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## Why Aren't 'Emerging Adults' Emerging as Adults?

*The church would demonstrate the power of the gospel in a whole new way by assisting young people into the successful and faithful transition to adulthood, celebrating this transition as a matter of spiritual maturity to the glory of Christ.*

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*The New York Times Magazine* addresses an important question in its August 22, 2010 cover story — “What Is It About 20-Somethings?” With this cover story, the venerable newspaper gives cultural attention to a phenomenon some now call “failure to launch.” In her article, writer Robin Henig probes this issue with care and insight. In all probability, this cover story will be discussed for years to come.

The reason for this becomes clear once you read the essay. Henig lets her readers understand the scale of the issue — we are not talking about a passing phenomenon that is linked to the economic recession. We are talking about a major change in the way young people move toward adulthood . . . if they are moving toward adulthood.

As Henig summarizes:

*It's happening all over, in all sorts of families, not just young people moving back home but also young people taking longer to reach adulthood overall. It's a development that predates the current economic doldrums, and no one knows yet what the impact will be — on the prospects of the young men and women; on the parents on whom so many of them depend; on society, built on the expectation of an orderly progression in which kids finish school, grow up, start careers, make a family and eventually retire to live on pensions supported by the next crop of kids who finish school, grow up, start careers, make a family and on and on. The traditional cycle seems to have gone off course, as young people remain untethered to romantic partners or to permanent homes, going back to school for lack of better options, traveling, avoiding commitments, competing ferociously for unpaid internships or temporary (and often grueling) Teach for America jobs, forestalling the beginning of adult life.*

The focus of Henig's article is on young people in their 20s — a period she describes as a “black box.” As a generation, they are constantly moving residence (one-third move each year), changing jobs (average is seven jobs in their 20s), and moving back home with parents (one-third at least once). Two-thirds cohabitate with “a romantic partner” and delay marriage until their late 20s.

Henig cites one sociologist who calls all this “the changing timetable for adulthood.” How big a change? Consider this: In 1960, the vast majority of young adults had, by the time they reached 30, accomplished the five standard milestones used to measure adult status. These milestones include completing school, leaving home, getting married, having a child, and establishing financial independence. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, less than one-half of all young women reached these milestones by age 30 in 2000. Even more concerning — less than one third of all young men did.

So, young people are moving into adulthood later and later, and young men even later than young women. According to psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett of Clark University, this represents a new “distinct life stage” like adolescence. He calls it “emerging adulthood.”



Look closely at how Henig reports the way Arnett describes this development: “Among the cultural changes he points to that have led to ‘emerging adulthood’ are the need for more education to survive in an information-based economy; fewer entry-level jobs even after all that schooling; young people feeling less rush to marry because of the general acceptance of premarital sex, cohabitation and birth control; and young women feeling less rush to have babies given their wide range of career options and their access to assisted reproductive technology if they delay pregnancy beyond their most fertile years.”

The radical nature of this transformation grows more evident with that description, as do the reasons that Christians should be especially concerned.

The attention now given to “emerging adulthood” parallels the rise of adolescence early in the twentieth century. Sociologists, psychologists, educators, and a host of others began to argue for the recognition of adolescence as a distinct and essential life stage. This led to a host of legal, educational, and cultural accommodations. Now, the same recognition is urged for “emerging adulthood.”

Not all are buying the argument. For one thing, it seems that young people without the luxury of time and money move rather more quickly into adulthood. Everyone has to go through puberty. Not every young person experiences this extended adolescence.

Richard Lerner, a specialist in developmental science at Tufts University, says that Arnett has failed to prove his case for emerging adulthood as a distinct life stage. In order to qualify as a life stage, it must be a universal and essential experience, he explains. Clearly, it is not.

Who or what is to blame? Social and economic forces do play a part in this story, as do “helicopter parents” who are complicit in their offspring’s delayed entry into adulthood. Henig does a good job of showing how many parents seem to be quite happy with children who remain attached and dependent. “It can be hard sometimes to tease out to what extent a child doesn’t quite want to grow up and to what extent a parent doesn’t quite want to let go,” she explains.

There is an intense focus on the self that emerges in how many of these young people explain their delayed adulthood. “When is there time to just be and enjoy?” asked a 25-year-old young woman identified as “Jennifer.” Just one generation ago, a young woman her age would have been, on average, married and well on her way to motherhood.

Christians must look at this phenomenon with great concern — not because we would heap scorn on this generation of young adults, but because we are concerned for them and for the long-term impact of this delay of the acceptance of adult responsibilities. It is not just that they are AWOL from adulthood and its responsibilities. They are also missing the joys, consolations, challenges, and responsibilities that make for maturity and long-term flourishing. They will pay a steep price for this delay, and we will pay it with them.

There are deep spiritual concerns here as well. The extension of adolescence (itself a dubious and problematic life stage) means further delay in accepting the kinds of roles and responsibilities that make for mature Christians. And the dangers are clear. As this report highlights, the extension of adolescence into the 20s was culturally facilitated by the acceptance of premarital sex.

Every family and local congregation has its work cut out for it in facing this challenge. The church would demonstrate the power of the gospel in a whole new way by assisting young people into the successful and faithful transition to adulthood, celebrating this transition as a matter of spiritual maturity to the glory of Christ. These young adults are desperately needed for the cause of Christ, and many are indeed making their way into authentic adulthood with faithfulness, energy, conviction, and excitement. Let’s pray that their example is infectious.

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I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at [mail@albertmohler.com](mailto:mail@albertmohler.com). Follow regular updates on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler](http://www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler).

Robin Marantz Henig, “[What Is It About 20-Somethings?](#)” *The New York Times Magazine*, Sunday, August 22, 2010.

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