

A Theology of the Generations
By Justin Thacker, Head of Theology

Consider the following quotations regarding the youth of today:

The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.

The world is passing through troublesome times. The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age. They are impatient of all restraint. They talk as if they knew everything, and what passes for wisdom with us is foolishness with them. As for the girls, they are forward, immodest and unladylike in speech, behaviour and dress.

Despite what you might expect, these quotations do not come from the letters pages of the *Daily Mail* but rather the first was written in the 4th Century BC, and the second in the 13th Century. I have highlighted them because one of the perennial temptations for each new generation is to think that the issues affecting it are somehow unique compared to those that impacted all previous eras. These quotations, then, act as a reminder that what we think is new may in reality be nothing of the sort.

This is important as we consider the issue of declining church attendance by young adults today. For once again, as many of us look round our churches and see the absence of those in their 20s and 30s, we can very rapidly jump to the conclusion that what we are witnessing is a sudden and dramatic decline in that age group's participation in church.

Consider the statistics that are presented earlier on in this report. On the surface, they appear to show a dramatic decline in the attendance of 20s and 30s over the last 30 years. However, a more careful reading of those statistics reveals that the decline over the last 30 years has been taking place in *all* age groups, and that in fact the greatest decline has not been amongst those in their 20s and 30s, but actually among children under 14.

This is evident if we examine church attendance by age in comparison to the national population at that time. In 1979, children under 14 were over-represented in church by a factor of 5%. In 1989, they were still over-represented by a factor of 6%. However by 2005, their attendance had slumped such that their attendance was precisely in line with what we would expect compared to the national population. Over the same time period, 20s and 30s, were under-represented in 1979 and remain under-represented in 2005 with a slight growth in their degree of under-representation from -3% to -6.5%. So, yes it is the case that proportionately we have few 20s and 30s in our churches, but the important point is this: that under-representation is not some particularly new phenomenon. It is not occurring in unprecedented ways in our generation. It is simply continuing the under-

representation of that age group that also existed 25 years ago. The significance of this is that it means that we need not think that some terrible and dreadful thing has happened to the church in the last five or ten years, which unless we address, the future of the church is in peril. No, it is rather the case that we have problems attracting 20s and 30s, but such problems have certainly existed for the last quarter of a century and probably much longer.

And if we think about it, there are a number of very good reasons why those in their 20s and 30s might be hard to attract to church. More importantly, we can recognise that these issues apply to all 20s and 30s in every generation (at least in the modern period) and therefore have nothing to do with the particular things our churches have been doing more recently. So, those in the 20s in particular are often busy trying to build careers, find partners, experiment with life and so on. Now I'm not suggesting that those are good reasons to not attend church, but I am suggesting that they are pressures 20s face in all generations – and are not peculiar to our own. Similarly, those in their 30s are probably even more pressured in terms of career, and in addition have the added challenges of settling down in marriage and managing young families. Once again, this does not excuse non attendance, but it indicates reasons that apply to this particular stage of life that do not apply to others. My point is simply this: I would suggest that the right question to be asking if we are to tackle the issue of under-representation of 20s to 30s should not so much be concerned with what our churches have or haven't been doing in the last 5 to 10 years – the latest fads and fashions – but much more importantly we should be tackling the longer term strategic questions about why for the last quarter century and probably longer we struggle with this age group. In other words, what we require is not a 5-10 year piece of analysis, but one that is relevant for half a century.

Given this, I want to address a couple of tensions that arise as we seek to address the problem. The first is what I would call the consumerist-servant polarity, and concerns the tension that arises in balancing our desire to give young adults what they want with a proper concern to require of them a servant heart. The second tension resolves around ecclesiology and the tension that exists between seeking an all-inclusive, all-age 'church' versus the desire to frame church around one particular age-group or lifestyle. Relevant to both these tensions is the generational challenge in which we struggle to maintain the appropriate tension between allowing younger leaders the freedom to change the status quo without losing all sense of respect for the wisdom and experience of the older generations. I will address these tensions before turning to Paul first letter to the Corinthians for some guidance in how we might handle them.

The consumerist-servant polarity

Whenever a church leaders repeatedly stares out upon row upon row of older people, sooner or later, either because his elders force it upon him or because he forces it upon himself, he will face this question: what do I need to do to attract more young adults to this church? So, in the 1998 church survey undertaken by the Evangelical Alliance, one of the questions concerned activities undertaken specifically to attract 21 to 40 year olds. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the survey found that those activities with the highest attractive ratings for that age group were: "social events" and "student meals". As a result the Alliance report concluded that if we are to reach and increase the proportion of 21 to 40 year olds in our congregations one of the most important

factors to which we must pay attention is that of "intentionality". In other words, "a process involving prayerful reflection, careful analysis, and specific targeting." As part of this, it is important that we have an appropriate leadership culture which is not shocked or judgemental regarding young adults values and lifestyles, and that is "needs sensitive" in respect of this age group. In similar vein, Scot McKnight writing in a recent issue of *Leadership* magazine on the problem of the missing 18-30 generation states,

Emerging adults (those between 18 and 30) form a generation that is largely insensitive to the potency of God's holiness, and are therefore insensitive to the magnificence of his grace, the shocking nature of his love, and that gratitude forms the core of the Christian life. Some today complain about these matters. But I doubt very much that ramping up moral exhortations and warning about an endless hell are the proper places to begin with emerging adults. Paul was sensitive to his audience; we need to be as well.¹

And again, a recent issue of *Perspectives* asked the question, 'What do 18-40s need and expect?' and went on to list nine characteristics of the generation that, as the article concludes, "we would be irresponsible to ignore".²

Much of this analysis is extremely useful, indeed essential if we are to effectively reach this generation. When a pioneer missionary enters a new territory the first thing he or she does is ensure that they know and understand the language and culture of those with whom they are working. Hence, whether or not we agree with the 'culture' of those in their 20s and 30s, we must at least know what it is and understand it. As Paul said, "I became all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). But at the same time, a rightful word of caution is needed as Krish Kandiah has already pointed out. The primary purpose of the church is not to meet the needs of its congregation, but to be a mission community in the midst of a world in need.

There is a real danger, then, that in our efforts to win back these missing generations, we simply pander to the spiritual consumerism that has a tendency to affect evangelical Christianity. While the Barna group have helped us much in understanding the needs and aspirations of the younger generations, I cannot agree with George Barna when in his 1988 book, *Marketing the Church*, he wrote, "the major problem plaguing the church is its failure to embrace a marketing orientation in what has become a marketing-driven environment." And so he goes on, we must imagine church "not as a religious meeting place, but as a service agency – an entity that exists to satisfy people's needs"³

This is surely far from the case. It may well be possible to create churches with great music and great preaching that attract lots of lots of young adults, but merely having great music does not necessarily mean that we are a worshipping community, just as having a great preacher does not necessarily mean that we are a biblical community.

¹ Scott McKnight, 'The Gospel for iGens', *Leadership* (Summer 2009) p20.

² *Perspectives*, May 2009, p13.

³ Quoted in Hilborn and Bird, *God and the Generations* (Paternoster, 2002), p11.

The question we face is whether our primary concern is to build *our churches*, or whether it is to co-build *His kingdom*.

The contrast, of course, is an attitude that understands worship not as something that meets my need for emotional intimacy or whatever, but as "a profoundly unselfish activity", in which "there is little room...for self-indulgence or self-absorption."⁴ The challenge for us, then, is to present Christ not as a spiritual Santa Claus or Fairy Godmother, but as a profoundly counter-cultural, counter-consumerist Lord.

The ecclesiological challenge

The second tension we face in reaching out to those in their 20s and 30s concerns the type of church that we run. In their book, *God and the Generations*, David Hilborn and Matt Bird draw attention to the so-called Homogenous Unit Principle (HUP). The HUP arose in the 1970s from Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission. The idea, as Donald McGavran, one of its chief exponents, liked to put it was that people "like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers."⁵ As a result, we should make it as easy possible for people to become Christians by first of all seeking converts according to a Homogenous Unit, that is "a section of society in which all members have some characteristic in common."⁶ What made this a *principle* though was that McGavran and others were not just observing that people became Christians in this way, but were positively advocating an intentional stance in this direction, that we should seek converts in this way. In short, if we targeted converts from one particular social group then we would be far more likely to have success than if we sought to make our churches accessible for all.

For fairly obvious reasons, since the HUP arose in the 70s, it has come in for a fair amount of criticism both from cross-cultural missionaries and theologians and practitioners in the West. Nevertheless, it is arguable that something similar is going on when we tailor make our 'seeker-sensitive' services to appeal to just one demographic, or when we create churches that are designed for just one particular group.

The critiques are fairly obvious. In the first place, the church by definition is meant to be all-inclusive of all-ages, all social strata, all races and all genders. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul did not encourage the hands to all get together and form a home group, let alone a service just for them. Rather, he encouraged them to see their need for the eyes and the feet. Moreover, the image with which we are provided in the book of Revelation is not of a mono-cultural church, but rather a diversity in which "every nation, tribe, people and language" are together worshipping before the Lord (Revelation 7:9). In addition, though, whenever churches do become mono-cultural there is a significant danger of group-think such that other equally valid expressions of church are at best ignored, at worst, despised. If all we ever meet with are people who reinforce our sense of sub-cultural identity then it is very hard for us see either the flaws in our own sub-culture, or the richness in others. Finally, it can also be argued that a mark of true discipleship is precisely the ability to embrace those who

⁴ Ibid., p190.

⁵ Cited in Ibid., p183.

⁶ Ibid., p182.

are different from ourselves, and therefore a lack of willingness to do this calls into question both the gospel being preached and the depth of the conversions being achieved.

In response to these criticisms, advocates of HUP modified their stance to some extent and viewed it not as an *ultimate* expression of the body of Christ, but as a penultimate or interim approach that may be used by God in order to extend his kingdom. So, a 1977 Lausanne conference which specifically examined the issue concluded in its report, "

All of us are agree that in many situations a homogenous unit church can be a legitimate and authentic church. Yet we are also agreed that it can never be complete in itself. Indeed, if it remains in isolation, it cannot reflect the universality and diversity of the Body of Christ. Nor can it grow into maturity. Therefore, every [homogenous unit] church must take active steps to broaden its fellowship in order to demonstrate visibly the unity and variety of Christ's church.⁷

The relevance of this point for 'student' or 'Gen X' or 'Gen Y' churches is obvious. Yes, they may well see very rapid growth and apparent success. Such approaches might well 'work', but to what extent are they faithfully replicating the body of Christ as it is meant to be. Interestingly, in a very recent example in Leadership magazine Collin Hansen has called into question the long term success of such churches anyway. He draws attention to the fact that Axis, the Willow Creek young adults service, which at its peak in 2000, 2001 was pulling in 2,000 people had slumped to just 400 and was going to be axed, at least in its current format. He goes on to suggest that this in fact has been the pattern for a significant number of such generation specific services / churches. They have proved immensely successful for a while, but often in due course, subsequently collapsed just as readily. He writes,

"Due in no small part to Willow's example, ministry leaders across the country once viewed separate, age-targeted services as the key to reaching a generation largely absent from the churches built by their boomer parents. Little more than 10 years after Willow launched Axis in 1996, many of these once-prosperous twenty-something ministries have folded, spun off, or morphed. Leaders from these ministries have learned differing lessons from the experiment."⁸

Hansen points out that one US church leader who has followed the ups and downs of young adult ministries "estimates that 90 percent of worship services targeting a younger generation run into serious trouble after three years." He goes on, "One factor is the way these age-specific ministries isolate young people from the rest of the church." If we think about it, such an analysis make sense. If what young people ultimately need is the full gospel of Christ expressed in the full body of Christ, then while age-specific services are fun and exciting for a while they will, like a McDonald's cheeseburger, ultimately fail to nourish. Yes, of course, worshipping alongside those

⁷ The Pasadena Consultation: Homogenous Unit (LOP no.1) p3.

⁸ Collin Hansen, 'The X Factor', *Leadership* (Summer 2009), pp25,26.

who are older, perhaps more traditional, is harder work, but perhaps it is precisely in that harder work that real strength is born and real discipleship takes place.

This is not then to suggest that age-specific services have no place in the church. But it is to say, as the group at Pasadena did, that we need to find ways to integrate those who attend such services into the rest of the body of Christ. There are, of course, as many ways to do this as there are forms of church, but as Hansen himself concludes, "Across the spectrum, twenty-something ministry leaders say reaching the millennial generation will require more than playing mainstream music, dimming the lights, and talking about sex. All see deep, genuine community as a crying need and key avenue for communicating and displaying the gospel of Christ."⁹ And as we all know, real community, is inter-generational.

Paul and the Generations

The issue for us, then, is how to negotiate this tension between understanding the needs of 20s and 30s without either us or them being held captive by them. Such a tension is always hard to negotiate, but the key has to be in Paul's exhortation in 1 Corinthians 9:19-27. On the one hand, as we have already noted, Paul describes himself as being a "slave to all", "to the Jews a Jew", to the gentiles a gentile etc. We have here then what we might call Paul's capitulation to culture or sensitivity to needs etc. But on the other hand, Paul's efforts in this regard are not aimless or pointless (v24ff). He indicates in fact three specific purposes of his efforts. Firstly, his aim is to "win as many as possible", secondly it is for "the sake of the gospel", and thirdly it is so that he "may share in its blessings".

In relation to the first of these, then, the point of our cultural adaptation is not so that we seem cool, it is not so that people like us, or buy our books, or come to hear us at conferences – it is so that people are saved. His point seems to be that cultural adaptation is fine, but let's ensure that its focus is not us and our popularity, but rather them and their eternal destiny. I remember once hearing a well respected national youth leader put it this way: "there's a fine line between stand up comedy and an effective youth sermon." His point was that there absolutely was a valid use of comedy and amusing stories in order to create and maintain attention with young people, but the purpose must not be so that they go away thinking 'what a great and funny speaker', but rather 'what must I do to be saved'. A focus on salvation, not our popularity, will help us walk this tightrope of cultural adaptation.

The second point Paul makes is that it is for the sake of the gospel. Once again, the important point here is that it is not for Paul's own sake. Many commentators take it that the implied contrast is with the sophists of Paul's own day who oratory was precisely designed to win popular audiences and the consequent financial benefits of having such a following. In contrast, for Paul, the purpose primarily is to save others and for the sake of the gospel. Now the commentators are divided on whether the phrase 'for the sake of the gospel' is referring to the *content* of the gospel, its essential tenets as it were, or it whether it is referring to the *progress* of the gospel, in other words its power to save (Romans 1:16). The preceding verses of course suggest

⁹ Ibid., p29

that it is the *progress* of the gospel that Paul primarily has in mind, but having said that do we need to choose? For we are making a major mistake if we think that somehow the advance of the gospel can be separated from its content. The reason that the gospel has power to save is precisely because of its content – that it is a message of salvation in and through Christ alone. If we remove or modify the *content* then some kind of spirituality may well progress, but it will not be the gospel of Jesus Christ. The message and its progress are inherently related, and therefore I see no problem in suggesting that Paul's concern was *both* for the progress of the gospel and for its content.

Given this, what Paul seems to be suggesting is that there are limits on what he will and will not do in order to win others. It is indeed his goal to save some (v22), but in order to achieve that he will not compromise the gospel itself, for it is the gospel that saves – not Paul's oratory. For Paul, then, it is not just undesirable but actually impossible to preach a sermon that would 'win' some, but in the process compromise the message. In saying this, we see precisely why Paul's accommodation to culture could never result in mere decisionism. For when Paul says that he becomes a slave in order to win some, he is not winning them to anything other than the full orb'd gospel which is far broader than a mere 'decision' for Christ. Perhaps the whole debate that has been had regarding an emphasis on conversion in contrast to disciple making would have been avoided if we had paid closer attention to what Paul says here. It is for the gospel's sake that he seeks to save, not merely to 'win' folk in some kind of spiritual popularity contest.

Finally, then, Paul adds that he does all this in order to 'share in its blessings'. The phrase used here literally means 'to be a fellow-partaker of it', and once again the commentators are divided. Does he mean to be a fellow-participant in the *work* of the gospel, the efforts he has been describing in verses 19ff, or does he mean to be a fellow-participant in the *blessings* of the gospel as the following verses (24ff) would suggest? Once again, I would suggest both, not least because part of the blessing of the gospel is that in this life we are enabled to work with God in proclaiming it. We get to be God's co-workers and ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:18 – 6:1). How marvellous is that?

I would suggest, then, that his point here simply flows directly from the previous two. If he had in fact accommodated himself or his message merely to win popularity, or in a way that compromised the message of the gospel itself then as a direct result he would necessarily have also disqualified himself from being God's co-worker and so enjoying the blessings that brings. That seems to be precisely what he goes on to say in the following verse, culminating in his conclusion in v27. "I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." Paul is not so much saying here that he makes himself a slave in order to receive blessing himself. It is rather that as he necessarily accommodates himself in order to win others for the gospel, he must ensure that he does not do this in such a way that would disqualify him from sharing in its benefits either in this life or the one to come.

We have then three principles that set limits on our accommodation to culture. Firstly, the goal is winning other for Christ. Secondly, we must not compromise the gospel in

the process, and thirdly we must never act in such a way that we ourselves would be disqualified from working with God in this great endeavour. All three of these points help us walk the tension between reaching out with every possible kind of cultural accommodation that is required, but not compromising our biblical principles in the process.

To give a practical example. The vast majority of preachers like to tell stories – especially those seeking to communicate effectively with those in their 20s and 30s. Secondhand stories are good, but often what really impacts such audiences are personal, heartfelt tales of our own struggles and triumphs with faith. There is a great temptation then for preachers to exaggerate one or two finer details in order to make our point. Perhaps, we exaggerate a little the extent of the healing miracle we saw: the old lady did not struggle out of his wheelchair – she leapt out of it. Perhaps, we make worse the situation someone was in before we preached Christ to them: the young man was in and out of prison and living on the streets addicted to heroin, when in reality he'd been arrested once and slept on a park bench a couple of times, but was actually now living at home and doing well in a drug rehab program. Or perhaps we increase just a tad the number that responded to our previous message: the 50 who actually came forward turns into 100s. Now, if all we had to guide us was Paul's admonition that it is all about winning others for Christ, then it would be all too easy to justify such liberality with the truth by saying either openly or in our hearts – 'yes, but this is in order to save them', or 'surely a little exaggeration is justified if as a result people come to know Christ'. Whether we acknowledge it or not, I'm sure many of us have at times played with the literal truth of the stories we tell.

But Paul's other points – that what we do must not compromise the gospel message itself, and must not disqualify ourselves from the prize – put breaks on this kind of behaviour. It says to us that even though telling the story in that way may well lead to more 'conversions' that night, or people feeling more moved by the worship or our speaking, it will not have served to advance the gospel and we will have disqualified ourselves from enjoying its blessings. For how can a medium of untruth in any way proclaim that which is true? In similar vein, if we fail to show love and grace in the way we express the gospel, the real advance of the gospel will be hindered, for how can a medium which fails to show love be used to communicate a message of grace.

In practical terms, then, it seems to me that there are three questions we need to ask ourselves as we rightly seek to accommodate ourselves and our churches to reach the lost generations. Firstly, are we doing absolutely everything we can to win these people for Christ? This is the admonition that will cause us to remove every and any possible stumbling block that would prevent such folk from coming to know Christ. But at the same time, we must also ask the second question: is our accommodation compromising the gospel itself? Have we, in other words, short-changed our hearers by providing them not with the good news of Jesus Christ, the message that salvation is found in him alone, but rather with a piece of spiritualised sophistry that sounds great, makes us feel warm and gooey inside, but does nothing to save us from eternal judgement. Thirdly, have we by the way we behave and speak compromised ourselves and the ethical integrity to which we are called and so compromised the medium if not the message. The words that come out of mouth may well be those of grace, but if our actions betray them, they mean very little. These three questions, then, I would

suggest may help us as we walk this tension between accommodation to culture and remaining true to the purpose to which God has called us: the gospel of Jesus Christ.