

Multigenerational Preaching

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On the surface, multigenerational ministry is not new, but has been part of the scriptural pattern since Old Testament days. Moses commanded the people to teach God's message to their children and their grandchildren (Deut. 4:9). When Ezra reintroduced the Law following the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall, he and his colleagues taught the Scriptures to "both men and women, and all that could hear with understanding" (Neh. 8:2), meaning the children of a certain age.

In the New Testament, the child Jesus accompanied his parents to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in worship of God. Later, He made a point of welcoming the children as well as their parents. In apostolic days, Paul taught the gospel to entire households, such as in the cases of Lydia and the Philippian jailer. Paul also instructed fathers to bring their children up "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4).

Through the centuries, churches have included multiple generations in their worship and Christian education. D. L. Moody began with the children of Chicago's streets before starting a church to reach entire families. While some early Sunday Schools were directed primarily to children, worship services tended to include entire families – usually encompassing four or even five generations.

In the 20th century, strategies developed that separated the generations. Sunday School curriculum strategies adopted the practicalities of developmental psychology in order to provide age-appropriate materials. Since children and teenagers have significantly different cognitive abilities at various ages, classes and curriculum reflected age-graded approaches. In early childhood education, scope and sequence materials were appropriately different from the first quarter of the first grade to the last quarter of the same school year.

Along the way, some churches extended this pattern to include worship. The genesis of the Children's Church involved several motivators. Some leaders believed children would be better served by having a separate worship service that was more interactional, with Bible lessons appropriate for their ages, as opposed to the adult-oriented sermons of "big church."

Around the turn of the millennium, churches increasingly used Wednesday night youth services to provide a setting for worship that was oriented specifically to teenagers. These meetings usually include music the students enjoy, but that might be unacceptable to their parents in the Sunday morning services. Instead of services led by the church pastor, the student ministers preach at these mid-week services, using teaching and preaching approaches, anecdotes, and other techniques geared specifically for this age group.

The church can become so age-segregated that biblical principles related to parents training their children may be lost in a pitch for pragmatic approaches that appeal rather than transform. Consequently, many leaders have advocated multigenerational philosophies for church ministry. Reggie Joiner is one of those voices. He argues for blending multigenerational family ministry into the basic DNA of the church.

Joiner contends that unless the church and the family cooperate intentionally to impact children and youth for Christ, “the church forfeits its potential to have greater influence on kids’ and students’ lives...” and “parents avoid or abdicate to the church the responsibility to be spiritual leaders.”¹ Joiner urges families and churches to engage deliberately in shared strategies to develop their young people as disciples of Christ.

Voddie Baucham Jr. also advocates for multigenerational ministry. Baucham, author of *Family Driven Faith*, believes the church must intentionally integrate educational, musical, and worship activities across all the generations. He writes, “What if there were no nurseries, or youth groups, or Sunday schools? How, then, would we propose a plan for one generation to ‘tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done’ (Ps. 78:4)?”²

Since multigenerational ministry became the current hot topic in theological and practical ministry discussions, some Christian educators have advocated doing away with age graded Sunday School or small group Bible study organizations. A few music leaders suggest developing choirs that integrate age groups. Homileticians write about ways for preaching to the whole family.

Yet, have we not been doing multigenerational ministry all along, especially when it comes to preaching? Pastors preach to multiple generations every Sunday. Musical worship involves everyone singing the same songs – even if we accommodate different tastes with varying types of blended worship plans. So, what’s new? What’s the big deal about multigenerational ministry? The key is intentionality.

In 2005, I published an article on “Transgenerational Preaching” in *Preaching* magazine. This work noted the problems of cultural exclusion on one extreme and cultural exclusivity on the other. Cultural exclusion ignores the differences between generations. Preachers offer sermons without considering what illustrations or applications might apply to different age groups. Cultural exclusivity focuses ministry,

particularly in new churches, on a narrow range of ages – usually young marrieds and their families. In both situations, the church misses an excellent opportunity to tailor ministries for multiple generations that include extended families.³

In that article, I recognized various generations as cultures and used the principles of cross-cultural communication as strategies for deliberately speaking to the generational culture groups. David Hesselgrave's work offers excellent help in applying cross-cultural communication to preaching. He advocates three steps: understanding human universals, inquiring into cultural differences, and understanding uniqueness. He notes, "It is the similarity between men that makes identification, understanding, and empathy possible."⁴

The keys noted in "Transgenerational Preaching" included the following principles: know your audience, identify in love, find commonalities, understand the vocabulary, hearing feedback, adapting methods of communication (image driven), and maintaining integrity of the message. These concepts expanded on Hesselgrave's emphasis of finding commonalities to bridge the gaps between generational cultures.

This article builds on "Transgenerational Preaching" and goes further to offer ten practical approaches for preaching to multiple generations. Consider the following principles:

1. Keep it Real – Maintain Authenticity and Integrity.

Every generation values integrity. Younger generations especially demand authenticity in their speakers. Authenticity involves maintaining consistency between what one says and what one does. Integrity goes a step further and applies authenticity to every aspect of one's being, creating a wholeness. Craig Groeschel emphasizes this important aspect of character: "All the parts of your life seamlessly form a united whole. There are no secret compartments or double lives. What you say actually matches what you do." Groeschel writes that he wants to preach in such a way that his children, grandchildren, and future generations would say about him, "You are a person of integrity. All those things you said, you actually lived."⁵

Jeff Iorg defines integrity in this way: "A person is whole, complete, undivided in words and actions and standards. This changes the focus from simply behaving properly in any single area to behaving consistently in all areas of life."⁶ Post-modern millennials and Gen-Xers are not the only generations who demand authenticity and integrity. If the pastor would preach effectively to multiple generations, he must demonstrate consistency between his words and his daily life.

The Bible is relevant to every generation in all cultures. However, some preachers think they must be something they are not in order to reach other generations. Two preacher friends, although well into middle-age, thought they could relate better to younger audiences if they dressed differently. Assuming the uniform of jeans, tennis shoes, and untucked shirttails, they brought out technological helps they had seen younger preachers use and tried to be hip and cutting edge. Not

only did their efforts not succeed in bridging the generational gap, but the lack of authenticity cost them credibility among their younger listeners.

2. Address the Values that Span Generations.

Secularization of the western culture created a vacuum of values in relationship to Christian preaching. Older generations grew up in a society that affirmed basic biblical qualities, whether or not individuals actually embraced Jesus Christ. However, younger generations experienced education, media, business ethics, and other aspects of values that not only lacked Christian perspectives, but actually rejected them outright. Preachers must also remember that the newly retired include Baby Boomers who grew up rejecting authority, although many changed as they matured.

Referring to the writing of Peter Berger, Al Mohler states, “As a result [of secularization], the binding authority of the Christian moral tradition, or of any religious tradition, was lost.”⁷ The effect on preaching means the speaker must understand that these varying values cause people to think about truth differently. He adds, “Given the cultural changes, we need to recognize we are not preaching to people who hear us in the same way as previous generations in Western societies.”⁸

The answer is not to focus on needs-centered preaching or sermons that are merely seeker-sensitive, but to proclaim the values of Scripture. Where generational values conflict with biblical truth, the herald of God brings hearers into contact with God’s Word which has the power to transform. Mohler declares, “Whether we find ourselves in circumstances of cultural acceptance or cultural hostility, we must preach the Word.”⁹

In reaching the various generational cultures, we cannot sacrifice biblical truth on the altar of cultural accommodation. D. A. Carson agrees, “Our motivation to understand and address people in the 21st century is not to domesticate the Gospel by . . . appealing to cultural analysis, but to prove effective ambassadors to the Sovereign Whose Word we announce.”¹⁰

3. Appreciate and Love Each Generation.

Donald McGavren’s homogeneous unit principle focuses on the sociological observation that people tend to gather around other people who are similar to themselves. However, multigenerational preachers cannot fall prey to the danger of concentrating on the part of the audience that most resembles what they see in the mirror each morning. Younger pastors must embrace older generations and vice-versa. Doing so requires deliberate effort to engage and understand different age groups. Spending time with different kinds of people between Sundays can generate dividends on Sundays.

Joe McKeever advises younger preachers to be intentional about relating to older audiences. In an excellent article, “15 Things Young Pastors Should Know

About Seniors,” McKeever observed some younger preachers love older congregants, while others see seniors as obstacles to church growth. He urged the new generation of pastors to embrace their elder members and recognize that they can be strong allies who appreciate good Bible teaching.¹¹ Similarly, older pastors need to spend time with younger families in order to build relationships and gain an understanding of the unique issues related to their lives.

4. Work Diligently to Produce Quality Sermons.

Parishioners of every generation increasingly demand a high level of quality in their pastor’s preaching. Michael Duduit noted a study by the Pew Research Center in which persons who changed churches were asked what they wanted in their new churches. More than 8 in 10 answered “Quality of services.”¹² Parishioners are no longer willing to endure poorly crafted sermons tossed together at the last minute or stolen from someone else’s sermon trove on the internet. They expect the preacher to invest time and effort to deliver quality messages.

Quality sermons often require more time in order to delve deeply into the exposition of Scripture and its application to various groups in the congregation. In an interview with Mark Batterson, Michael Duduit noted that many younger pastors preach long sermons that average forty minutes in length in order to accomplish this goal. When asked about the common advice about preaching shorter sermons due to shorter attention spans, Batterson responded that people underestimate the willingness and ability of younger people. He argued that the key issue is not the length of sermon, but whether the preacher has communicated well.¹³ My personal study of younger preachers of larger churches suggests most of them preach 40-45 minutes or longer, but they work diligently to produce quality messages that engage all the listeners.

5. Involve a Broad Group of People in Sermon Development and Evaluation.

Sermon development is often a lonely affair. The preacher needs time alone with God to pray and seek the Lord’s direction for the message. He has to invest more time alone in studying the biblical text and developing the message. After the service, the people leave with a handshake and “Nice sermon pastor,” leaving the preacher alone to contemplate how effective the sermon might actually have been. Jim Shaddix says preachers need to rise “above foyer feedback.” He recommends having an intentional plan that involves both ministerial staff and a range of church members to get good information that helps shape future sermons. Shaddix observes that by leading such a team to understand how to offer honest evaluation and giving them the freedom to do so without fear, the pastor can apply beneficial perspectives to his sermon construction.¹⁴

Some pastors have developed teams of laity, along with some ministerial staff, in developing and evaluating sermons. While only the pastor can bring together the

final product that he presents on Sunday, he may find input from various congregants to be helpful. This kind of team can discuss the focal text of the sermon and offer personal perspective for application. By involving persons across the generational spectrum, pastors can gain insights they may not have by themselves.

Similarly, following the sermon, a team can help with evaluation. One church staff meets each Monday morning to review the video recording of the previous day's services. Every aspect – from music to message to announcements – is evaluated. What went well? What can be improved? By involving multiple generations in this process, the pastor can extend his message beyond his own age group and make sure that he is speaking to the entire congregation.

6. Use Preaching to Encourage Multigenerational Bible Study.

Preaching is an excellent platform to encourage families to study the Bible together, not only at church, but in the home. Looking back over a lifetime of preaching, Ken Hemphill, former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, noted that as a pastor he “tended to be a Bible teacher from the pulpit and, therefore, it was common for a majority of the congregation to have their Bibles and notebooks open while I was preaching.” Having people refer to the text in their own Bibles during a sermon is a powerful influence for their study of Scripture at home in the context of the family.¹⁵

One issue that can inadvertently dampen family Bible study involves the increasing use of technology to project the Scripture onto a large screen. One church likes this technique because the entire congregation can stand and read the sermon text together using the same translation. While it is useful, one unintended side effect results in the people not needing to open their Bibles during the sermon. Children benefit from seeing their parents reading their Bibles. As congregants follow the preacher through the sermon with their own Bibles, parents and their children identify God's truth with the printed page or the Bible app on their phones.

Jay Strother's church intentionally strategizes ways to impact emerging generations. They recognize that parents are the primary disciple makers for their children. Consequently, they intentionally interpret and align all church ministries with the goal of a multigenerational approach to biblical growth.¹⁶

7. Make Wise Use of Technology.

Leonard Sweet argues that the current culture is inter-relational, interactive, participative, and image driven.¹⁷ Technology can help pastors address these important qualities. Rather than asking members to turn off their cell phones during the worship service, one pastor encourages them to keep the phones turned on and to use their social media accounts to share key statements made during the sermon. He recognized his message could be multiplied not only by the number of contacts

who received these messages, but untold more as posts were shared with unseen audiences many more times.

Referenced by David Stokes in his article, “What Would Jesus Tweet,” Scott Bettinger, president of Echo Media, urged preachers not merely to see social media as “an extension of the pulpit,” but more like a living room in one’s home – a place where conversations begin.¹⁸ No preacher wants the sermon to end when it ends, but desire it continue to affect the daily lives of his people. Social media and other technology can encourage families to continue the conversation about biblical truth and application throughout the week.

Another innovation uses phone technology to involve congregants in the sermon. One pastor has a dedicated Instant Message account so members can text questions during the sermon. Sometimes he used transitions between sermon points to pause and answer questions. On other occasions, he waited until the end of the sermon and addressed the matters raised in text messages. Given the inter-relational nature of younger generations, this pastor’s method encouraged listeners to participate in the sermon.

Technology also can expand the message into a multi-sensory experience. Simply listening to the spoken word reaches one level of effectiveness. A second level can be achieved by adding the visual component of projecting the sermon outline on a wall or screen while members fill in outlines in their worship handouts. An even higher level involves bringing images (still photos or videos) into the process. Visual enhancements help people combine multiple senses as the congregation takes in the emotional as well as the cognitive content.

Podcasts and streaming webcasts allow preachers to share sermons with thousands of people outside the church at negligible costs. Blogging the sermon also increases interest in the message. Chat rooms and website tools can be used to witness to many people who are not accessible in any other way. Each of these and other technologies can help preachers bridge the message to multiple generations.

8. Don’t Assume Anything in a Biblically Illiterate Culture.

Preachers cannot assume everyone understands the terminology we use when preaching. While many cultural observers believe younger generations suffer from a lack of scriptural knowledge, biblical illiteracy extends to every age group. Jud Wilhite tells the story of a dramatic presentation culminating in the revealing of the word *grace*. After his sermon, a member approached him and asked, “What’s grace?”¹⁹

Some preachers trade solid doctrinal teaching in favor of styles and methodologies they believe will appeal to certain generational groups. We should heed Michael Duduit who recalled the effort by one preacher to preach creatively to an audience of young adults. After the message, one approached him and said, “No, tell us what the Bible says, what it means, and what we should do about it.”²⁰

Multigenerational preaching not only should help all generations of listeners understand the concepts of Scripture, but lead them to put biblical principles into action. In their study of biblical literacy, Tanner Hickman and Stephen Smith discovered, “True biblical literacy extends to a level of comprehension that enables one to understand the importance of Bible doctrine and deeper theological concepts, which in turn should enhance the desire to think, learn, understand, live, and develop into a culture-changing Christian living the faith they proclaim.”²¹

9. Insure the Sermon Is Not Insensitive to Multicultural or Multiethnic Issues.

Many members of previous generations grew up in communities consisting of one or two ethnic groups. As migration transformed western societies into multiethnic, multicultural melting pots, many churches refused to embrace people who looked, spoke, dressed, and ate differently from themselves. When communities transitioned racially and culturally, churches that failed to reach out to the newcomers gradually died out.

Younger families moved to places where they could find newer housing and joined or started newer churches. Senior adults often were left behind, holding on to what they considered to be their church heritage. Instead of fulfilling their legacy by reaching out to their new neighbors, older congregants simply maintained the status quo until they could no longer afford to keep the doors open.

Multigenerational preachers recognize the ethnic mosaic of modern communities. A certain family adopted a child from China. One day, while coloring a picture book, an issue arose when the little girl picked up a crayon labeled “flesh.” She was confused because it was a different color from her skin. On another day, her mother asked why a certain child was her favorite playmate. The little girl answered, “She looks like me.” In a church full of white children, these two Asian girls reached out to one another.

In “Challenges for 21st Century Preaching,” D. A. Carson acknowledges the growing multiethnicity of western society. He writes, “One of the valuable things that [younger] pastors can do is spend time with more senior pastors who have already crossed a lot of bridges and who are willing to mentor a new generation. . . .”²² Mentors can help guide less experienced pastors of all ages through the transitions of a changing community.

Another factor for preachers to consider is that many of their younger congregants are more culturally sensitive, a fact that must inform preaching. Preaching must not be color-blind, but it has to be color-aware. One Mississippi delta church was primarily Anglo, but also had numerous Chinese, African-American, and Hispanic members. One day a visiting preacher made a casual reference to the way the people greeted one another as a “Chinese fire drill.” The Chinese members

kindly overlooked his gaff, but other members were offended on behalf of their brothers and sisters.

Daniel Wong, in his article “Preaching in a Multicultural World,” notes, “We are often unaware of our own cultural baggage that we bring to preaching. We tend to preach out of our own cultural perspectives.”²³ He advises pastors be careful to choose illustrations, applications, and metaphors that reflect cultural sensitivity.

10. Preach in the Power of the Holy Spirit.

Preaching can be an arrogant indulgence unless the pastor is not speaking for himself, but as a herald of God. We cannot preach in our own power or for our own benefit; rather, we must bring God’s message by the power of God’s Spirit. He alone knows the hearts of all the people listening to the message. He alone is able to convict them of sin, righteousness, and judgment. He alone is able to convince multiple generations of God’s truth.

Preachers must avoid drawing attention to themselves, but allow the Holy Spirit to transform them into spokesmen for God. Tim Keller warns, “Audiences are able to sense... what lies behind the speaking. They may see insecurity, the desire to impress, a lack of conviction or self-righteousness – any of which closes their minds and hearts to the words.”²⁴ Keller further observes, “What the Holy Spirit is to do in the hearts of your listeners He will normally do first in and through you [the preacher].”²⁵ By heeding the Spirit’s voice through the Scriptures He inspired, preachers can experience the Spirit’s inner workings even as they prepare to pass on His Word to others.

Jim Scott Orrick and his co-authors note the vital role of the Holy Spirit not only in the proclamation but also in stirring hearers to Spirit-directed application. They point out the results of biblical preaching in salvation, fellowship, faithfulness to doctrine and spiritual maturity, and other areas.²⁶ Pastors may not understand all the needs of every generation of hearers, but the Holy Spirit does. As preachers speak in the power of God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit works to empower them and to inspire the hearers to put the Word into practice.

Conclusion

Pastors do not have the option of not preaching to multiple generations at the same time. Every audience contains people from wide-ranging ages and backgrounds. We cannot ignore some of the congregation to focus on certain groups. Nor can we dispense biblical exposition without consideration for how best to communicate biblical truth to each generation. Without compromising the timeless truths of God’s Word, preachers can apply basic principles to help all kinds of people hear from God, respond to His voice, and live in a way that pleases Him.

NOTES

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5. Craig Groeschel, *Altar Ego* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 104, 106.
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7. Al Mohler, "Preaching in a Secular Age," *Preaching*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2016, 21.
8. *Ibid.*, 23.
9. *Ibid.*, 25.
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12. Michael Duduit, "Preaching Matters," *Preaching* vol 31, no 2, 8.
13. Michael Duduit, "Preaching to the De-churched: A Conversation with Mark Batterson," *Preaching*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2009, 11.
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