some big faith questions that are stumbling blocks to Gen Zs.



Five things that frustrate Gen Z Christians

It's bad enough that so many teens and twenty somethings don't have God or religion on their radar. It's even worse that 65% of those who

have been raised in the church walk away when they leave home. The



Gospel Coalition did a nationwide survey of evangelical Gen Zs to find out what frustrates them most about their church experiences. They boiled their research down to five main grievances. I'm only going to focus on the fifth one at this time, but I thought you might find all five

to be helpful. So I encapsulated them in my own words:

- 1. When Partisan Politics Reshape Faith.** Most evangelical Zs don't want to be identified as conservative or liberal, as much as they want to be identified as Christlike.
- 2. When apologetics outweigh relationships.** It's important to share what we believe and why it is reasonable. But most evangelicals Zs want to develop friendships with their disbelieving peers *first*. They see apologetics as a valuable tool *after* social connections are made.
- 3. When Christians don't live what they believe.** This became a huge issue in the 2020 elections. Evangelical Zs saw both presidential candidates who, whether in character or policy, reflected immoral and unchristian values. To their dismay, Zs watched their elders look the other way and find reasons to defend their favorite candidate.
- 4. When Christians are known more for judgment than love.** The Bible's moral demands will always come across as judgmental to many, but most evangelical Gen Zs hope that a reputation for radical, Christlike love will also define our Faith and attract nonbelievers.
- 5. When Christians aren't serious thinkers.** Studies show that younger evangelicals are looking for a more robust and muscular Christianity. Life is full of tough questions, and most don't have easy answers. They require responses that are biblical, thoughtful, and nuanced. Gen Zs don't see today's churches as being willing to wrestle with hard issues, or do the homework required for compelling answers. Nor do they think churches deal well with doubters, skeptics or cynics. They believe that too many older Christians are unwilling to listen to ideas that challenge their traditions, biases and prejudices. And that turns off the next generations.



Here's the good news: studies show that most Gen Zs are highly success driven. They want advice that will help them achieve life goals. Most are willing to listen to the counsel of older sages who have walked the road before them. They will especially dialogue with their grandparents whom 86% love more than anyone else on the planet.

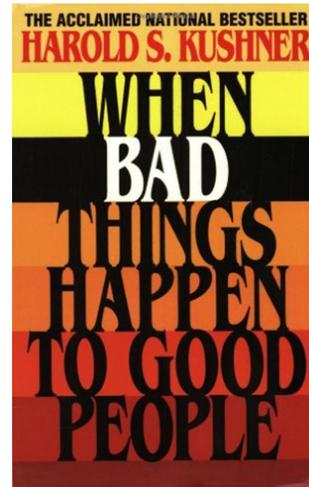


But here are the caveats I've discovered in my interaction with Gen Zs): **1)** Zs want to talk to nonjudgmental people who genuinely love and accept them for who they are; **2)** Zs are most attracted to people who listen to

them *first*, and dialogue rather than lecture; **3)** Zs don't want you to try to shove your beliefs down their throat; **4)** Zs want answers that are compelling and practical; and **5)** Zs have highly functioning B.S. meters. They detest manipulation, and won't be pushed into changing their minds by high pressure gospel sales pitches.

So, let's talk about the number one faith issue for Gen Zs

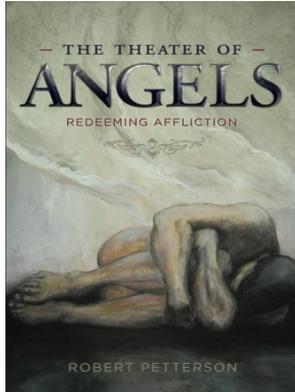
It's the problem of evil in this world. More specifically, how can God be good, and yet this world be so full of suffering? Or on the other hand, if God is in control, why doesn't he jump in and fix things? No one captures those questions better than Rabbi Harold Kushner In his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. His son, Aaron, was born with "rapid aging disease," He watched helplessly while his boy suffered years of agonizing pain before prematurely dying.



In his bestseller, Kushner wrote that we are given four choices on God and suffering: 1) Sometimes it just goes that way. 2) God gives us the free will to do bad things to ourselves and others. 3) Nature is morally blind. Hurricanes, floods, plagues, and nonpreventable diseases, come and go at random, destroying both good and bad people alike. 4) There are corners of this world where God's creative light has not yet penetrated.

In his book, this grieving father wrestles with his anger at God while trying to hold on to his faltering faith. He's attempting to get God off the

hook. In the end, Rabbi Kushner decides God can't be both in control and good at the same time. So, to keep his faith intact, he chooses to believe in a good God who can't stop the suffering, but at least comes to give comfort to those who suffer.



I'm not here to judge Rabbi Kushner's answers. I can't imagine the nightmare he endured. At least he gives some answers. But they aren't my answers. I believe God is in control. He is also good. And he comes to us in our suffering to comfort us. [You might read my response to Rabbi Kushner, and see my answers to the question of God and evil in my book, *The Theater of Angels*. You can order it on Amazon or at Legacyimperative.org]

Some answers for us and others who might need them

There are no easy fixes to the problem of God and evil. Job struggled with it. So did prophets and apostles. Even Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The search for satisfying answers has tormented theologians and philosophers down through the ages. And it remains a stumbling block to faith for so many of our Gen Z loved ones.

But they are willing to dialogue about the mysteries of life because they're natural scientists. They want to dissect things, understand them, and boil them down to a workable formula. So, feel free to engage them with a question like, "Why does God allow suffering in this world?" Or, "If God created everything, did he create evil?" Or, "Do you believe that things are messed up in this world? Why do you think God doesn't intervene and clean up some of those messes?"



A few warnings: God isn't on trial. So, relax. He doesn't need you as his defense attorney. And you aren't the Holy Spirit. The burden isn't on you to change hearts. And you shouldn't feel the pressure to come up with foolproof answers. No one has yet, and you won't either. However, there are good answers. Here are some for starters:

1. There is a God, and there is evil in his creation.

If someone simply asks, "How can God allow evil?" there is one less obstacle to overcome. At least they're not saying there is no God. So you don't have to argue for his existence. I remember being in a public swimming pool talking to an elderly lady. Our conversation got around to God topics, when her 91-year-old husband angrily said, "I don't believe in God! I'm an atheist!" I asked him why. He replied, "My sister died of cancer, and God didn't do anything to stop it. I've been mad as hell at him ever since!" I replied, "Then you're not an atheist." He gritted his teeth and snarled, "I just told you I was an atheist!" I smiled as I replied, "No, you're not, because you can't be angry at a God that doesn't exist.



You're just a ticked off theist." That's what so many self-professed atheists are.

The issue isn't that there's no God. It's that the God we Christians proclaim is sovereign, all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-present, and good. So, if God is all those things, why is there continuing evil, suffering and injustice in God's world? Why doesn't God do something about it?" Rabbi Kushner argues that if he allows evil to go on, he's not in control. If he is in control, and does nothing to stop evil, he's not good. You have to choose one or the other. Or you could say he's neither sovereign nor good. Or, maybe, there's no God at all. These are the responses arising from two realities: there is a God and there is evil.

2. If God created everything, where did evil come from?

There are variations of that question. Why did God create Lucifer, other angels, and even humans with the capacity to sin? Why did he put the Tree of Forbidden Fruit in the Garden to tempt Adam and Eve?

The half-brother of Jesus is clear in his Epistle that evil does not come from God. He writes, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone..." [James 1:13] He goes on to say in James 1:17, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." In short, only good things originate and come from God. Okay, James, then why did God create angels like Lucifer with the seed



of evil in them? Or Adam and Eve with the potential to sin and do evil? Or a world with hurricanes, floods, volcanos, forest fires, and beasts of prey that devastate and destroy? Here are some biblical answers:

1) God did not create evil, but created the possibility of it being activated by the free will he gave his creatures.

James 1:13-15 says, "For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desires and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."



Sin and evil come from within the Creator's creatures and not from the Creator himself. God created angels and humans with free will. As long as they freely abided by his divine will, everything would be perfectly good. But, once they sinned, they would unleash sin and activate evil and all its consequences. God put the future in their hands. I'll tell you why in a minute.

Lucifer was the highest and most beautiful of God's fire angels, created out of the holy fires of heaven, but he said in his heart, "I will ascend higher than God's throne."



[Isa 14:24] And he convinced a third of the angels in heaven to join in his rebellion. They opened a kind of Pandora's Box, unleashing sin and evil for the first time. A holy God couldn't tolerate this, so he cast them down to the earth he had already created. [Rev. 12:4] He

allowed Lucifer and his fallen cohorts freedom to roam the earth like lions looking for prey to devour. He knew that Adam and Eve were vulnerable to Satan's wiles. But he left the free will decision in their hands, to either put their trust in his Word ("In the day you eat of the forbidden fruit you will surely die.") or to allow Lucifer to seduce them just as he had the angels in heaven. Sin, and all it produces, comes from God's creatures (like fallen angels, Adam and Eve, you and me), and not the Creator—according to the only book God has written.

2) When it comes to love, God didn't stack the decks in his favor.

The biblical story of love begins with a Triune God who is love. Father, Son and Spirit have communed eternally in love with One Another. When God created angels and humans, he did so as a reflection of himself. Because he is love, he loves his creatures. He desires them to love him back. He wants them to love one another.

But love that has no option *not* to love is not love at all. Free choice is essential to real love. You can't force someone to love you. And God won't force us to love him. He gave his angels, as well as Adam and Eve, free will to love, honor and obey him; or to rebel against him. He even upped the stakes. He put a tree of temptation in paradise. He didn't surround it with an electric fence or a moat full of crocodiles.



There weren't warning signs on the approach to the tree. He didn't make the tree ugly. In fact, the fruit was appealingly beautiful. Then God upped the stakes even further by allowing the tempter to have access to Adam and Eve. He could have put a hedge around them, but he didn't.

Why? Because real love demands free choice love in return. Real love is risky. God is all-knowing. Surely he knew that Lucifer would be up to his old tricks, and Adam and Eve did not love him enough to withstand Lucifer's seductions. But he allowed it because he wanted to prove to them how much more he loved them than they could ever love him. He had already engineered a plan to give his Only Begotten Son as a sacrifice to redeem them. Only then – and now – would his prodigal sons and daughters ever know how priceless they are to a Creator who has always been heads over heels in love with them.

3) It is in pain and suffering that real love is tested.



After Pandora's box was opened in Eden, sin infected the DNA of our first parents and all their progeny. It inhabits every molecule of this sin-sick world. But this too has a good purpose. Suffering and pain now become a measure of true love. Take the story of Job. God blessed him with riches, health and a family. When Lucifer came for an audience with God, his Creator said, "Have you considered my servant Job?" God then bragged about how much Job loved him. The fallen fire angel replied,

“Sure he loves you. You’ve lavished him with blessings. It pays for him to love you. But, if you remove your hedge of protection, and let me take away everything he has, he will curse you to your face.” [my translation of Job 1&2] So God agreed to the cynical devil’s wager. Job was stripped of everything, and left with oozing boils as he sat desolate on an ash heap. He was tormented by why God abandoned him to destruction, disease and destitution. But he never blamed or cursed God. He said, “Even though the Lord slay me, I will still put my hope in him.” [Job 13:5] Even though it seemed that God had let go of him, he never let go of God. He cried out from the ash heap, “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth...how my heart yearns (for that day).” [Job 19:26-27]

Take marriage. What proves that two people really love each other? It’s not the times of plenty, but of want. Not the good times, but the bad. Not seasons of health, but of sickness. Proverbs 17:17 says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.” You will never know if you really love your spouse until it costs everything. You’ll never know if someone is your friend until they go down the river of no return with you. Job never proved his love for God when he was enjoying the good times. It was when his ten kids were taken away, his wealth was stripped away, and his health was oozing away that he proved his love for God—and discovered how much God really loved him.



And we never knew how much God loved us until we gave him every reason not to love us – and that wouldn’t have happened unless he allowed us to sin and bring evil into this world. We never knew how much he loved us until he took on flesh, entered into our world of suffering, suffered in every way that we suffer. And then died an excruciatingly painful death on a Roman cross, took on our sins, and even became sin itself, before dying that death God warned Adam and Eve would come to them if they ate the forbidden fruit.

Pain and suffering are God’s anvils, furnace and fires to reshape us into the beauty that will cause all heaven to cheer when our ultimate glory is revealed. However, how we respond to the pain and suffering is also a measure of how much we love him. Sometimes, we wonder if we are really saved. It’s when God puts us on the ash heap, like he did Job, and we remain



faithful to him, that we are given the gift of knowing that our calling and election to salvation is real.

I highly recommend this second point as a great way to deal with our Millennial and Gen Z loved ones. It not only shows that God wasn't the one who unleashed sin and its consequences in this world, but that it came (and still comes) from the free will choices of people. It takes the blame from God and puts it squarely on us. Only then can we segue into the solution that comes from the gospel. In addition, the point that God gives us options when it comes to loving him, will appeal to folks who don't like to be forced into anything against their will. It also shows that God's motives come out of a deep love for us.



3. Without pain we would never know that we are sick.

C.S. Lewis wrote that pain is God's megaphone. Pain is often seen as a bad thing. In fact, it is one of God's



greatest gifts to humankind. Philip Yancy wrote a great book on the problem of God and evil, entitled, *Where is God When it Hurts?* In it, he tells the story of a world famous doctor who was given a grant to create artificial pain sensors for a leper colony in Louisiana. Leprosy takes away the natural pain sensors

in its victims. A leper might put his hand on a stove or run it through a band saw and not feel a thing. At night, rats could gnaw away a leper's fingers and he wouldn't even wake up. The inability to feel pain is one of the main reasons lepers are disfigured by things that would make normal people quickly jump back in pain.

After working in vain for years to create artificial pain sensors, the doctor finally gave up. He told reporters, "I'm not a religious man. But, if there is a Creator, one of his greatest creations was our ability to experience pain." Without a baby crying in pain, a mother would never know that there was something wrong. Imagine if our burst appendix, or any other diseased or broken part of our bodies, never screamed out in pain? Pain tells us that something is terribly wrong. Pain drives us to get that which is wrong fixed.

The suffering of people in this world tells us there is something terribly wrong. We are in desperate need of healing. Wars, oppression, genocide, the Holocaust, and other inhumanities, tell us that something is rotten and diseased at the core of humankind. The world needs to be fixed. We need fixing. This epidemic gender dysphoria among our children tells us something is terribly wrong. Emotional pain says that there is something wrong. Broken marriages and dysfunctional families are a painful reminder that there is a deeper sickness in us.



But, we choose to blame God for the problems we create. We scream to the high heavens, “Where is God when it hurts?” And God is in heaven yelling back at us, “I’ve told you what is wrong. I’ve given you my laws in my Word– laws that will keep you safe and healthy. I’ve told you what you must do to stop the madness. But you aren’t listening.” Indeed, pain and suffering are some of God’s greatest gifts to us, if only they would drive us to the Great Physician.

4. Natural disasters, and their consequences, are part of God’s grace, but often break bad because of our stupidity.



Take hurricanes and typhoons. They come with destructive power, devastating property and taking lives. While standing in the wreckage of our dreams, we might be tempted to shake our fists at God and wonder why he didn’t protect us. But hurricanes are one of God’s gifts to nature. They are part of the world’s air conditioning system, pulling hot air off the surface. They bring torrential rains and grow tropical forests that are the lungs of the earth. They build wetlands and feed them with nutrients, flush out lagoons of weeds and algae, fill lakes, and bring water to drought-stricken earth. The earth’s Master Designer knew what he was doing when he created weather systems.

Floods bring water which teems with life. They leave behind bottom lands that are rich in nutrients for crops that feed the hungry. They carry silt that expands land into the sea. They remove trash and clean the earth. As they discovered in Yellowstone Park, forest fires sparked by

nature, clean the underbrush, make the soil richer, and prepare the woodlands to be greener, healthier, and a better sanctuary for life. Volcanos and earthquakes create mountains, fertile valleys, and geological wonders like the Grand Canyon. It's all part of God's creative genius: a world that he created for his own glory and our enjoyment.

In contrast, we build cities where mighty rivers flood. And condominiums in hurricane zones. We create trailer parks in tornado pathways. Ancient Romans looked at Mt. Vesuvius and said to themselves, "Let's build a city called Pompei at its base." Builders in Hawaii construct homes within feet of active lava beds. And developers in Southern California build houses on the edge of cliffs that regularly turn into mud slides when heavy rains come. Tourists tease buffalos in Yellowstone Park and stick their heads out the window to take pictures of nearby lions in Africa. We play with deadly viruses and create deadlier ones in labs. And when our games of chicken with nature end badly, we wonder why God didn't protect us. God might say, "I gave you brains. Why don't you use them?"

God won't step in and fix things now because he has a better plan for those he wants to redeem.

I remember when Joyce and I were climbing Horn Peak in Colorado. We were above the tree line, near the summit of the 13,800-foot high mountain, when the temperature dropped thirty degrees in a half hour. Gale force winds were pelting us with heavy hail, turning the mountainside to ice. Joyce was in a state of hypothermia, exhausted and scared. I remember her screaming into the wind, "Jesus, please bring the rapture right now!"



The only way this world of evil, pain and suffering will ever be fixed is when Jesus returns. How many suffering saints down through the ages have begged Christ to return to end their pain and misery? Or at least rapture them out of this dark and dangerous world?

We must remember what St. Peter wrote to persecuted Christians who were impatient for Jesus' return, "God is not slow in keeping his promise, as some see slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." [2 Pet. 3:9] What's he saying? He can only fix this world when he returns. But, if he returns



now, his return will usher in the Final Judgment of the world. Then it will be too late for those who haven't yet come to him for salvation. I know there were Chinese Christians in prison camps before December 10, 1965, longing for Jesus to come back. Christians in Biafra were being murdered in tribal warfare. They desperately wanted Jesus to come back and end the genocide.

Yet, if Jesus would have come back before December 10, 1965, I would have perished. On that day, at a Campus Crusade for Christ meeting, I bowed my knee to Jesus as my Lord and Savior. And I've led thousands of people to Christ in the 58 years since. Do you remember the day you came to Christ? Jesus never would have come back to fix the world before the moment you were in his arms. There may be millions more that he does not want to perish. So we will patiently wait. I can't tell you the hour or the day he will return to make things right, but the Bible tells me two things must happen before he returns: 1) the last of his chosen sons and daughters will be saved; and 2) his final precious martyrs will have sacrificed their lives for Jesus.

5. God shows his love for us by personally sharing our pain and suffering, and experiencing the full impact of evil.

This is the most amazing truth of all: though Adam and Eve activated sin, evil, suffering and death, and every one of their sons and daughters have perpetuated it, an innocent God chose to suffer right along with us. He crossed the vast universe to enter our hellhole. He who was the infinite, eternal, and almighty God the Son became a two-celled zygote in the darkness of a peasant woman's womb. He grew up in abject poverty, the stepson of a blue-collar carpenter, in a hillbilly hovel in the Appalachia of Israel. He suffered under the bootheel of totalitarian Roman oppression. He touched sinners, and ate with the worst of them. He was persecuted by organized religion and unjustly murdered by corrupt police. His closest friends denied him, betrayed him, and abandoned him in his greatest hour of need.



When he was suffering excruciating death by brutal men in an evil system, the sins of his lost sons and daughters (yours and mine too) were heaped on him, and he literally became sin. He experienced the full wrath of his Father that should have been visited upon us. He was separated from God, and experienced in six hours on that cross, an eternity of hell so that we wouldn't have to go there ourselves. He knew

what it meant to be abandoned and rejected by God. You and I will never know what that means because we will never experience it.

God existentially understands our pains and sufferings. As bad as our trials and tribulations are, no one has ever experienced the depth of sin, evil, or its worst consequences, than Jesus. He shares in the fellowship of our sufferings and we share in the fellowship of his. That's what true love does—whether in marriage, family, friendship, Christian fellowship, or our relationship with God. The world doesn't get it. But we do. That's why we have to share it with those who don't yet know it.

6. Jesus will make it all right, and he's the only one who can.

That's the ultimate good news of the gospel of salvation. And that's where we want to lead our dialogues about the problem of God and evil with our next generation loved ones (or anyone else, for that matter). Jesus fixed everything at the Cross 2,000 years ago. If we give our lives to him, it won't change the world in which we live. But we will be different in it. Everything that didn't make sense before, now will.

We will know what St. Paul meant when he wrote, "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." [2 Cor. 4:17-18] In short, we will have a better perspective. Indeed, an eternal one that will see us through bad times with better attitudes.



We will also have a new purpose. As fully devoted followers of Christ, we will see hurting people through his eyes. We will become his heart,

hands, and feet in this world, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, tending to the sick, and visiting those in prison. [Mt. 25] Instead of being complainers, we will become lovers and healers.

We will share the gospel of salvation while there is still time because we know that Jesus is coming back to fix everything. He will judge everyone who got away with sin in this world, and pay back evil for evil. And we don't want any of those we love (or even our worst enemies) to face that awful day unredeemed.



Finally, we will never lose confidence in what the English Puritans called “the blessed hope.” A day is coming when there will be a new heaven and earth. Paradise will be restored, never to be shattered by sin or evil again because its inhabitants will be glorified like Jesus himself. Satan and his fallen angels will be banished forever. Evil, sin, death, and all those who promoted it, will be cast into outer darkness. Jesus will reign on this new earth with perfect love and justice. And, as Revelation 2:4 promises for those who inherit this new world, “God will wipe away all tears from their eyes! And there shall be no more death, or sorrow, or crying, for the old order of things has passed away.” On that day

everything will be fixed forever!



A Final Invitation

I would encourage all of you to attend one of Legacy Imperative’s live Next Generation Summits near you, or get one going in your church. Visit Legacyimperative.org to find out how. Or you can bring a virtual summit to your Sunday school class, small group, or your home. In our follow-up Mission training groups, we teach you how to share the gospel story in the most compelling way. This question that has plagued humankind since the beginning is the best springboard I know to reach today’s Millennials, Gen Zs and Alpha kids for Jesus.

A talk given by Dr. Robert Petterson, Founder and President of Legacy Imperative [legacyimperative.org] in his “Sharing Jesus in a ‘Woke’ Culture” series at Covenant Church of Naples, Fl.