

The Influence of Church on Wellbeing in Adolescents and Millennials

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Abstract: This study evaluates the associations of the church, as well as its members and leadership, to wellbeing in adolescents and millennials. Subjects were surveyed about their background, personal wellbeing (feeling healthy and happy), their Christian walk, and how church affected their wellbeing. In total, 884 participants were surveyed of which the majority of participants attended church 4 or more times/month (80%); were female (73%); age 18-30 (39%); lived in the USA (56%); and were evangelical (77%). The 3 greatest church influences on wellbeing were prayer (59%); spiritual growth (56%); and praise and worship (54%). The 3 most influential factors from church leadership on wellbeing were Bible-based teaching and preaching (75%); Bible-based speech (51%); and powerful biblical vision for the church (44%). The survey results indicate that the church today is influencing the personal wellbeing of youth and millennial believers around the world.

Key Words: Millennials, Adolescents, wellbeing, church, leadership

When asked about the role of the New Testament church, biblical teachers often emphasize four primary functions of (a) worship, (b) education, (c) fellowship,

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and (d) evangelism as exemplified in Acts 2:42-47.⁵ Following Pentecost, the apostle Peter preached the resurrected Jesus as Lord and Messiah. In response, about three thousand people were so deeply moved that they repented of sin and were baptized—giving birth to the church (v. 41).

This community of new believers in Jesus “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching⁶ and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42 NIV). A spirit of awe, and worship imbued everyone as they watched God work through the apostles and many individuals who experienced profound renewal and transformation.

The believing community was uniquely characterized by mutual care, concern and generosity⁷ as they looked not only to their own interests, but to the needs of others (v. 45). The early church gave life, purpose, hope, forgiveness, healing, belonging and a sense of wellbeing to those who believed and gathered

⁵ J. Scott Horrell, “Freeing Cross-Cultural Church Planting with New Testament Essentials,” *BibSac* 174, no. 694 (April 2017): 210-25; Charles R. Swindoll, *The Bride: Renewing Our Passion for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Wayne C. Gruden, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1994); Grudem asserts three purposes of the church: (1) Ministry to God: Worship; (2) Ministry to Believers: Nurture; and (3) Ministry to the World: Evangelism and Mercy (867-68); Steven J. Lawson, “The Priority of Biblical Preaching: An Expository Study of Acts 2:42-47,” *BibSac* 158, no. 630 (April 2001): 198–217.

⁶ See Kuruvilla’s definition of a vision for preaching: “Biblical preaching by a leader of a church in a gathering of Christians for worship is the communication of the thrust of a pericope of Scripture discerned by theological exegesis, and of its application to that specific body of believers, that they may be conformed to the image of Christ for the glory of God, all in the power of the Holy Spirit.” p. 260; (Abraham Kuruvilla, “Theological Exegesis,” *BibSac* 173, no. 691 [July-September 2016]: 259–72); For a detailed discussion of the “breaking of bread” and the Lord’s Supper, see Dr. Michael Svingel’s blog post “Should We Celebrate the Lord’s Supper Every Sunday in Church?,” *RetroChristianity*, April 20, 2012, <http://bit.ly/2KUXZm9>; and book, Michael J. Svingel, *RetroChristianity: Reclaiming the Forgotten Faith* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2012).

⁷ Edmund P. Clowney and Gerald L. Bray, *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity, 1995.)

together in wondrous praise and communion.⁸ There was a peace with God and one another—a shalom⁹—that permeated this growing community of believers. “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47b). The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines wellbeing as: the state of feeling healthy and happy. Wellbeing is not a typical biblical word; it is used in the medical literature. Consequently, we use it as a word to bridge the gap between the medical literature and the Bible. Surrogate markers for wellbeing in the Bible are contentment, joy, and peace.

Like the early church, when the local church today fulfills its vital function of worship, instruction, fellowship, and outreach, it too brings glory to God and wellbeing to the body of Christ. But what is the church’s influence on the personal wellbeing of church going believers, particularly to adolescents and millennials who are the next generation of Christ followers? This question is important as discouragement appears typical in today’s church regarding its mission and effect in the world. Knowledge of the potential for enhanced wellbeing through the truth of Scripture might strengthen the resolve and persistence of church leadership.

A growing number of clinical studies suggest a connection between religion and wellbeing. In separate comprehensive reviews of peer-reviewed articles in the medical literature discussing religion and spirituality on mental and physical health, Stewart and colleagues¹⁰ and, separately, Koenig¹¹ showed that religion was generally associated with greater

⁸ Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

⁹ Barry D. Jones, *Dwell: Life with God for the World* (Wheaton, IL: InterVarsity, 2014). Jones explores shalom as the “establishment of God’s perfect peace” (Chap. 1) woven into the fabric of the whole biblical story in connection with righteousness and justice.

¹⁰ William C. Stewart, Michelle P. Adams, Jeanette A. Stewart, and Lindsay A. Nelson, “Review of Clinical Medicine and Religious Practice,” *J Relig Health* 52 (March 2013): 91-106.

¹¹ Harold GI Koenig, “Religion, Spirituality, and Health: The Research and Clinical implications,” *ISRN Psychiatry* (Dec 2012): 278730, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3671693/>.

wellbeing, improved coping with stress, and better mental health. Further, Weber and Pargament reviewed religion and spirituality and their ability to promote or damage mental health through positive or negative religious coping, community/support, and beliefs, finding that religion and spirituality can promote mental health through positive religious coping, community, and support and positive beliefs.¹²

Few studies, however, evaluate details of the Christian experience to determine negative or positive contributions to wellbeing. Several church-based surveys have demonstrated that individuals who are most adherent to the practice of Christianity demonstrate better wellbeing.

Tao studied how devout Christians can enhance their subjective wellbeing by means of high health expectations, good family relationship expectations, and sound social networks.¹³ MacIlvaine and colleagues showed that religious adherence may promote a greater sense of wellbeing and feelings of contentment, peace, purpose, and acceptance by God.¹⁴ In a separate study MacIlvaine and coworkers noted that church attendees who serve, either within the church or community, have enhanced wellbeing compared to those who do not assist others as well as greater scores for contentment, peace, joy, purpose and sense of community acceptance.¹⁵ The study found that the effect of service on wellbeing was present with just one hour a week of

¹² Samuel R. Weber, and Kenneth I. Pargament, "The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Mental Health," *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 27 (Sept 2014): 358-63. doi: 10.1097/YCO.0000000000000080.

¹³ Hung-Lin Tao, "What Makes Devout Christians Happier? Evidence from Taiwan," *Applied Economics* 40 (July 2008): 905-19. doi.org/10.1080/00036840600749839.

¹⁴ W. Rodman MacIlvaine, Lindsay A. Nelson, Jeanette A. Stewart, and William C. Stewart, "Association of Strength of Religious Adherence to Quality of Life Measures," *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* 19 (Nov 2013): 251-55, doi: 10.1016/j.ctcp.2013.05.001.

¹⁵ W. Rodman MacIlvaine, Lindsay A. Nelson, Jeanette A. Stewart, and William C. Stewart, "Association of Strength of Community Service to Personal Well-being," *Community Mental Health Journal* 50 (Jul 2014): 577-82. doi: 10.1007/s10597-013-9660-0.

volunteer time. Further the enhanced wellbeing could be gained by Christian service both inside the church or in the community.

The lack of more complete data regarding the church and wellbeing is especially true for adolescents and millennials who will be the main adult foundation of the church in the coming decades.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the associations of the church, as well as its members and leadership to wellbeing in adolescents and millennials.

The survey was developed internally at Teleios, Inc., to address issues related to church leadership and wellbeing. Subjects were asked about their background, personal wellbeing, their Christian walk, and how church affected their wellbeing. Survey advertisements were placed on InstaPray (<https://www.instagram.com/instapray>), a Christian Instagram account. The survey was administered through Survey Monkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com>).

Results

In total, 884 participants were surveyed. We defined adolescents as middle and high school age and millennials ages 18-34. The majority of participants attended church at least 4+ times/month (80%); were female (73%); ages 18-30 (39%); resided in the USA (56%, Table 1); had college or post-graduate degree (30%); employed (37%) and evangelical (77%).

Table 1: Geographic location of respondents

Answer	Percent
United States	56%
Asia	16%
Europe	13%
Africa	5%
Canada	4%
Other (less than 3% incidence per country)	7%

Generally, the young participants had good wellbeing and among potential surrogate markers of wellbeing: peace, joy, contentment, and purpose with ratings of 4.6 to 5.0 (scale of 0 to

6. The higher the grade the better the wellbeing). Interestingly, among these young people their Christian walk was the most positive contributor to their personal wellbeing (5.2) with the church worship service coming in second (5.0). The only measure close to these two was their family (4.9, Table 2).

Table 2: Activity ratings contributing to personal wellbeing (Scale 0-6, 6 being best)

Answer	Rating
Personal walk with God	5.2
Church worship service	5.0
Family	4.9
Friends	4.5
Church activities	4.4
Church members	4.3
Professional or student life	4.1
Church leadership	4.0
Health and fitness	4.0
Community service	3.7
Personal finances	3.5

Most participants were adherent to their Christian walk at some level, attending church once a week or more, and participating in prayer and worship. However, they less often were involved in direct Bible study, biblically-based fellowship, teaching others, or sharing the gospel message (Table 3).

Table 3: How often participants did the following?

Answer	Never	A few times/ year	Once/ month	A few times/ month	Once/ Week +
I attend church	4	29	23	123	704
I study the Bible directly	26	66	32	127	632
I pray to God	1	4	3	28	848
I praise God	1	8	5	16	853
I teach others directly from the Bible	161	186	62	176	299
I verbally share the Gospel message with an unbeliever	165	328	87	151	149
I have Christian fellowship discussing biblical topics	86	103	58	141	493

Amazingly, the church's influence on wellbeing did not differ generally between youth and millennials ($P=0.084$) or among world regions including the USA, Europe, Asia, and commonwealth countries ($P=0.394$).

Church and Its Young Members

Participants were asked to select up to three of the greatest influences on wellbeing from their church and its members from a list of 12 (Table 4) from which the most common contributors were the following:

Prayer (59%) – Prayer is a cornerstone of the Christian walk, allowing believers to come directly before God, unafraid with their petitions (Heb 10:20-22, Phil 4:6). The church might assist prayer by acting as a guide to attendee’s supplications to God, a more expansive prayer experience, and promoting prayer in member’s lives.

Spiritual growth (56%) - Participants generally recognized the church helps them in their Christian walk to become mature believers. The church can do this in many ways but might help best by promoting biblical activities leading to maturity as expressed in the earliest church: prayer, praise, fellowship, outreach, and teaching (Acts 2:42, 47).

Praise and worship (54%) – Acknowledging God for his righteous character and actions is critical for a healthy Christian life. Praise allows believers to remind themselves that his thoughts and goals are greater than theirs. God deserves praise (Heb 13:15, Ps 147-150).

Emotional support (38%) - This finding is heartening in that young believers looked to the church, perhaps specifically to the church leadership or their Christian colleagues, to help them through life with sympathy and advice. Access for young Christians, desiring support from believing peers, is an important function of the church.

Comfortable and pleasing worship surroundings (35%) - Indeed, a beautiful church, often combined with lovely accoutrements, inspiring music, prayer, and liturgy can combine to create an awe-inspiring and encouraging ambiance.

Table 4: Percent respondents believing specific church activities that assist wellbeing?

Answer	Percent
Prayer	59%
Assist spiritual growth	56%
Encouraging praise and worship	54%
Emotional support	38%
Bible-based fellowship	38%
Comfortable and pleasing worship surroundings	35%
Opportunities for service and outreach	25%
High quality small group	18%
My needs are met	11%

Nonetheless, Christians are instructed to take our Christian walk beyond the emotional satisfaction of church worship and friendships and practice our faith daily. Over time, Scripture indicates that believers should become confident in their relationship with God through knowledge and understanding; emotional stability, making correct decisions between right and wrong as well as teaching others (Heb 5:11-14, Col 1:27-2:3, 3:16-17, Eph 5:15-19).

The above results are encouraging in the emphasis of spiritual growth, prayer and praise, and church attendance among young Christians. However, another interesting finding is that Christian adolescents have the same desires for their church experience as the young adult generation and across cultures ($P > 0.087$). It appears the Holy Spirit is using the Bible, parents, church members, leaders, and teachers to help form the next generation of believers across the globe to carry forth in unity God's great work.

Church Leadership

The effect of church leadership on wellbeing differed statistically among the adolescent and millennial age groups ($P > 0.05$), but not for international regions ($P = 0.69$; Table 5). Participants were asked to select up to 3 of the most influential

factors on wellbeing from a list of 12 of which the most common were:

Bible-based teaching and preaching (75%) – It is encouraging to see such an important cornerstone of church function chosen so frequently by young evangelicals. We know that the teaching of God's word is a vital function of the church. Such teaching occurs not only in the Sunday sermon, but in Sunday school, small groups, discipleship relationships, and self-study. Certainly, much fruit can be anticipated in believers' lives by knowing Scripture (1 Tim 3:2, 4:6, 12, 16; 2 Tim 2:2, 25-26).

Bible-based speech (51%) - This choice was a pleasant surprise. This topic often is under stressed in church life. The Bible wisely indicates our speech should be primarily for the hearer, to meet their needs, and not for the speaker (Eph 4:29, 5:17-18; Col 3:16-17, 4:6).

Powerful biblical vision for the church (44%) - Participants perceived that the church leadership helps their wellbeing by directing the church in biblically based goals. Indeed, the church functions primarily to outreach to the world as well as to equip its own members to go out and impact the community for the gospel, build Christian community as well as for our cultural good (Matt 28:20; 1 Tim 2:1; Gal 6:10; 1 Thess 3:12, 5:15).

Table 5: Percent respondents believing how church leadership helps wellbeing?

Answer	Percent
Bible-based teaching and preaching	75%
Encouraging, Bible-based speech	51%
Powerful biblical vision for the church	44%
Supporting church programs	31%
Effective pastoral care	30%
Willingness to undertake church discipline	17%
Assisting my needs	16%

Harmful Effects of the Church on Wellbeing

Participants were asked to choose the most negative influences on wellbeing from their church and church leaders separately, each from a list of 14. Remarkably, there was a relatively low percent of complaints regarding the church and its

leaders among participants. Again, there was a unified response across age groups ($P=0.67$), but not regions ($P>0.05$). However, there were several themes that were associated with poor wellbeing.

Favoritism (19%) –We know of no research on church leadership and favoritism that explores whether it is intended or mostly unintentional. In addition, the participant’s lack of social skills and expectations that might accompany youth could have played a role in the perceived favoritism. More research is needed in this unexplored topic.

Poor communication (14%) - Concerning church members the most cited issue diminishing wellbeing was negative communication skills. Again, this is a little studied area. As mentioned above, Scripture admonishes that speech is not intended for the speaker but to love others (John 14:21).

Accordingly, Teleios research has shown that church attendance can be associated with self-serving goals that might be a source of negative speech habits such as control of a church function as a power base, as well as seeking emotional support and having personal needs met (Teleios, internal data).

Significance of the Survey Findings

What do these data indicate for today’s church? Several potential results are the following:

Healthy young people - Although we do not have an exact worldwide incidence, we know from this survey that there exists a spiritually active population of adolescents and millennials who visit Christian-based social media and appear intent in their faith. They also report good wellbeing for which their church and Christian walk are the primary progenitors of their healthy mental state, especially in prayer, praise, and church attendance.

No difference in age - We observed surprisingly little difference between older youth and other age groups regarding wellbeing, the influence of church on wellbeing, and their views of the church and its leadership.

Geographic unity – We also noted little divergence between geographic populations regarding general wellbeing, the influence of church on wellbeing, and their views of the church and its leadership. Young Asian people appeared to be slightly

more displeased with leadership in terms of favoritism and hypocrisy, and among other members by negative speech patterns, but the difference was not significant ($P>0.05$).

Healthy churches and leadership - The survey results are very positive in that not only are the youth responding to the survey healthy mentally and spiritually, but the churches and leadership themselves provide a positive experience for which the level of complaints are surprisingly low. Further, the same positive findings were found in the millennial age group. This is a surprise since they have a reputation in the popular press for being demanding and self-focused.¹⁶

Next Steps

Based on the results of this study, what work still needs to be done in the local church?

Teach the Word - The desire for God is evident in the participants in this survey yet also there are some apparent imbalances in the Christian life. The survey implies, and from our own experience, that young people need to know the Scriptures to be able to accurately apply them to their lives and see the accompanying fruit.

Pastors and leaders should be careful that they teach the Bible directly from the text. Those young people who are truly believers long for God's word and the Bible need not be hidden or neglected. Perhaps those who seem less desirous to hear Scripture and want other functions in the church do not yet understand God's saving grace and need to hear the gospel itself.

Promote complete adherence to the Christian walk - While prayer, fellowship and praise are essential for the believer's maturation, a true Christian can experience even further growth through studying and teaching God's truth to others. This discipline of teaching others cultivates healthy accountability to comprehend, organize and articulate biblical truth. Further, it is the struggle to produce fruit in other people's lives that helps

¹⁶ Jada A. Graves. "Millennial Workers: Entitled, Needy, Self-Centered?" *US News and World Report*, 2012, <https://money.usnews.com/money/careers/articles/2012/06/27/millennial-workers-entitled-needy-self-centered>.

them grow beyond their own inward-looking experience (Col 1:10). Young Christians need to learn basic Bible study methods to teach others from the Scripture.

Spread the Gospel - Additionally, young believers need to share their faith. This is how the church grows in size and maturity. However, it needs to be the specific verbal gospel message. Interestingly, Teleios found that sharing the explicit plan of salvation was number five in the list of preferred methods of sharing the gospel in a well-taught evangelical church (Teleios, internal data).

Encourage one another – pastors and lay leaders should teach their congregation even more how to speak and not to speak to one another in a biblical manner. Biblically-based speech should be encouraged from all believers so that we can better encourage each one another.

More preferred methods were lifestyle example, praying for others, encouraging others and loving them. Further, participants confessed that they did not even know how to verbalize the gospel to somebody else. Pastors should be careful to teach the gospel in their sermons and Sunday school and individual conversations.

Summary

The survey results indicate that the church today is influencing the personal wellbeing of youth and millennial believers around the world. Young people from both age groups and geographical regions are devoted to God and to their local church. Overall the participants have good wellbeing and hold a positive attitude toward their church and church leadership.

This research suggests that the Holy Spirit through the preaching and teaching of God's word, worship, encouraging fellowship, and outreach is at work in building unity among local congregations from around the world. More research is needed to more fully understand the impact the local church is having on the next generation of Christ-followers.