

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to ONEGEN. My name is Ben Shanks. I'm the Associate Pastor for Worship and Young Adults here at NorthernLife.

I'm recording this right now in the middle of cold and rainy May in 2026. But this podcast is a recap of the vision message that I gave at ONEGEN One in sunny and warm January, 2026.

I thought it might be worth just re-recording this message and putting it out on the pod to give some context for what ONEGEN is all about.

THE CHAIN OF DISCIPLESHIP

I want to invite you to think of the main person that is the reason why you're a Christian, as in the person who had the most significant influence on your faith. For me, it's my dad.

If my dad wasn't a Christian, I don't think I would be a Christian. So my dad is the most significant influence on my faith. Now, I want to invite you to think of who that person is for you, the most significant influence on your faith.

Now, imagine that they're standing next to you and you're holding their hand. So I'm standing next to my dad and I'm holding my dad's hand. All right, you got that?

So now imagine who your person's person is, meaning your kind of grandfather, grandmother in the faith, the person who disciplined the person who disciplined you.

Now keep that chain going back and back and back and back and back throughout the generations, all the way back to Jesus and the time of the apostles.

There's a good chance that this chain of persons, this chain of discipleship is around 100 people long. That is an astonishingly small amount of people to go from you and I right now, all the way back to the time of Jesus.

DISCIPLESHIP THROUGHOUT CHURCH HISTORY

Imagine this chain of persons holding hands. Then think about the fact that every single generation in that chain has to learn how to follow Jesus in their time with its unique opportunities and challenges.

So to give an illustration, way back at the start of the chain in the first century, the challenges and opportunities that that generation faced was something like this.

They had no New Testament yet. I mean, the apostles, Peter and Paul and the others, they were writing their letters, but there was no unified body called the New Testament that we had right now. So that is a significant challenge to faith.

And the way that that first generation responded is that they learned how to cling to the teaching of the apostles because that is all they had.

Those stories, the gospel message that the apostles brought to them, they had to hold on to because it is all they had. Now imagine a couple of people later. We're now in the second century.

We're in the time of persecution under the Roman emperors like Nero. The main challenge that this generation is facing is how do you remain faithful to Jesus when you might lose your life for professing him as Lord? That is a significant challenge.

Now follow me, a couple of generations later, in the fourth century, this is the time of the emperor Constantine's conversion, the edict of toleration.

This is the moment when Christianity becomes the official, legal religion of the entire Roman Empire. Now on the surface, that kind of sounds like it's a really good thing. It's a great thing that Christianity has spread so far.

But what it did to the church in the fourth century is that suddenly, everyone kind of is a Christian, whether they are a Christian or they're not.

And so the church is kind of corrupted with this sense of people who say they're a Christian, but they don't really live like they're a Christian. And the way that the church responded in the fourth century was with the movement of monasticism.

Faithful Christians withdrew from society and formed these communities where they were faithful to Jesus for the sake of sharing the gospel with the world.

Okay, now skip, skip, skip, skip, skip, skip, all the way to the 16th century, we're in the time of the Protestant Reformation. The Catholic Church has gone pretty rogue, they're selling indulgences and doing some pretty wild things.

And so that generation of Christians has to learn how to be faithful to God and to scripture in the midst of the context that they're in. What about in the 19th century where we're almost done?

The 19th century, slavery is rampant across the United States and the British Empire. And that generation of Christians, William Wilberforce and others like him, have to learn what it is to be faithful to Jesus in their time.

Christians were on the forefront of the movement to abolish slavery in the British Empire and the United States. What about 1940s Germany? Imagine living under the Nazi regime.

Well, that's what a generation of Christians had to live through. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other Christians around him were wrestling with a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler.

This is a real challenge that they had to face because of the context that they were in. So finally, what about 2026 Sydney? What are our opportunities and challenges?

You and I are only here believing in the gospel because of the generations that came before us.

Every single generation in the chain of persons from the 1st century to the 21st century has to follow Jesus in their time with its unique opportunities and challenges.

THE ETERNAL GOSPEL IN THIS CULTURAL MOMENT

I guess what I'm talking about is the crossroads between the eternal gospel and this cultural moment. Now, the gospel is eternal. The gospel does not change.

It is good news for every generation. But this cultural moment does change. So there is a need for every single generation to learn what it means to follow Jesus, to believe the eternal gospel in the middle of this cultural moment.

Because if we don't, the chain breaks and it stops with us. The gospel does not pass on to the next generation. But this is what the church is for.

The church is the community of the people of God. Multicultural, intergenerational, transhistorical. The church is passing on the gospel from generation to generation.

Now, within the church, as in capital C church, is our church, NorthernLife Baptist Church.

And within NorthernLife Baptist Church is our demographic of young adults. Which brings me at last to ONEGEN. What is ONEGEN?

Well, you look at the name, ONEGEN. It's just this idea that we are kind of fundamentally one generation. You know, sociologists often think of generations as spanning 15 years.

And so for us, that's 18 to 32. That's 15 years. We are one generation seeking to follow Jesus with our unique opportunities and challenges.

So ONEGEN is a network of life hubs of young adults who meet together every single week to search the scriptures, to pray for each other, to do community, to live life together.

And then once a month on a night called ONEGEN, we come together for relevant, helpful, biblical content that helps us make sense of the world that we live in, that helps us be faithful in the middle of this generation.

1 — SECULAR & SPIRITUAL

Now concerning this generation, I want to kind of give you three kind of top level ideas about what I see are kind of the biggest challenges that our generation is facing when it comes to Christianity.

Firstly is this secular and spiritual divide. Friedrich Nietzsche, a couple of hundred years ago said, God is dead. It's not this idea that we killed God, but just that human beings have generally come to realize that we don't need God.

So God is dead. That is what secularism is all about. It's the removal of God from the picture.

We live in a world that is deeply, deeply secular. It is trying to remove God from the equation. The problem is God cannot be removed from the equation because he created everything and his presence fills everything. And so we want to learn how to be a spiritual people, people who believe in God, who walk with God in the middle of a secular generation.

2 — INFORMED BUT UNFORMED

Secondly, we are informed but unformed. We live in what many have called the information age.

We have access to more information in our pockets than any generation in the history of the world has ever had. We have sermons upon sermons upon sermons. We have Bible project.

We have AI. We have the internet. We have so much information, but there is a cosmic gap between information and formation.

And all this information that we have in our pockets is doing little to transform the deepest part of our person, our spirit, our heart, in order that we might be people of love.

In fact, the information age is not forming us, but de-forming us into what sociologists have dubbed the anxious generation. We are more anxious than any generation on record.

3 — ADMIRERS NOT APPRENTICES

Thirdly, concerning Christianity, I think our biggest challenge is that we are formed to be admirers, not apprentices. So we look at Jesus and we like him. He did awesome things.

He said lovely things. But we are tempted to adopt a vision of Christianity that is admiring from afar without coming under apprenticeship to him.

We believe at this church that Christianity is an invitation to the good life with God, that we are invited to become apprentices of Jesus himself, that he would teach us how to live and how to love the way that he did.

CONCLUSION

So those kind of three things, secular, spiritual, informed, but unformed, and admirers, not apprentices. The way I see it, those are three of the biggest challenges for our generation to be faithful to Jesus in our time.

And that's what ONEGEN is all about. We want to be a generation that is faithful to God in the midst of our unique opportunities and challenges. So let me read for us a prayer from Ephesians chapter three to finish.

For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

I pray that out of His glorious riches, He may strengthen you with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be

filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.

To him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.
Amen.