

Bridging the Generation Gap in churches of Christ

(Based in part on an article by Gardner Hall, Biblical Insights Magazine, June 2012, p. 17; Sermon developed by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

- A. All of the people who attended here as members or immediate family of members over the past fifty years: “Where are they now? Where have they gone?” (Based on records of Tomlinson Run kept by Carl Parsons and myself between 1962 and present; actual tally may be incomplete)
 1. Passed from this life - 93
 2. Moved away - 161
 3. Still here today - 158
 4. Fallen away - 118
 5. Of the fallen away, those who did so between the ages of 15-30: 57
- B. Why have we lost and continue to lose members of the younger generations?
 1. Why does it appear that the younger generation has a propensity for unusual worship activities and different doctrinal configurations?
- C. The older generation’s answer is to create hyperbolic monsters to explain the losses, such as worldliness, error, or a generalized blame of youth itself
 1. Their panacea is more sermons on institutionalism, denominational error, sin, evil, etc.
 2. While well meaning, it’s like giving someone castor oil to cure cancer.
 3. Jude commands us to use discernment in teaching others - Jude 22-23
 4. Not all hearers develop at the same rate - Heb. 5:13-14
 5. While we use the same Gospel, there is no universal, one-size-fits-all teaching plan
- D. What is the answer?
 1. Balance. “The whole counsel of God” does not mean the parts you like best or think are the most effective.
 - a. Accounts of conversion in Acts begin where the hearer needed to begin
 - b. Truth is not at the extremes of human opinion, nor is it in the golden mean in the middle; it is where God put it in His clearly revealed word.
 2. The Spirit of Christ. Jesus did not please Himself, but acted in our best interests - Rom. 15:1-3
 - a. Begin with holding others’ best interests at heart.
 - 1) In truth, I am convinced that both generations, the young and the old, have the well-being of the other as their primary focus
 - 2) If that is the case with you, trust it is the case with others
 - b. Start seeing the need through your brother’s eyes
 - 1) Old or young, our perspectives differ with experience and life setting
 - 2) For the young, don’t be so naïve as to think that older folks are so out of touch that they can’t know what they are talking about
 - 3) Hip, cool, fashion, all change faster than the weather, and have nothing to do with a good life - Ecc. 1:4-7, 9-11

- 4) For the old, don't be so narrow as to think that the young are mistaken just because they are young
 - 5) Just because you are old doesn't necessarily mean you are right; that's not wisdom, that's bigotry - Job 32:1-12
- c. Both sides need each other in order to survive this world
- E. What are the greatest concerns facing local churches and individual Christians
1. "You judge a man by his foes as well as by his friends" (Joseph Conrad)
 2. God's people have opponents; to stand for something means one must deal with those who stand against it.
 3. To stand for truth and right means we must stand against sin and error
 4. Psalm 97:10, 119:104; Eph. 6:11-12
- F. Christians differ on which opponents produce the greatest threat to local churches and to individual Christians
1. Age and life situations often determine what we would list as the most serious problems we face

I. GREATEST ENEMIES IN THE EYES OF OLDER CHRISTIANS

A. Denominational error

1. Beginning with the restoration movement and continuing to the ecumenical movement, Christians were constantly embattled with mainstream Protestant denominations
2. Ecumenicalism has led to the "I'm okay, you're okay" doctrine of worship in the church of your choice; everyone's going to be saved anyway." Made defending their doctrine a moot point
3. But a great deal of work, preaching, writing, teaching, studies, and conversations were spent in this effort. In my library, two of every three books written before 1960 address denominationalism
4. It is necessary - 2John 9-11

B. Institutionalism

1. In the 50s through the 70s, brethren were in a constant state of militancy over institutionalism, a doctrine that took three of every four congregations into error on the work and organization of the church
2. It has degenerated into a transitional doctrine now, halfway between institutionalism and denominationalism called progressivism.
3. It is necessary to address it - 2Tim. 1:13

C. Worldliness

1. The love of the world and the immoral aspects of pop culture are evident in our changing attitudes toward what once was clearly understood to be sinful
2. Awash in a world wallowing in immoral behaviors considered acceptable and healthy, Christians' senses are dulled to the point where they not only entertain themselves with it, they dabble in it further desensitizing themselves to sin
3. It is dismissed with "That's just the world we live in" as they walk around in clothes, using language, and engaging in activities that are sinful
4. It's still important to preach on it - 1John 2:15-17

II. GREATEST ENEMIES IN THE EYES OF YOUNGER CHRISTIANS

- A. Younger Christians have a hard time seeing denominations and liberals as enemies when they are often their allies in contemporary battles against secular humanism, evolution in the classroom, postmodernism, abortion and unqualified sex education.
 - 1. Did our grandfathers foresee a time when the world became so anti-God that the denominations they debated would become allies in the battle against secularism in government and evil in the courts?
 - 2. Just an explanation; I am not trying to justify this with “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”
- B. Strong emphasis on structure and form sends the message that purpose and function are less relevant
 - 1. We’ve got the “Five acts of worship” and the “Five steps to salvation!” “We’re a sound church.”
 - 2. Not a lot of emphasis on love, outreach, prayer life, helping the poor
 - 3. You can do it right and still get it wrong - Matt. 23:23
- C. Emphasis on tradition can close the door to growth
 - 1. Woman in the south objecting to eating the Lord’s supper because the table did not have “Do this in memory of me”
 - 2. I have seen brethren pitch fits over new song books, New King James Bibles, overhead projectors, class books, etc. because “that’s not the way we used to do it”
 - 3. Young people notice it when we treat traditions as equal to the gospel
- D. Being judgmental and hyper-negative are not only unnecessary and counter-productive to preaching the gospel, they quell the interest and zeal of the young in the faith
 - 1. Michael the archangel used restraint when rebuking Satan - Jude 9

III. SO, WHO’S RIGHT?

- A. Both old and young are correct that their concerns are real spiritual dangers.
 - 1. Every enemy of Christ has the potential to subvert souls and must be addressed
 - 2. Jesus rebuked the loose, liberal Sadducees - Matt. 22:22-29
 - 3. Jesus rebuked the stifling, self-righteous Pharisees - Matt. 23:1-7
- B. Both old and young are incorrect when they focus on only one set of enemies
 - 1. It’s the enemy we are not looking for that gets us - Num. 13:30-33

Conclusion: “Older Christians who constantly complain about the young often don’t realize that if not careful, they can be grouchy, unloving, inwardly focused, and even sectarian and proud as they overlook the teaching of Jesus. Efforts of younger disciples to promote prayer and group studies are undercut when they talk about attending ungodly movies and wear tight or revealing clothing. They must remember that belittling the importance of Biblical patterns regarding church organization and worship resulted in the Roman Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ denomination, both far in their practices from the simplicity taught by Jesus. A renewed focus on Christ... will help us battle all spiritual enemies, not just those that may be unpopular within our social circles.” (Gardner Hall, Biblical Insights Magazine, June 2012, p. 17)