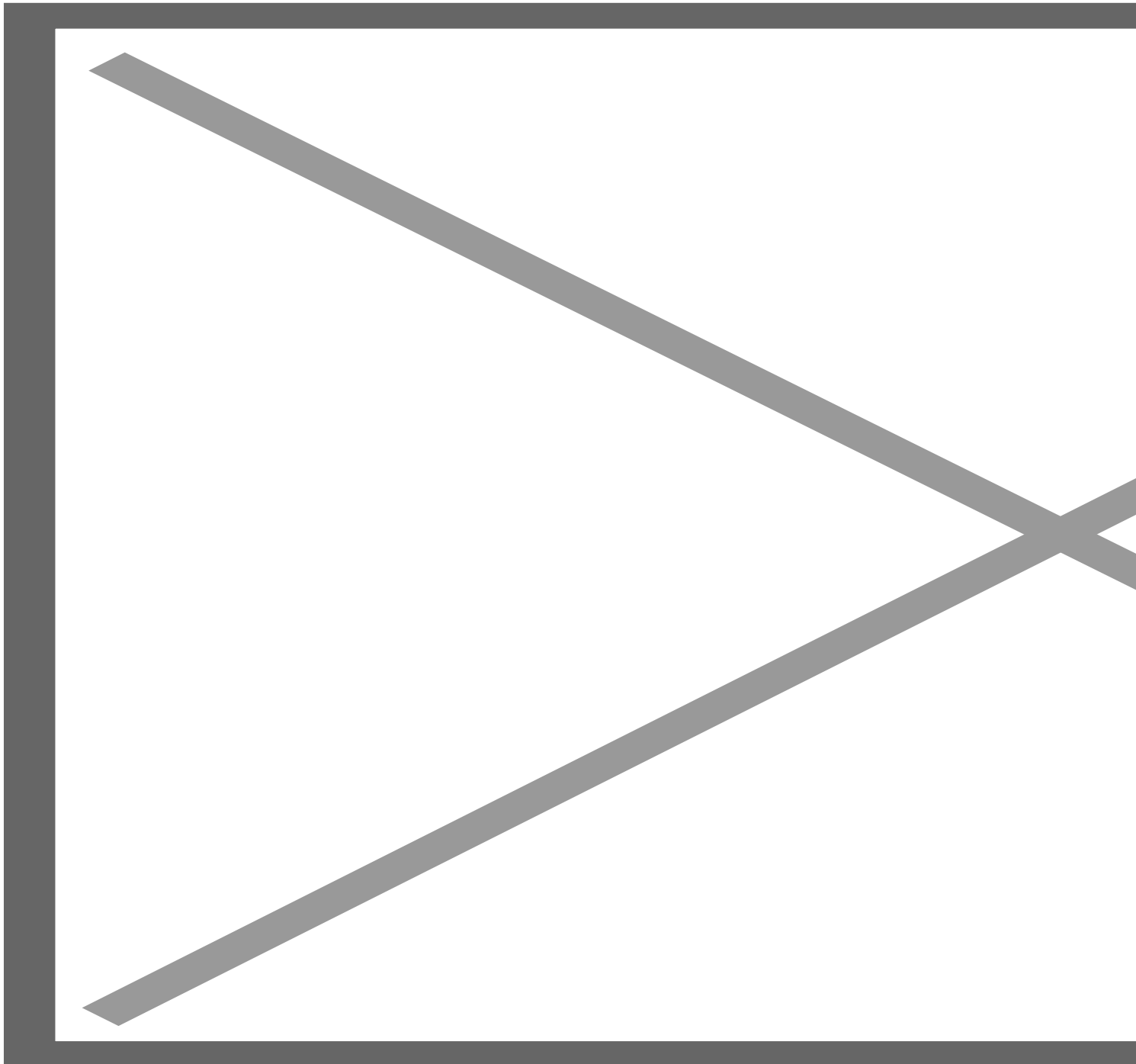


What Gen Z knows about the church

It's not that they know nothing; it's just that we don't like to talk about what they know.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#) in the [September 2026](#) issue
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We asked experienced pastors and seminary professors to put themselves in the apostle Paul's shoes: You're writing a letter to a present-day ministry leader. What issues do you want to address, and what theology can you bring to bear on them?

Dear Pastor,

I've thought about you a lot lately. I've been holding in my heart your sense of generational loneliness, your frustration that so many of your fellow Zoomers know nothing of the church although they seem to have "an open and unformed orientation to transcendence," as our friend Craig Barnes puts it. I've been pondering your suggestion that this reality presents both challenges and opportunities for those of us who are still invested in the idea of church as a thriving expression of God's people on earth.

It may be helpful to add some nuance to the conversation, because plenty of Zoomers do know something about the church (and nearly all of their parents do). We just don't like to talk about what they know. They know that the church frequently sacrifices its deepest values for the sake of political alliances, economic security, and institutional longevity. They know that the church is prone to using power and platform in a way that aligns far more closely with the norms of Whiteness and capitalism and patriarchy than with the cross of Christ. They know that the church often focuses on individuals' behavior while ignoring its own deep complicity in the structural sins that threaten the health of most of the planet's inhabitants. They know that the church covers up its mistakes far more often than it apologizes for them. They know that the church's instinct for self-preservation often supplants the gospel's message of self-sacrifice for the sake of a greater good. And because they know all these things about the church, they know little of Christ.

This is hard to hear. If you're like me, you're thinking, "OK, but what you've just described isn't the real church; it's just the way the media portrays it" or "Sure, but some congregations, like [insert name of your own congregation], are better than that." But if we're honest, we must admit that all these young (and middle-aged) people, although they know little about the church and even less about Christ, are onto something. They're not wrong about the church's failures. We clergy types may be able to distinguish between the church militant and the church triumphant, to apply the same hermeneutic of forgiveness to the church as we would to any other human institution that's trying to do good in the world, and to maintain some hope that the church will—despite its many visible and invisible failings—let itself be formed by God's relentless mercy into something better tomorrow than it is today. But we can't expect the same from a generation that's largely been ignored, misunderstood, or traumatized by organized religion.

Sometimes I look at my unchurched neighbors and wonder: How is it possible that people who live in the exact same world can have such vastly divergent perspectives on the church? Where I see God's children practicing for the kingdom by working through conflict at a church council meeting, my neighbors see frustrated retirees grasping at power in the only realm where people still listen to them. When I hear a helpful exhortation to put off the old Adam, my neighbors hear an authority figure casting judgment. And here's the thing: Both of us are right.

I wonder if our old friend Martin Luther could be useful at this point because, for him, faith was all about the optics. For a person who lived 500 years before the invention of social media, Luther was surprisingly astute about both the value and the danger of the gap between appearances and reality. Epistemic uncertainty was at the core of his *Anfechtungen*, his frantic sense that he wasn't doing enough to earn God's grace, his fear that he would burn in hell eternally for failing to successfully negotiate the church's penance system here on earth.

And the manifestation of sin that plagued Luther the most wasn't pride or lust or anger; those things can be easily identified and forgiven. It was sin's noetic effect, the way it twists our reasoning and blurs our vision of God and the world and ourselves. Sin lulls us into thinking that whatever is wrong with us, we can manage it on our own. We see our failures as less powerful than they are; we perceive our abilities as greater than they are. Because of sin's noetic effect, our mind fabricates idols to trick us into a false sense of comfort. (I'm reminded here of what I've learned in anti-racism training about Whiteness: that it thrives on its own invisibility. *Why should I work to extricate myself from something that doesn't exist?*) For Luther, the most frightening aspect of sin is that it sabotages our ability to see it, and thus we mistakenly think that we have no need for Christ.

This view of sin is largely true to my own experience, and yet I suspect that sin's noetic effect on the average person has shifted since Luther's time. Hubris and false comfort don't seem to be the primary spiritual dangers afflicting Zoomers. Maybe the biggest problem these days isn't that we fail to see our own sin; maybe it's that we can only see other people's sinfulness and not their goodness. This is an intuitive claim as much as a theological one: When I look at my neighbors who view the world's problems very differently than I do, I really struggle to see their goodness. I know in theory that they bear the grace and beauty of the God in whose image they were created, but something prevents me from believing it or acting on it. Perhaps that something is the noetic effect of sin.

This side of the eschaton, the church is always going to be every bit as much *simul iustus et peccator* as are the individuals who make it up. That's easy for me to say, but another thing I've learned in my anti-racism training is that you don't know what you don't know. If people who know very little about the church can only see its glaring sins, how will they even get to the question, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Do they even have time to gaze piercingly through the church's bad optics when they're so busy organizing to protect the world from climate change, global warfare, and the concentration of power among the wealthy few? Perhaps Gen Z's open and unformed orientation to transcendence will remain forever undernourished.

Maybe the biggest problem isn't that we fail to see our own sin but that we fail to see other people's goodness.

Here again, it may be helpful to turn to Luther. It's easy to critique his faith-alone-saves theology by noting that at its heart is an epistemological requirement for salvation. You don't need to do anything to be saved; you just need to believe. But in order to believe, you have to know that you're sinful and that God alone can save you. This is why Luther found so much comfort in the theological use of the law: Like a mirror, it shows us our own sin—a revelation that drives us into the loving arms of Christ. In this model, salvation comes through grace alone . . . along with our knowledge that salvation comes to us through grace alone.

I suspect that Luther's response to this critique would be simple: Just as sin manifests in us noetically, so too does God's grace. You're overthinking it, he would say, and overthinking is its own kind of noetic error. Belief in Christ isn't something we can manufacture through an act of deliberate cognitive assent; it's trust. It's given to us through the work of the Holy Spirit and nurtured through the grace we continually receive—in word and sacrament, sure, but also in our daily lives in something as simple as reaching out to our neighbors from a stance of vulnerability, openness, and kindness. Vulnerability is frightening, because it asks us to give up certainty. But there can be real freedom in letting go of the illusion that we have all the answers.

One certainty I'm struggling to let go of these days is a principle that's upheld my ministry for decades: Institutional preservation is necessary in order for me to live out my vocation of sharing the gospel. Recently I've wondered if I got this backward. What if clinging to its own life is what keeps the church from being able to see the gospel in its fullness?

This leads me to wonder whether I've been approaching the entire issue backward as well. From the moment I began typing, I've been judging the people of your generation, analyzing how sin works in Zoomers so we can come up with a response. I haven't even started to think about the goodness in them. And that's my own noetic failure. My inability to see your generation as anything other than a problem for the church might be the biggest sin in all of this.

If we were having this conversation in person, you would have already reminded me that there's a gift in Gen Z's open and unformed orientation to transcendence, and then I would have considered that maybe the heart of the gospel for today's church is in our interaction with that very gift. I can't imagine that interaction looking anything like typical Sunday morning mainline Protestant worship. And that's more promising than frightening, because grace promises a noetic shift even greater than that of sin.

Instead of waiting for Zoomers to ask if anything good can come out of Nazareth, it might be time for the church to ask if anything good can come out of Gen Z. I wonder if we can approach that question with honesty and vulnerability and a clear sense of our noetic limits. I hope that we can take the invitation seriously when the Zoomers, the unchurched, the angry, and the uninterested reply: Come and see.

There's much more I could say. It's never a great idea to talk so much about sin without also getting into the grace part. But I've already gone on too long, and I'm eager to hear your thoughts on all of this. Perhaps we can have our next conversation over Zoom.

In the meantime, please greet Eager Intern and Exhausted Volunteer Property Manager for me. I hold you all in my prayers, and I continue to cherish your prayers on my behalf.