Emerging adulthood as cultural diagnostic

Gil Dueck

In his notable 2009 article, "The Millennial Muddle," Eric Hoover notes the recent emergence of a cottage industry around stoking awareness of and anxiety around generational uniqueness and generational transfer.[1] On the one hand, Hoover suggests, generational change is inevitable and worth paying attention to. On the other hand, we should be at least partially skeptical of grand-scale claims that emphasize not what different generations share but what sets them apart from each other. We should be circumspect around our tendency to fret about the next generation and suppose that unprecedented changes are afoot. "For as long as human hair has turned gray," Hoover suggests, "elders have looked at their successors and frowned."

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Yet it seems that contemporary questions about the next generation, whether related to marriage and family life, entrance into the job market, or religious faith, are construed within a particular narrative—that of the "delayed adulthood thesis." Broadly speaking, this thesis suggests that something important is changing in the pattern of normal human development. These changes have stretched out the journey to adulthood while asking big questions about what's actually waiting for us at the destination. In what follows, I will unravel some of the various strands that make up one particular theory about delayed adulthood, that of *emerging adulthood*, and ask some questions that the church needs to consider at this particular cultural moment.

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1 Eric Hoover, "The Millennial Muddle," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 11, 2009, https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Millennial-Muddle-How/48772.

What is emerging adulthood?

The theory of emerging adulthood was introduced in 1998 by US developmental psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, who described what he saw as the advent of a new developmental stage, between adolescence and adulthood, in many Western contexts.[2] According to Arnett, this phase of life has emerged as the social role transitions normally associated with adult status—marriage and parenthood—have been delayed as the demand for specialized higher education has increased. The result has been an additional decade of relatively unstructured freedom for exploration as young people gradually make their way toward lasting commitments in love, work, and personal identity. Of central importance to Arnett is the self-consciously *developmental* posture that young people adopt as they move toward adulthood. To put it differently: for many, adulthood is clearly perceived on the horizon, even as it is deliberately kept at arm's length in the interest of pursuing other, more pressing goals.

The theory of emerging adulthood has met with criticism during its relatively short lifespan. At the popular level, some have lamented the refusal of contemporary young people to grow up, and have berated scholars who falsely dignify this behaviour by dressing it up in the finery of academic theory. At the scholarly level, critics have wondered whether Arnett is merely describing the distinct cohort of privileged Western college students (who are, after all, easy for academics to study) and neglecting those whose pathway to adulthood is fraught with economic instability. So does the idea of emerging adulthood offer a meaningful contribution to our understanding of coming of age? I will argue that this theory explains aspects of our particular cultural moment and forces a particular set of questions into our consciousness as we contemplate what it means to "tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord" (Ps. 78:4, NIV).

An individualized approach to adulthood

At the heart of the theory of emerging adulthood is the idea that changes are afoot in the course human life takes in many Western contexts. Scholars point to a loose historical consensus that has existed around the idea that arriving at adulthood involved navigating certain key transitions and the acquisition of certain adult roles—things like leaving home, beginning

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2 Jeffrey J. Arnett, "Learning to Stand Alone: The Contemporary American Transition to Adulthood in Cultural and Historical Context," *Human Development* 41, no. 5–6 (1998): 295–315.

a career, marrying, and becoming a parent. What is noteworthy is that the percentage of youth in their twenties and thirties who would qualify as adult based on these criteria has decreased significantly in recent decades. Replacing a transition-based understanding of adulthood has been a psychologized understanding that judges adulthood to have been achieved once a certain subjective sense of independence is adequately felt.

Why has such a highly individualized approach to adulthood become the norm? Canadian philosopher and historian Charles Taylor points to the loss of moral horizons as one of the defining features of modern individualism.[3] Without any shared transcendent backdrop against which to measure our lives, Taylor suggests, the self must now bear the burden of *creating* a kind of meaning that can have no reference point beyond the self. Contemporary notions of adulthood are underwritten by precisely the kind of individualism that Taylor describes, an individualism that cannot conceive of human development as anything other than a self-chosen and self-directed project. Yet, as Taylor aptly observes, it is not only possibilities that have been introduced. For many, the proliferation of options has led to heightened anxiety and rendered every subsequent choice tenuous and unstable. Whatever our assessment of this kind of modern individualism, it seems impossible to undo its effect on the way we conceive of the transition to adulthood.

> During their twenties, emerging adults try on different selves and even different worldviews through educational pursuits, jobs, relationships, travel. The goal in all this exploration is an answer to the omnipresent question: Who am I?

The priority of identity formation

According to Arnett, the first, defining feature of emerging adulthood is the profound emphasis on self-construction and identity formation. The twenties, it seems, is an extended period of self-reflection and experimentation as emerging adults try on different selves and even different worldviews through educational pursuits, jobs, relationships, travel. The goal in all this exploration is an answer to the omnipresent question: Who am I?

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3 Charles Taylor, "Three Malaises," in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), 16.

As a developmental psychologist, Arnett predictably locates his discussion of identity formation within that wider field. In his explanation of identity formation as a task of emerging adulthood, he notes that he is departing from earlier theories that saw this psychological revolution primarily as a function of adolescence. But Arnett contrasts the tentative and transient identity explorations of adolescents with the more serious and identity-focused explorations of emerging adulthood. Each change of college major, each new job or relationship, each unpaid internship is part of a search for that elusive fit that will move an individual toward a more stable understanding of personal identity and vocation. Hovering over all this exploration is the sovereign emerging adult self that is picking and choosing which elements will constitute the completed identity project.

The orientation toward the self

Arnett states quite baldly that there is no time of life that is more self-focused than emerging adulthood. Adolescents, while experiencing a growing level of independence, are still dependent on their parents or community of origin for a fair degree of structure in their lives. And by the age of thirty, most people have established a home of their own, with a new set of commitments and obligations. But between the ages of eighteen and thirty, a remarkable period of freedom has opened, in which emerging adults learn to make independent decisions, both large and small, even as they continue to experience some of the material benefits of adolescence (mainly financial support from parents). And in Arnett's view, the self-focus of emerging adulthood is a good thing, a stage of development that is good, necessary, and temporary. For Arnett, emerging adulthood is not necessarily a time of narcissistic self-absorption but rather a temporary and calculated look inward, prior to taking on the expected responsibilities of adulthood. Moreover, this self-focus contains a clear goal of learning to stand on one's own two feet.

Not all share Arnett's positive assessment of this aspect of emerging adulthood. US psychologist Jean Twenge describes contemporary young adults as the first generation that was born into a world that took for granted the self-importance of the individual.[4] Contemporary young adults do not need to be told they are special; their uniqueness is a taken-for-granted element of their conceptual universe. For Twenge, Arnett's optimism

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4 See, for example, Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

regarding the temporariness of this period of self-focus is unwarranted. Rather, she sees deep-seated habits of heart and mind that have come to be default settings in a culture that generally reflects and encourages this self-absorption in all its members. But whatever our assessment of the health of this orientation toward the self that dominates our time, its existence is difficult to deny.

The feeling of being in between

In the lives of emerging adults, the overwhelming psychological state is that of feeling "in between," experiencing some aspects of what they understand to be adulthood but feeling as if they've not yet arrived. In Arnett's research, more than 60 percent of those aged eighteen to twenty-five gave some kind of "yes and no" response when asked whether they are adults. This number decreased significantly in polling of people in their late twenties and early thirties, but even here a full 30 percent still reported feeling in between.

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This feeling of being in between adolescence and adulthood also points toward growing instability around the definition of adulthood. In Arnett's work among college students, he describes a quiet revolution that has taken place in their understanding of what actually constitutes entry into adulthood, and specifically in the relative obsolescence of the role transitions that have so often been assumed to be its key indicators. Instead, Arnett discovered a consensus around the assumption that to become an adult has far more to do with *self-sufficiency*. He suggests three specific components of this new consensus on self-sufficiency: (1) accepting responsibility for oneself, (2) making independent decisions, and (3) achieving financial independence. What is noteworthy about this definition is the way it, for the most part at least, requires subjective evaluation rather than social recognition. After all, how does one evaluate when one has accepted responsibility for oneself? What constitutes an independent decision? In both cases, it is the individual who assesses when an appropriately adult level of self-sufficiency has been reached, and it is

precisely this subjectivity that seems to produce the uncertainty that many young adults feel when asked whether they have arrived.

Finally, for a significant number of young adults the explanation of this experience of feeling in between is rooted in their own negative assessments of adulthood. Indeed, there seems to be a kind of ambivalence around whether adulthood is a desirable destination. They clearly perceive it on the horizon—nearly all emerging adults anticipate a time when they will settle into more traditional roles as spouses, employees, and parents— yet there is a palpable sense that it should be put off as long as possible. They have seen the future, and they don't want it—at least not yet. So the feeling of being in between is not only a diagnosis of uncertainty in the midst of transition; it can also be seen as a judgment about the content of adulthood as it has been offered to them.

The experience of possibilities and anxiety

This description of emerging adulthood should not lead us to deny the real anxiety that many young people experience in the transition to adulthood. The young person coming of age in many Western contexts is, to use Kay Hymowitz's memorable phrase, "stunned with possibility."[5] Most young adults have been faced with the What are you going to do with your life? question for much of their adolescence, but the twenties are the time when this question moves from the horizon to the unavoidable foreground. The possibilities are almost endless for some, particularly those whose socioeconomic status offers a wide range of opportunities. But even those who do not have access to so many resources still face pressures in a cultural context saturated with the message that they have a sacred duty to be true to themselves and pursue their passions.

> While the stereotype of young adulthood may portray it as an extended spring break, the combination of individualized and subjective assumptions around adulthood places increasing demands on the self, sometimes stressing it beyond what it can readily bear.

5 Kay S. Hymowitz, *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 35.

It is this context of limitless possibility and enforced choice that emerging adults confront. It can be seen as a root cause of the anxiety and mental health struggles that Arnett observes increasingly characterize this stage of life. While the stereotype of young adulthood may portray it as an extended spring break, the reality is much more ambiguous. The combination of individualized and subjective assumptions around adulthood places increasing demands on the self, sometimes stressing it beyond what it can readily bear.

What does emerging adulthood mean for young adults and the church?

The connection between the contemporary Western experience of coming of age and the life of the church is simultaneously obvious and unclear. We are, by this point, awash in data and analysis around the so-called exodus of young adults from the church. It has become somewhat common to note that something is happening in the transition to adulthood that is destabilizing for religious faith. And while there has been much good reflection around how the church can use this as a moment for self-reflection—for a sober assessment of how the contemporary church has become either inhospitable to or unpalatable for contemporary young adults—I want to suggest that there is also a crucial need to take stock of our relationship to a culture that offers much incentive to reflect on identity but few resources for anchoring those reflections in anything beyond our subjectivity. I conclude with two questions that I believe the church will need to address in order to engage meaningfully and faithfully with emerging adults.

The first question is: *What pictures of maturity are we holding in front of our young people?* In a context where adulthood has been collapsed into psychologized notions of self-sufficiency, and where youth is cherished and sought as a commodity over the entire lifespan, how can the church reflect a picture of maturity—in life and in faith—that offers an alternative? What would it look like for the church to prioritize maturity? What would it look like for us to tell stories and celebrate exemplars not just of those at the entry point of faith but of those who have achieved a stable, settled conviction? How would we describe this kind of maturity? Could we? What would it mean to point to these stories as indicators of the transforming power and activity of God?

The second question: *What does it mean to suggest that we as members of the church are to find our truest and most durable sense*

of who we are **in Christ?** "Identity in Christ" can easily become a Christian slogan or a euphemism for conversion. But in the context of this particular conversation, I would argue that we need a rehabilitated notion of how our faith in Christ—in his life, death, and resurrection—provides a reference point for our selves that relieves us of the anxiety-riddled burden of self-construction and the nervous pursuit of self-sufficiency. Paul writes, in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." There is much to ponder in this short sentence. It names the fact that there is an "I" that needs to be crucified. It names the self as the site of conflict and struggle, an awareness that is a crucial necessity in a time when we are trained only to trust—never to interrogate—what we find within ourselves. It locates salvation "in Christ" not as a religious transaction but as a recovery of a true "I," the I that is created by God, loved by God, and reconstituted by God in Christ. This progression—from "I" to "not I" to "I in Christ"—is the mark of the beautiful and enduring pattern of Christian discipleship.

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This pathway is not new, of course. But it needs to be learned afresh in every generation. Emerging adulthood is not the first term used to express our hopes and frustrations about the next generation. But it is often as we contemplate the progress of successive generations that we are forced to clarify the inheritance that we are wittingly or unwittingly passing on. This contemplation offers us a diagnostic for our souls and opportunities to examine what we are aiming toward. After all, we are the pictures of adulthood that our children will either aspire to or judge as inadequate.

In this sense, our ultimate task as churches is to create a space where this essential intergenerational conversation can happen. Crucially, it means that we need a better vocabulary for describing the goal that we are aiming toward. *Adulthood* is not a very inspiring term to name that goal. It can imply nothing more than the passage of time. But consideration of such terms can offer us a way into a larger, deeper, more profound

conversation around what it means, in the words of the apostle Peter, to "grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good" (1 Pet. 2.2–3).

About the author

Gil Dueck serves as academic dean at Columbia Bible College (Abbotsford, BC). Prior to this he served as instructor in theology at Bethany College (Hepburn, SK) and program director at Mennonite Central Committee Saskatchewan. This article is a reworking of material from his doctoral dissertation, "A Transformative Moment: Emerging Adult Faith Development in Conversation with the Theology of James E. Loder," which was completed in May 2017. Gil lives with his wife, Shelley, and their three daughters in Abbotsford.