



BECOMING A MULTIGENERATIONAL CHURCH

Psalm 145

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The Gap Has Become a Canyon

Today there is a major difference between the way in which younger people and older people view the world. At least this is the conclusion of a recent Pew Research study intended to probe more deeply into today's generation gap.

The survey asked whether younger and older people differed on eight core values or traits: their work ethic, moral values, religious beliefs, racial and social tolerance, musical preferences, use of new technology, political beliefs and the respect they show others. Here's the upshot, according to the directors of this study: "The answers to these questions are unambiguous. By lopsided majorities, the public agrees that a generation gap exists on each of the eight values tested."¹

Lopsided majorities indeed: 86% said their use of technology was different; 86% said their preference in music was different; 80% said their work ethic was different; 80% said their moral values were different; 78% said their respect for others was different; 73% said the same about their political views; 70% said their attitudes toward other races and groups was different; and, last but not least, 68% said their religious beliefs were different.

All in all, then, this study demonstrates that a whopping 79% of the public says there is a generation gap between younger and older people. Furthermore, as this study points out, this is five whole percentage points higher than what it was in 1969, at the height of the Woodstock era and countercultural revolution.

Evidently, then, in the view of the American public, the generation gap between young and old is no longer a gap; it has become a canyon. And, indeed, never in our history as a society have we felt more divided along generational lines than we do at present.

The Church's Response to the Generational Gap

Now, let me ask you: How well has the church in America responded to the growing generational divides in our society? How successful has the church been at resisting the polarization of the generations? How effective has the church been at building multigenerational communities? Or are there signs that the church in America has succumb to the same generational fracturing we see in our society?

Speaking bluntly, here's the reality: most churches in America today are carved up along generational lines like a Thanksgiving turkey, and the slices seem to be getting thinner and thinner with each passing year. Either churches are designed to only really attract one particular generation; this is the case with several of the fastest growing churches in America today, filled, say, with a vast majority of white males in their late twenties. Or churches are organized to retain multiple generations, but only by not really insisting that they interact with

¹ Paul Taylor and Richard Morin, "Forty Years After Woodstock: A Gentler Generation Gap" (Pew Research Center; August 12, 2009), p. 5.

one another; this is the case with many large and well-established churches like ours, with a whole array of ministry programs for specific age-groups.

Little wonder, then, that students of the American church are worried about the generational gap for the church's future. Listen, for example, to the opening lines of a recent book on this topic, aptly entitled, *A House Divided: Bridging the Generation Gap in Your Church*:

As the church enters a new millennium, warning signs are appearing on the horizon. The Christian church is polarizing along generational lines, and the generation gaps are intensifying this divergence.²

But let me get more to the point and ask you: How well are *we as a church* doing responding to the growing generational divides in our society? How successful has Calvary been at resisting the polarizing of the generations? How effective are we at building a truly multigenerational community? Or are there signs within our own body that we too may have succumbed to the same generational fracturing we see in our society?

Now in light of all this—this rather candid assessment and these sobering statistics—about the growing generational divides within the society and the church, we may be tempted to look with some disbelief at the words of David when he so cheerfully assures us in verse 4 of this psalm: “One generation shall commend your works to another.”

“Oh, really?” we may wonder to ourselves. One generation shall communicate good things about God to the next generation? But doesn't that require different generations actually spending time together? And not just spending time together, but interacting with one another: talking together, praying together, serving together, and worshiping together? Yet where is this robust kind of multigenerational and intergenerational interaction actually taking place within the American church today? And is this kind of cross-generational connecting actually taking place within *this church, our church, Calvary Memorial Church*?

How, then, can we communicate good things about God all the way across the gapping generational canyon? This is the question we're going to take up today. Yet this message is not going to be an exposition of Psalm 145, as would be our usual practice; instead, we're going to reflect practically on the Scriptural theme touched on in this psalm: namely, being a multigenerational community that commends God's works from one generation to the next.

How Do We Commend God Across the Generations at Calvary?

These, then, are the reasons—some of the key reasons—why one generation must commend God's works to the next generation. But now we must ask ourselves: How? In particular, let's ask ourselves how we as a church can connect cross-generationally and thus commend God across the generations here at Calvary? I have several proposals.

A definition of a multigenerational church

First, let us be clear on a definition of what it means to be a multigenerational church. By the grace of God, Calvary happens to be a church with a wonderful representation of the different generations. We have Builders and Boomers and X-ers and Millennials. This is unusual in the

² Bob Whitesel and Kent R. Hunter, *A House Divided: Bridging the Generation Gap in Your Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), p. 7.

church today, as we've already suggested. Many churches tend to have really only one or two generations.

But we also need to realize that being multigenerational as a church is not simply about representation; it's about relationships. We're not really a multigenerational church, where one generation commends the works of God to the next, by simply having a representation of the various generations meeting within these four walls. No, we are a multigenerational church in the biblical sense when the various generations actually relate to one another in meaningful ways; when the older and younger are actively engaging with one another and growing and serving together.

So let me ask you: when was the last time you had a meaningful conversation with someone either thirty years older than you, or thirty years younger than you? This is the test of whether we are connecting across the generations.

Being multigenerational must begin at home

Second, connecting across the generations must begin in home if it is ever to come to church. Friends, our homes are to be multigenerational. This does not, of course, mean that members of each generation must live with you, in the room next door! It does mean, however, that you view your home as a place where young and old connect and do life together. This was the vision for the home in the Old Testament. And this is why we're commanded in Scripture in the Book of Deuteronomy:

Only take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children's children (Deut. 4:9).

Or, as Moses goes on to explain:

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.
⁸ You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹ You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deut. 6:7-9).

The home is therefore to be a hub of activity for both the old and young alike—which, if our home has gotten old, means we'll need to intentionally reach out to the younger generations; and if our home is young, we'll need to reach out to the older generations.

Check our own attitudes

Third, we need to check our own attitudes. In particular, we must seek to cultivate the right attitudes toward those in other generations, and put to death the wrong attitudes toward those in other generations.

Perhaps the most problematic attitude of all is an attitude of judgment. We're quick to unfairly and indeed uncharitably judge generational differences. So it seems to me that both younger generations and older generations alike need a good dose of the medicine Paul prescribed to the Christians in Rome. Theirs weren't generational problems per se, but cultural problems nonetheless—which is why Paul's instruction is as timely for us as it would have been for them. Here's what he had to say to them back then; let it be a word to us all today:

Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand . . . Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother (14:4, 13).

Judgment is an attitude we must kill. In its place we must cultivate an attitude of understanding. You see, one of the challenges to multigenerational community is that we are quick to assume and slow to truly understand each other. For example, older generations tend to underestimate the impact of generational differences, while younger generations tend to overestimate them. So those of an older generation might be tempted to think: “It worked for me fifty years ago when I was their age; why shouldn’t it work for them?” On the other hand, those of a younger generation might be tempted to think: “How can those old folks even be trying to understand my life; they’ve never even seen my Facebook page.”

Again, Paul’s prescription to the Christians in Rome is right on target here:

Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up (15:2).

So too is his closing benediction to them, which really expresses the heart of one who seeks mutual understanding and harmony within a diverse body of believers:

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (15:5-7).

We must, then, check our own attitudes, because right attitudes are indispensable, if we are to be a church that truly commends the works of God from one generation to another for the glory of God.

An honest look at our own church culture and ministry structures

Fourth, we need to take an honest look at our own church culture and ministry structures. What do we do or say as a church that perpetuates generational alienation or at least encourages generational frustration? How have we designed our ministries and organized our programs that may inadvertently be exacerbating generational segregating rather than greater generational connecting?

At the risk of inviting a few Monday morning emails, let me speak a bit more candidly here and cite a few specific examples. Is it really best for our high school students to spend the vast majority of their time at church with only their own peer group? Perhaps this is why alarming numbers of them go off to college and never come back to the church. Is it really best for our senior saints to spend the vast majority of their time at church with only their own peer-group? Perhaps this is why so many seniors in so many churches so often feel alienated from the rest of the church and, in effect, ‘put out to pasture.’

Or, is it really best for the body of our church as a whole to worship in two different service styles: traditional and contemporary? —which, while not of course catering to one specific generation, nevertheless tends to divide largely along demographic lines; and thus reinforces, rather than counteracts, the generational gaps that already exist within the broader American culture?

And, perhaps most importantly, are some of you either offended or nervous about the fact that I've even brought up these examples?

A few simple steps in the right direction

*Fifth, each one of us needs to commit to taking a few simple steps in the right direction. What are these simple steps? What might this look like for you and me, and in the life of this church? Here are several:*³

1. If you're not already in one, join a Life Group. These are intentionally designed to be intergenerational; and by participating, you'll get to do life with Calvary people of different ages.
2. Consider attending a different Adult Bible Fellowship. Many of our ABF's are life-stage oriented. But in the past few years, some have chosen to attend classes comprised of those mostly older or younger than themselves. A great way to foster cross-generational connecting.
3. Step out and make it a point each Sunday to introduce yourself in the Portico to someone either twenty years younger or twenty years older than yourself. And then look for them in the following weeks and follow up with them. In other words, don't just cluster together with your peers.
4. If you go to the Traditional service, how about visiting the Contemporary Service once a month or even once a week? Or if you go to the Contemporary Service, how about doing the reverse? Go intending to connect with people you don't normally rub shoulders with.
5. Plug into one of our numerous Men's or Women's Ministry meetings or events. Women, if you're available, come to the Women's Bible Study on Tuesday mornings or Wednesday evening. Men, come to a Men's Breakfast or Men's retreat or join in one of the Men's studies. All of these are intentionally intergenerational.
6. Commit to serve in the church. There's nothing like serving together to cross generational lines. Why don't you think about serving in our Emergency Clothes Closet, or as a Sunday School teacher, or a Prayer Partner, or in the Sanctuary Choir, or with the Hospitality team, or in the Nursery or AWANA or Youth Ministries. In each of these venues, young and old serving together, side-by-side.

³ I'm indebted to one of our Calvary elders for these good and practical suggestions.

7. Adopt a college student, and invite them to lunch after a service. They would no doubt enjoy meeting someone outside their peer group and sharing a home-cooked meal.
8. Randomly invite someone of a different generation to your home or out for lunch after the services. Perhaps that sounds awkward or intimidating, but it will be enriching and beneficial for everyone.

So, you see, as important as right attitudes are, and as critical as right structures are, we don't have to wait for radical transformations on either front in order to see positive gains within the life of our church. In fact, let me say that great gains can be had in the life of our church, if each of us will commit to a few positive gestures.

What could be more important?

Several months ago Cliff Raad gave me a copy of a letter he had written to his grandchildren. I'd like to close by quoting part of it.

When you read the age of 72, you realize that you have already exceeded the 'three score and ten' that the Bible speaks of and after that, any years you get are a bonus. Perhaps the Lord will give me many more years, but if he chooses not to do so, I'm grateful for the wonderful life he has allowed me to have.

I did want to share with you, while I still have the opportunity, some of the desires of this grandfather's heart. My greatest desire for each of my grandchildren is that they would walk with God. After 72 years on this planet, I can testify without reservation that there is absolutely nothing that can compare with living your life surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't make the mistake of thinking that there are other things more important. ...

The bottom line is that I want only the best for each of you. God has been good in giving me six wonderful grandchildren. I love each of you dearly and pray almost daily for your well being, but most of all, that you would walk with God. Some day when we've all finished our time on earth, I look forward to another of our family reunions, with every one of you on hand. God bless each of you.

With all my love,
Gramps Raad

This is a wonderful example of what we've been talking about today, isn't it. One generation shall commend your works to another! And what could be more important? What could be more important for the preservation of the church, reaching each new generation with the gospel, and ultimately bringing greater glory to our Lord Jesus Christ than this: than the diversity of age groups coming together in the body of Christ and learning to commend God's works from one generation to another.

Amen.