

# Presenting the Gospel to Generation X

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## An essay Response to Tom Beaudoin's Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X

In his widely-acclaimed book, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), Tom Beaudoin offers what he believes are four characteristics of GenX religiosity. These characteristics are:

1. Suspicion of Institutions, including Religious Institutions
2. Emphasis upon Religious Experience, both Personal and Communal
3. Awareness of the Religious Significance of Suffering
4. Acceptance of Ambiguity and Doubt at the Core of One's Faith

My purpose in this brief essay is not to provide a detailed description of this book's contents. I will assume that those interested in Gen X spirituality will have already read this tome. My purpose, instead, is to offer reasons why Xers should find a Wesleyan/Holiness theological perspective preferable to other perspectives as Xers venture on their spiritual quest. In short, I believe that the gospel, as witnessed to by the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition, offers Gen Xers a Christian way of thinking and being that meets the needs implied in the Xer characteristics Beaudoin lists.

First, although the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition has utilized institutional structures, its theological perspective – like that of other Protestant Christians – is essentially egalitarian, rather than

hierarchical. Martin Luther illustrates this egalitarianism, in opposition to Roman Catholicism, by his recognition of the universal priesthood of believers. This egalitarian bent should remind us that people do not exist for the benefit of institutions, institutions exist for the benefit of people. Wesleyan/Holiness Christians find this message at the heart of their theology, because their theology claims that all persons can respond freely to God's prevenient grace.

Second, the value that Wesleyan/Holiness Christians place upon religious experience —both individual and communal – ought to attract Xers who crave a spirituality that can be felt. Wesleyan/Holiness Christians join with Charismatics and Pentecostals in affirming that God can be directly apprehended in communal worship, as well as in everyday experiences. Wesleyan/Holiness theology emphasizes the biblical affirmation that God is omnipresent and immanent. Furthermore, the Wesleyan/Holiness church, in its various forms, can be a powerful stimulus for life-changing religious experiences as Xers establish genuinely loving relationships.

Third, the Wesleyan/Holiness theological tradition offers resources for answering the questions of evil and suffering. To begin, the God envisioned in Wesleyan/Holiness theology —unlike the static God envisioned by Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin – genuinely feels the feelings of sufferers. The cross of Christ discloses that God truly suffers; God is affected by the world's pain. Furthermore, the Wesleyan/Holiness emphasis upon genuine creaturely freedom allows one to construct a theodicy based upon the conviction that evil results from the free choices of creatures. Other theological traditions have either explicitly or implicitly denied that creatures are genuinely free. These other traditions have affirmed theories of determinism and predestination. The two Wesleyan/Holiness doctrines mentioned here (that God suffers and that evil occurs because of free creaturely choices) provide pillars to support the central Wesleyan/ Holiness claim that God loves all creatures perfectly; i.e., "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8, 16).

Fourth, being on a quest implies that the adventurer has not yet arrived. It may be, however, that the GenX adventurer has made significant decisions on his or her journey — decisions that differentiate his or her quest from the one undertaken by others. The Wesleyan/Holiness emphasis upon salvation as involving both decisional instants and an ongoing process offers assurances to GenX adventurers. It assures Gen Xers that their spiritual decisions reflect genuine encounters with God, while also assuring them that failure to "have it all together" does not negate the genuineness of their quest. Xers are likely to respond positively to this understanding of salvation as both "already" and "not yet," because it corresponds to their experience. Furthermore, the "already but not yet" character of the GenX spiritual quest corresponds with the Xer tendency to acknowledge religious ambiguity and admit having doubts about God's actions or even doubts about God's existence. Xers can agree unashamedly with the individual in Mark's gospel who says, "I believe, help me in my unbelief" (Mk. 9:24).

Now —here is my secret: I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God — that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love (*Life After God*).

There is no theological tradition whose theology is better equipped to offer Generation X a way of thinking about and living in love than the Wesleyan/Holiness one. Divine love is central to Wesleyan/Holiness theology. Love is central to Wesleyan/Holiness ethics. Love is the heart of the gospel as understood from a Wesleyan/Holiness perspective. The Gospel of love, when presented lovingly to Xers, ought to attract them to respond lovingly to the Author of love.

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