

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF INTERGENERATIONAL MINISTRY

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Introduction

Scripture is anything but silent on the concept of intergenerational relationships. Implicitly the Scriptural story makes clear that multigenerational families are necessary for practical survival and flourishing faith. The following survey of Scripture will move beyond the implicit understanding of the need for integrated generations and point to explicit points where clear instruction and teaching are offered. From the patriarchal stories, to poetic literature and into the Gospel narratives and New Testament Epistles emerges a picture of God's people being called out to function as a family; a family whose varying generations are mutually connected, serving and inspiring one another. This familial community of God's people is grounded in the triune nature of God Himself. Therefore, it is from this point the discussion must begin.

Intergenerationality and the Triune God

The opening lines of Scripture allow one to see a communal God creating. The Father creates through His Word (the Son; John 1:1-5) by the agency of the hovering Spirit. The reader of Scripture immediately must grapple with a God who functions not in isolation, but in mutual, co-eternal relationship. This triune nature intensifies in Genesis 1:26, "Then God said, 'Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness...'" (Emphasis added) There is a plurality with which God speaks of Himself. Within the first chapter of the Scriptural story it is noted that a communal God has created humankind to reflect Himself. This is why the only thing not good in God's original creation was the isolation of the first man (Genesis 2:18). Humankind was created to function in relationship;

designed to reflect the very nature of the Creator Himself. Community has always and will always be essential to life that is full and complete.

Though in many ways this triune nature is beyond human ability to grasp, language is employed to help fathom this relationship. Familial terms are often utilized through Scripture and in creedal statements to communicate this relational dynamic. For instance, the Father is said to eternally beget the Son. Another way this is often stated is through the terminology of generation and procession (Grenz, 1998). The Father generates the Son, and the Son is generated by the Father. Similarly the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. While it is important to note the co-eternal nature of these three Persons, there is also the quality of familial, generational language employed to help distinguish their diverse functions. While there is distinction within the Trinity, there is also clarity in their perfect unity. While each Person functions uniquely, they also are jointly involved in each Divine role. The Father is Creator, but Son and Spirit act in accordance. The Son redeems humankind, but Father and Spirit are intimately involved in this reconciliatory work. The Spirit is the completer of the divine plan, upon consummation, however, the Son will return in glory and the Father is noted as "all-in-all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

This understanding of God has many implications for human life, and can certainly be applied to the concept of intergenerational relationships. Because human beings are created in the likeness of a communal God, certainly people are to function in holistic community. Generations proceed one after another, and indeed there is often great diversity of experiences, life-skills, and other attributes amongst these generations. Nevertheless, a Christian community who seeks to reflect their triune God will learn to celebrate the diverse functions of

each generation while finding unity in a common purpose. Familial terms and functions for the people of God flow from this familial nature and activity of God Himself.

Intergenerationality and the Old Testament People of God

From the beginning of the biblical narrative family lineage becomes integral to the community of faith. This concept especially emerges with the covenant promise made to Abraham, which is renewed to Abraham's son Isaac, and grandson Jacob. From Jacob (renamed Israel), twelve sons proceed creating the families or tribes of Israel; God's chosen people. This multi-generational covenant develops a deeply rooted tradition of established generations (elders) investing in, instructing, and passing on their faith to the emerging generations. Deuteronomy 6:1-9 demonstrates with clarity how the promises and provision of God are to be handed from one generation to the next. As Moses prepares his people to enter the Promised Land, he adamantly reminds them of God's Law for them. Within his speech he demonstrates the necessity of intergenerational connectivity for this Law to be met and remembered, "...so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the Lord..." (Deut. 6:2a) Moses unpacks this command with practical instructions to, "teach them diligently to your sons and talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up." (Deut. 6:7) In order for future generations to understand the commands of the Lord which preserve His promise and protection, the established generations are instructed to teach and instill values with "diligence" in the hearts of the emerging generations.

As Joshua, Moses' younger understudy, takes the baton of leadership and leads the people across the Jordan River to possess this Promised Land, we

see yet another example of the importance of preserving the memory of these events for the generations to come. Joshua 4 notes the miraculous crossing on dry ground and then states God's instructions to Joshua to set up a memorial of standing stones. Joshua is obedient to the Lord's desire and instructs his people to take twelve standing stones (demonstrating the twelve families who comprise God's covenant people), and place them on the banks of the Jordan. Joshua said, "Let this be a sign among you, so that when your children ask later, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' then you shall say to them..." (Joshua 4:6) There is a cultural value being set by God himself that His chosen people would preserve faith through the intentionality of one generation passing on stories and memories of God's work to the next.

Even though there are exemplary moments of intergenerationality at work, there are also the realities of what happened when it ceased. Judges 2 chronicles the passing of Joshua. The biblical narrative is clear to observe the faithfulness of Joshua and the "elders who survived Joshua." Those who had "seen all the great work of the Lord which He had done" were obedient to God and lived according to His law. Though there is lacking detail, the reader learns that as this elder generation passed away another generation naturally arose in their place, but this generation "did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel." Somehow, the cultural expectation of the established generations instilling Godly values in their predecessors had not stuck. When this investment ceased, "the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals, and they forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers..." (Judges 2:6-12) Tracing the biblical narrative to this point makes clear the necessity of established generations to contend for the faith by investing in and teaching it to younger generations. When this does not happen, emerging generations do

not have mores to guide them, stories to anchor them, or knowledge of a heritage to inspire them.

God's people, through great turmoil, recover the Law and once again elevate the traditions of passing truth from one generation to the next. One way in which this is demonstrated in the Old Testament is through acts of worship. Unique to other world religions of the day, all generations of the family were instructed to participate in worship rites. Ritual feasts and festivals accounted for roles that each generation of the family would fill, from children to grandparents. The whole family sharing in these experiences was crucial to preserving the promise of the Covenant People (Yoder, 2011).

This theme is evident in the worship songs of the Old Testament People as well. Consider Psalm 71:17-18, "O God, You have taught me from my youth, and I still declare Your wondrous deeds. And even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to all who are to come." The worshiper celebrates the Godly instruction which had been poured into him at a young age, and asks for the sustenance to do the same for future generations. Similarly Psalm 78 is an entire worship song employed to teach youth about both the victories and mistakes of their ancestors, so they might learn from them. The Psalmist declares, "We will not conceal them from their children, but tell to the generation to come the praises of the Lord." There is such insistence on the need for this retelling of history it is said, "even the children yet to be born" must learn and know these things. (Psalm 78:4, 6) Another worship song declares, "One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your might acts." (Psalm 145:4) The theme of intergenerationality is woven into the practices, prayers and songs of God's Covenant people.

One might ask, "Is the generational investment in the Old Testament only one-sided? Is it always about what the elders must do for the younger?" Though less explicit, there is a reality of mutuality in the Old Testament; moments where the role of the younger generations serving the elders is evident. First, it must be noted that a clear role of the emerging generations is one that calls for the younger to honor and obey their elders. (Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16) Deuteronomy 32:7 reinforces this theme instructing the young, "Remember the days of old, consider the years of all generations. Ask your father, and he will inform you, your elders, and they will tell you." Respect from the younger to the older is crucial for God's design for the transmission of family values to succeed. However there is also the reality of elder generations needing the youth and vitality of younger generations. The Proverb writer admonishes, "Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old." The Law of God made provision for youthful generations to work and provide for the elderly. In a very real sense, the younger generations were able to provide practical or felt needs for their elders, while their elders were capable of imparting wisdom and memory to shape their younger counterparts.

While the Old Testament norm places the onus of leadership and spiritual wisdom upon the elder generations, it would be neglectful to pass over instances where the youthful step out in leadership. A young Joshua, who has already been discussed, takes the mantle of leadership from his elder Moses, and leads the people of God faithfully (Numbers 11:28). Josiah becomes the King of God's nation at the age of 8 (2 Kings 22:1), and at the age of 16 begins to restore God's Law to the land (2 Chron. 34:3-7). The child Samuel hears the voice of God even when his elder Eli is unable (1 Samuel 3:1-10). Most notably

the youthful David emerges as the anointed leader of Israel, defeating the feared foe, Goliath. In fact the elder King Saul makes it a point to note David's youth as weakness, "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man..." (1 Sam. 17:33) Of course, the narrative reveals God's strength made great in David's youth. The Scriptural narrative demonstrates through leaders such as these that God not only desires a submissive, obedient younger population, but also creates them with great potential and the ability to serve and contribute to His Kingdom.

This survey of the Old Testament reveals the God-ordained plan of generational faith transmission. When established generations were not teaching and instructing the emerging generations, waywardness and Godlessness prevailed. In order to avoid this trend, God's covenant people employed intergenerational worship rituals and traditions, and even allowed this intergenerational dynamic to shape themes of prayers and songs. God's plan also recognizes the mutuality of intergenerational relationships, noting the vitality, unhindered obedience, and malleability of younger generations as beneficial to the elders and the good of the broader faith community.

Intergenerationality and the New Testament People of God

The New Testament is marked by the incarnation of God the Son. Jesus of Nazareth demonstrates through his life and teachings that the Old Testament covenant was a foreshadowing or preparation for the fullness of God's Kingdom. Christ claimed he was the establisher of this Kingdom on earth (Luke 4:43). One of the things God had been foreshadowing in Israelite history was the usefulness of young people to the Kingdom cause. On several occasions the Gospels demonstrate Jesus' insistence on the value of children (See Appendix A). In a culture where children had become often regarded as a liability more than a

value, Jesus offers a contrary view. His statements not only assign value to children but go as far as elevating a child's character and behavior as attributes necessary to inform and inspire adults. Drane and Weber (as cited in Harness, 2012, p. 124) contended that Jesus' teachings promote an idea that children are "divine representatives, mediating the values of God's kingdom and being channels of God's grace." Intergenerational contact with children is pertinent for adult growth and formation. Once again the mutual benefit of intergenerationality is brought to the forefront in the biblical story; this time by the Author himself.

Jesus becomes the cornerstone or founder of a New Covenant family; the Church (Ephesians 2:19-22). His revolutionary teachings which gave value to all life regardless of age or gender became foundational practices within this body of Christ followers. In fact, once again the language employed to describe this Covenant people is often described in familial terms. The Church understands God as "Father", and the Spirit even compels them to cry out in intimate terms, "Abba (Galatians 4:5)." Jesus has enabled all people to be adopted as children of God (Ephesians 1, 5, Galatians 4:5, Romans 8:15, 23), thus creating a new family (Ephesians 3:15) dwelling within the design of a new household (Ephesians 2:19, 1 Timothy 3:15). This becomes significant because God's household is learning to function differently than the cultural norm. Most families of the New Testament era understood that wives, children (even grown children), and slaves were subjugated to the head of the household (*paterfamilias*; the oldest living male), and his broad legal powers and authority (*patria potestas*). God's household, on the other hand, is patterned after the teachings of Jesus which have ascribed value within each age group and gender within a family and a society.

In Ephesians 5:22-6:9 and Colossians 3:18-4:1 the Apostle Paul's instructions to each key family member illustrate how the household of God was restructuring the social expectations of communal relations. In these homes everyone was called to mutual submission because *all*, regardless of age, gender or social standing were submitted to the true *paterfamilias*, their heavenly Father. Because their God was one of unified diversity, His household would function in the same way. Certainly the goal of the New Covenant home was not to create homogeneity, but rather celebrate the diversity of various generations and genders united by one common purpose.

This Pauline language is understood in the context of household tables common in that day. The difference was at this household table everyone had a place and purpose and the "guiding principle 'Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21),' took on an intergenerational dimension radically different from the prevailing cultural norms (Harkness, 2012)."

Because valuing mutuality from all generations was countercultural there are moments within the apostolic teachings where instruction must be given towards this end. Titus 2:1-10 is devoted to generational instruction; how the young and old are to interact with one another. From this list of instruction there are a few important observations. There is a continuation of Old Testament thought in regard to the importance of elders transmitting faith and values to the younger. Another important observation from these instructions is that intergenerational dynamics were not only to benefit faith issues, but also practical life issues (felt needs). The list of things established generations were to teach the emerging generations ranges from faith concerns (i.e. purity) to felt-need concerns (i.e. work ethic).

The New Covenant family designed for intergenerational connectivity, then, was not only to enhance the faith, but also to impact societal needs and concerns. This again is reflective of Jesus' teachings which dealt with theological matters but also addressed finances, marriage, anxiety and other practical issues. Jesus modeled faith as interwoven into all aspects of life (Oosthuizen, 2007). Therefore the household of God placed value in each role, recognizing their respective needs and contributions. Whereas the elders instructed and offered wisdom, 1 Timothy 5:1-6, 9-16 affords the role of provision for the elderly and respect to the older to that of the younger generations.

Conclusion

Throughout the ages the people of God have been called to reflect the image of their Creator. Because God is Himself communal and relational; a model tension of unified diversity, His called ones have always grappled with managing the same tension. Whether it is the diversity of race, gender, or generation, the biblical theme resonates through Old and New Testaments, *all* have value for *all* are created in the image of God. From this foundational premise both Old and New Testament worshipers learn counterintuitive practices where the young are invited to the family table, invited to fully participate in worship, and even become exemplary sources of leadership and inspiration to their older counterparts. A God-ordained design of established generations being the progenitors of faith, Godly values, and redemption stories to younger generations is witnessed. Biblically, intergenerationality is pictured in the very nature of God, must be reflected within the lives of his worshipers, and is key to the transformation of culture.