

## *Must Worship Styles Divide the Generations?*

**By Bryan McAlister**

What did we do before we had cell phones? You know exactly what I'm talking about, don't you? Believe it or not, we were still connected. The stops were to be Kroger, Wal-Mart, and Hardee's, in that order. Two calls were made, one more to go, after all "third time's the charm." It's not often today that you go to a fast-food restaurant and hear, "There's a call for \_\_\_\_\_!" But you could "way back" then. The voice on the other end of the line was her husband, "You need to come to the church; Ward and Virgie want to be baptized." Those were the names of my mother's parents, and that was the day they became Christians.

That was a good day. That is an understatement. Describing the day is like being back in that day. It is one of my most vivid memories. I remember the sight of my grandparents waiting for us at the front of the building. I remember each of their voices confessing their belief that Jesus is God's Son. I remember how gentle the one baptizing them was, especially with our "Me-ma" (she had a fear of being under water). I remember hugging them both, crying. I cry with delight even now at the memory. I remember walking out of the building, arm and arm with my Granddad, who had just become my brother. In one moment, in God's Gospel of grace, the span of time between our years (mine, nearly 13, theirs, 73!) was replaced with a relationship. I'm at a loss to describe it with words. God is not. He described it in a single word: "one."

Now, imagine their reaction had the next words to them been, "Welcome, Papa and Me-ma, to Christianity! Old people's church meets at 10 a.m. Sunday. Young people's church is at 11 a.m. I won't see you there!" More bridges have been needed between generations than between gulfs. Our attempts today to connect to the generation of tomorrow is no different from our parents' attempts to connect to us yesterday. Bill Cosby's observation in his book *Fatherhood* captured this dilemma by saying, "A baseball manager has learned a lot about his job from having played the game, but a parent has not learned a thing from once having been a child" (Bill Cosby, *Fatherhood*, pg. 20, Penguin Group, May 1986). We've all probably had a moment when we have completely forgotten what it was like to be young, facing the frustrations of growing up around so many "old people" who don't understand us. Stop and think about it. So

much of what we actually do remember about our childhood, we remember in contrast to the way it is today. My wife used her phone to take a picture of our four-year-old daughter the other day, at which time our daughter said, "Put it on Facebook!" My generation will rear children who have never known a world without social media. My generation set the clocks on the VCRs for our parents. You get the picture. Are we really surprised when we look to the arena of the church and the avenue of worship and see division among generations over how to worship God? Our divide for some stretches so deep, we no longer assemble together, convinced we are just too different from one another. When Jesus praying we be "one" (John 17:21) turns into "one way" for the "is" generation and "one way" for the "has been" generation, the "one" just becomes "one more." The prayer of God's Son becomes thwarted. That takes some doing.

Every generation can recall their cultural differences. Rand-McNally or Google Maps? Rotary phones or iPhones? Oldsmobile or Prius? "Amazing Grace" or "How Deep The Father's Love"? Through the generations, methods of navigation, communication, and even transportation continue to change at a pace that is frightening for some. The one who Google's his directions still believes in maps. The one who uses an iPhone still believes in communicating. The one who drives a hybrid still believes in getting from point A to point B. The one singing "How Deep The Father's Love" still believes in undeserved grace from an unbelievable God. The style of many things will change over time, even the style of worship. But if we are dividing over "style" (the plain "how it's done") is worship of God still our goal?

Must worship styles divide the generations? No. God is the object of worship (Matthew 4:10). I am at a loss to explain it any other way, He just is. Worshiping by my ideals, concepts, culture, or knowledge as a creature, with clear evidence of a Creator, is foolishness (Romans 1:22). From the patriarchs of the Old Testament to the examples of faith in the New Testament, every generation that has desired to worship God has been subject to offering God the worship He wanted. That has not changed. The great prophet Elijah ascended to the top of Mt. Carmel to prove the point against the 450 prophets of the imagined god Baal, "...that You are the Lord God..." (1 Kings 18:37). Their worship was blended with influences of the culture to the extreme. The influences in no way aided worship; they altered it all together. God was not pleased. The farmer-turned-prophet Amos dealt with the same exact issue in his generation. The same response was offered: God was not pleased (Amos 5:5, 25-26). Christians were not exempt from the problem of blending either. In fact, on one occasion the response was "no small

dissension” (Acts 15:2). The final conclusion was to remain consistent with what God had done (Acts 15:7-12) and said (Acts 15:13-17). Spirit and truth, spirit and understanding, decency and orderliness, faith and sacrifice are among the words God breathed to us of how to worship Him today (John 4:24; 1 Corinthians 14:15, 40; Hebrews 11:6, 13:15). To lay hold of these truths in any generation and claim they are insufficient to offer a meaningful worship experience for our hearts is to admit we have failed to surrender to God as God, and our hearts have become the object of worship and satisfaction. We have created another Baal.

Must worship styles divide the generations? Yes. Christians have an obligation to show every generation the relevance of the church today. In the same time when the church had to decide if they were going to blend the Gospel message of salvation through Jesus Christ and baptism for the remission of sins with the dead, nailed-to-the-cross doctrine of circumcision, they in no way wanted to “trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God” (Acts 15:19). Blending would have been a barrier. But dividing to make room for the various styles would have been a sin. The impact we can have and are having on the culture around us ought to be visible through our words, our works, and our walk. The intrinsic divide among the generations should be spanned with incorporation, not severed by separation. The church family that sees the need to be relevant and genuine in the way they present the Gospel today is a church family that is ready to reach out to the generation of today while respect the generation of yesterday. The cosmetics of our building, the comfort of our sanctuaries, the compassion and connection of our message, the communion of our people, the contemporary theme of our worship can reach out to today’s generation with the same measure of truth the Lord prayed for when He prayed that His people (young and old) would be one (John 17:17). When churches divide along the lines of the generations, those of yesterday become cynical, having no hope for tomorrow. Those of today are left impressionable, having no heritage of yesterday, driven and tossed by the wind (Ephesians 4:14).

Leaving the church building that day in March of 1991, my worship became the worship of my grandparents, my God became their God, my people became their people, my hope became their hope, my generation was still my generation. But it became connected to theirs in a way that only Christ could accomplish. No wonder we need so many bridges between the generations. Any attempt to compartmentalize our connection with one another would leave us barren. To mirror yesterday’s generation would stifle creativity. When we divide ourselves from

the world's negative influence and we unite around Christ and His one church (Matthew 16:18); when we look to the people of yesterday for their wisdom and the people of tomorrow for the will; when we learn from each other, all the while anchored to our common hope in Jesus (Hebrews 6:19); we in our generations help answer the prayer of Jesus. Now that takes some doing.