



Equipping the Generations: Cross-Generational Fellowship and the Gospel of Jesus Christ

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My best ministerial friend is ridiculous. He bleeds blue as a University of Kentucky basketball fan, he does not understand what a first down in football is, and he formerly studied rocks (that's right, rocks). On top of that, he is twice my age, is finished with school, and has children who can change their own clothes. I'm a redneck Alabama football enthusiast who bleeds crimson red (roll Tide) and listens to country music.

So how did two men with two wildly different backgrounds come to experience cross-generational intimacy?

The gospel.

The Scripture teaches that two thousand years ago, two other men with two wildly different backgrounds—the Hebrew of Hebrews, bigot and murderer, Paul (Phil 3:5; Acts 7:58, 8:1), and a circumcised half-Greek, Timothy (Acts 16:1)—came to experience cross-generational intimacy too. Again, the answer to the question, How is this possible? is: the gospel.

Their fellowship was grounded in a common confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ; this gospel drew them together as they labored expectantly for death-defying vindication in the resurrection. This gospel, which reconciled them to the Father vertically and to one another in Christ horizontally, made their cross-generational fellowship possible.

Paul and Timothy's friendship is one of the most familiar cross-generational relationships in Scripture (Acts 16:1; Rom 16:21; 1 Cor 4:17; Phil 2:19; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1, 3:2; 2 Thess 1:1; 1 Tim 1:2, 18; 2 Tim 1:2). Unfortunately, most people today interpret this gospel-relationship to be more like a medical fellowship for gospel students than a genuine friendship and relationship. As a result, many readers fail to notice that Paul and Timothy traveled together (Acts 16:3; 1 Cor 16:10), ministered together (2 Cor 2:1; Phil 2:19-24), wrote to one another (1 & 2 Timothy, respectively) and encouraged one another (1 Tim 6:20) as they lived life together and bore one another's burdens. Lack of observation has resulted in contemporary evangelical churches struggling to enable their congregants to cultivate Rock-solid (1 Cor 10:4), cross-generational fellowship like that of Paul and Timothy. Typically, the relationships in which churches exhort their congregations to participate are shallow; they are not grounded in their common confession of faith in

Christ. Instead, they are manipulated by flashy events and are artificially created through overly formalized “discipleship” structures that do not teach congregants how to live life together and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal 6:2). The Scripture, however, calls our churches to a different model by the Spirit of Christ. It presents a model of friendship that takes place over everyday conversations about loving your spouse and kids (Titus 2:3-4) rather than paradigmatic discipleship structures. This type of cross-generational intimacy is one aspect of what it means to not neglect meeting together as some are in the habit of doing (Heb 10:25). Indeed, this is what our Lord Jesus modeled as he walked with his disciples during his earthly ministry (Matt 16:13-20; Mark 1:21; Lk 14:1-17:11; John 21:1-14).

HOW TO CULTIVATE CROSS-GENERATIONAL FELLOWSHIP IN YOUR LOCAL CHURCH

The reality is, a significant majority of the people in contemporary evangelical congregations are lonely (this is true whether the church is comprised of six or sixty thousand congregants or anywhere in between), because they have not been taught how to live life together biblically in cross-generational fellowship. At Ninth & O Baptist Church, where I serve on staff, we contend that organic fellowship happens most naturally in our age-graded Bible Fellowship Groups (BFG), which meet on Sunday mornings and have fellowship throughout the week. Yet, we recognize that this is not enough. Our congregants need to experience healthy cross-generational fellowship in their own lives so that they may walk in the fullness of the Spirit of Christ and feel the gravity of being grafted into a people comprised of multiple socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and generations. It is our goal to create a culture in our church where it is odd to isolate oneself from participating in broader congregational cross-generational fellowship. Here are some practical principles we have adopted in order to create opportunities for our busy congregants to experience this type of cross-generational intimacy:

1. As a ministerial staff, we recognize that gospel

ministers must model cross-generational fellowship in their personal friendships. So, on a regular basis members of our staff are intentionally getting coffee or going out to eat or inviting people over for dinner with multiple generations in our church. This has two effects. First, it allows our ministerial staff to stay in-tune with a variety of age groups in our church. Second, and most importantly, it models the kind of gatherings we consider to be most healthy in our church.

2. As a ministerial staff, we recognize that gospel ministers must create congregational opportunities for our people to integrate into existing cross-generational structures. About six to eight times a year we have Building Community Nights (BCN) after an abbreviated Sunday evening service. These events allow the generations that make up our congregation to naturally mingle over cookies, coffee, desserts, fruit and laughs (we also have church-wide meals on the grounds 2-4 times a year which have the same effect). These non-threatening settings allow congregants to form unforced relationships with like-minded people in the congregation who may not be in their BFG. Unforced relationships result in genuine relationships where wisdom and service are shared amidst the corporate body.

3. As a ministerial staff, we encourage our congregants to serve in ministries that allow them the fellowship while serving with various generations in order to create organic cross-generational intimacy. Some of the most natural opportunities for fellowship at our church are in the nursery and greeting ministry. Both of these ministries encourage communication and require that those serving work together. Other excellent opportunities we encourage our members to participate in are national and international mission trips as well as the local missions ministry. Friendships forged while doing gospel ministry together typically prove to be some of the most long lasting.

CONCLUSION

This is a call to war. Developing cross-generational fellowship in an age of individualism and social-media iso-

lation will not happen without intentionality. Further, this type of Christ-centered fellowship scares the people filling our churches. It is too intimate; it requires too much vulnerability. But, they will not learn to fight the Devil well nor learn what it means to walk in the fullness of the Gospel of Christ without this type of cross-generational fellowship. The gospel has called us into a cosmic-messianic community of faith; when we allow our people to isolate themselves, we make them susceptible to the alluring power of sin as well as to the enemy who prowls like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour (1 Pet 5:8). Therefore, gospel ministers must constantly remind their respective congregations that the church is a multi-generational messianic community of faith in Christ (Rev 7:9-12), which must be diverse ethnically as well as generationally.

ENDNOTES

¹ This article is dedicated to Dr. Jeff Elieff and Dr. Bill Cook. Without their pastoral discipleship in my life I would continue to remain in uninformed ignorance about vibrant congregational relationships and fellowship. Special thanks to Pastor Cook for taking the time to read this article and offer comments..

² Another helpful idea is to encourage two different age-graded BFGs to do a month of lessons together on Sunday morning and culminate the series with a fellowship at a member's home. Again, this provides non-threatening fellowship and invites cross-generational intimacy.