



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
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What Every Generation Needs
Philippians 2:1-4

If you're over forty, you'll probably remember it. If you're under forty, you probably won't. Do you remember all the talk back in the 1960s and 70s about the "generation gap"? With everything that took place in the social revolutions of the 1960s, it seemed like the older and younger generations were so far apart in their thinking that the only way to describe it was as a "gap." Some people desperately wanted to "bridge the generation gap"; others just threw up their hands in frustration.

While it was more pronounced in the 60s and 70s that it had been in earlier times, this difference in generations really wasn't new.

In fact, as far back as the eighth century B.C., older adults were expressing concern about the younger generation. The Greek poet Hesiod is reported to have said:

I see no hope for the future of our people if they
are dependent on the frivolous youth of today,
for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words.
When I was a boy, we were taught to be discrete
and respectful of elders, but the present youth are
exceedingly wise and impatient of restraint.¹

Socrates, Plato, and a host of others from ancient times are reported to have said similar things.

Even old Jedediah Wakefield in the Andy Griffith Show episode, "A Feud is a Feud," when Andy is trying to find out why the Wakefields having been feuding with the Carters for eighty years, laments, "I declare if I know where this late generation gets all these new-fangled ideas!"

Differences then and now

Generations have always had differences with each other. But I think that since the second half of the twentieth century, those differences have been even more pronounced.

I'm not sure why . . . Maybe it's the incredible pace of change we've seen in the world since then. People who lived in the first seventy-five years of the twentieth century probably saw more change than any of the generations before them. There was tremendous social change—some for the better, some for the worse. Changes in technology were mind-boggling! In about

¹ <http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview?id=408989>.

three-quarters of a century, we went from horse-and-buggy transportation to flight to traveling to the moon to shooting a shuttle into space like a rocket and landing it like an airplane. Since the middle of the twentieth century, technology, especially in the area of computers, has increased that change exponentially. Laptop computers are capable of what computers that used to fill a room could do, and you can get much more computer memory on a little flash drive now than you could get on a computer just ten years ago.

But along with all the technological changes and social changes has come a change in how people understand the world around them, especially for people who are under thirty-five.

There have always been generational differences. It's no different in the church. Hopefully the church deals with those differences in a more positive way, but it can be a challenge.

I think one of the greatest challenges we face today as a church is the sheer magnitude of these differences in our time.

In the not too distant past, there were generational differences, but they were not nearly as pronounced, and they were not nearly as distinct.

Today, sociologists identify at least five different current generations:

- The Builders are those folks who survived the Great Depression and World War II, and built up our country and its institutions to unprecedented heights in the years following the War.
- The Baby Boomers are their children, born following the War from 1945 until about 1964, many of whom rejected much of their parents' values including respect for authority and institutional loyalty, looking instead for personal satisfaction and fulfillment. At the same time, they valued gender and racial equality.
- Generation X or the Baby Busters are people born from around 1965 through about 1980. For them, relationships are much more important than institutions, although those relationships are often not lived out in spiritually or emotionally healthy ways.
- Generation Y, or the Millennials, are those born from about 1980 up through the mid-1990s. Authenticity is a key concern for many of them, and technology is a crucial part of their everyday lives.
- Generation Z are the children born since about the mid-1990s.

Some would break these designations down even further into some transitional generations having characteristics from both groups on either side of them.²

What makes things so tricky with all this is that the differences between these generations in the way they see things, the way they relate to their world, the way they relate to technology, and even the way they view things of a religious or spiritual nature, are so great. And they bring these differences into church as well.

Some of these differences are a matter of outlook. Some of them are a matter of how we do things. Some of them are a matter of preference. Some are a matter of needs.

And in trying to incorporate all these generations into the life of the church, we sometimes find ourselves in what seems like a no-win situation. If we focus on one or two generations, the others feel left out. If we appeal to the needs or preferences of the others, the first ones feel their perceived needs are not being met.

And the *perceived* needs are very different. But notice that I emphasize *perceived*.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_generations.

What we all need

Perceived needs may be very real, or they may be simply what we *think* we need. But sometimes we as individuals or as generations have *genuine* needs that we may not *perceive*.

Deep in my heart, while I believe that the felt needs of generations are indeed different, I also believe that there are some needs that we all, no matter what generation we belong to, have in common.

The passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians that we read as our text this morning points us to *what every generation needs*.

As Paul wrote to the Philippian church, one of his biggest concerns was their unity. While Philippians is often called Paul's joy letter (and he does emphasize joy, despite his writing from prison while quite possibly awaiting execution), this emphasis on unity runs throughout the letter.

In the first chapter, Paul reminded the Philippians that God was working in the midst of his circumstances for the furtherance of the gospel, and appealed to them to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, urging them to "stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel" (1:27),³ even if that meant suffering for Christ.

Then in our text, he appeals to the encouragement that is found in being united with Christ, the comfort of his love, the fellowship of the Spirit, and the tenderness and compassion that comes from that fellowship and union with Christ. He states these things as a condition—"If you have . . .," but the way he states it in Greek assumes that the conditions are true. Since they are, and on the basis of this encouragement, comfort, fellowship, tenderness and compassion, he asks the Philippians to make his joy complete.

And how can they do that?

First, they need to be "like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose" (2:2). They are to have a common purpose and be united in spirit. That doesn't mean they would agree on everything, but it does mean that they would agree to live in harmony with one another. In the beautiful music of the work of God's kingdom, some might sing lead while the others sing alto, tenor, baritone, or bass. But it should all blend together in harmony!

Second, they should "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than [them]selves" (2:3). Herein lies one of the greatest challenges of living together as God's people—laying aside our own selfish ambition and agenda, our insistence of having it our own way, and instead deferring to others. But isn't that what dying to ourselves is about, at least in part? Paul calls the Philippians (and us!) to put aside our self-centeredness and to put others in the body before ourselves. It's not about having our own way, it's not about who is greatest, it's not about insisting on our own rights, or taking power for ourselves.

It's about the next thing Paul says: "[they] should look not only to [their] own interests, but also to the interests of others" (1:4). They should be concerned with the needs and concerns of others instead of just their own personal interests and needs. And so should we!

Paul was calling the Philippian church to practice unity through self-sacrificial deference to one another.

And for the church to be the church as God intends, that's what *every* generation needs. *Each generation in the church needs to look out for the interests of the others as well as its own.*

³ Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

You see, that's what happens when there is authentic community, when we are truly living as the family of God and the body of Christ, when we are *united* in Christ.

Each individual and each generation needs for the others to look out for their interests.

Each individual and each generation needs to look out for the interests of the others.

When we do, an amazing thing happens—our own needs get met in ways we never dreamed! What Jesus said about saving life and losing it applies here too. When we're so intent on having things our way and everyone conforming to that, whether it's the Builders or the Boomers or the Gen-Xers or the Millennials, we sacrifice unity and *our* needs ultimately go *unmet*.

But when we gladly give ourselves up for the body and for the other members of it, looking out for each other's best interests, God meets our needs through the body. We may have to do or even endure some things that are not our favorite way of doing things, but we do it to be in fellowship with one another.

We do it out of love for one another in Christ.

We do it out of love for the body of Christ.

We do it out of love for Christ, whose prayer the night before he died was that his followers might be one, as he and the Father are one (John 17:20-23).

In a sermon in his church last year, my friend Tom Ogburn described this kind of life together as being like the relationship between his mother Betty and his daughter Elizabeth. Betty is in her seventies; Elizabeth is about sixteen. Tom said:

There are times that my daughter chooses to do things with my mom, not because the thing they are to do is her favorite thing, but because it gives her a chance to be with her grandmother. There are times that my mother chooses to do things with my daughter, not because the thing they are to do is her favorite thing, but because it gives her the opportunity to spend time with her grand-daughter. They reach across generational bounds because they love each other and are committed to be family to and for each other.

And so on this Senior Saints' Sunday, we give thanks to God for our seniors, for all the ways they have served God through the decades, and for all he has done through them.

Much of what we are and what we have done and what we have as a church has resulted from their faithfulness and service. And we are grateful.

And we pray that each generation in our church, from the youngest to the oldest, will look out for each other's interests as well as its own, understanding that to live as a family of faith may mean that things may not always be done according to our preferences, but will always be done for the good of the body.

After all, that's *what every generation needs!*

†MEG