

Chapter Two

Biblical Values To Shape the Congregation

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It will become clear throughout this book that effective intergenerational worship will require careful and committed effort on the part of those who lead and plan worship. This chapter explores the Biblical reasons for taking on such a complex task. The Bible speaks of values that ought to shape us as congregations. This chapter identifies those values for us to consider.

One Saturday a colleague and I were leading a workshop on intergenerational worship for a group of churches. The planning committee had suggested this topic because of the high level of interest in it. All the participants seemed very attentive. Their questions and responses indicated a high level of interest. We were encouraged to notice that they were dealing with questions and issues they had not identified before.

But after the morning session, several of the participants came to talk with us. They seemed troubled. "What you say sounds so good and so true," one of them said. "But it just seems like such a huge task. I don't really know if we could make the worship in our church truly intergenerational. There's just too much to do! This is going to be too hard, I'm afraid."

We talked for a short while and I agreed with them that this would, indeed, be a large task. It would be difficult. I didn't want to downplay that at all. Yet, at the same time, I didn't want them to give up on a very important part of ministry. There are times when our tasks are demanding, yet so valuable that we must draw on a healthy motivation to give it our best.

Otherwise, we will be tempted to give up the work when it gets to be more difficult than we first thought.

Jesus felt he had to address that very issue one day. When someone wants to build a tower, he asked, "Which of you ...does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?" Otherwise he may not be able to finish, and others will ridicule him because he was not able to finish what he began.¹ Then to reinforce his point, Jesus repeated the point, illustrating it with the scenario about a king who was planning to go to war but had not calculated the cost. He consequently was forced to negotiate a settlement midway through.

Some may consider this issue of intergenerational worship one that is not worth pursuing. It will be too complex to successfully minister to all ages and the cost will be too high, they say. I've heard the voices and so have you. "Why should we try to get a five-year old to sing with us?" "A Middle Schooler needs to be active, not listen, and there's no way we can provide for activity in a worship service." "An adolescent needs visuals with constantly changing images and will never become engaged in our kind of worship." "The 30-somethings and the 70-somethings think and feel so differently and face so many different issues; how can one sermon ever expect to connect with both of them?"

Aren't we handing a pastor and worship planners an impossible task?

And so some say, "how much easier it will be if we just let them all worship with their peers on their own level and in their own way!" After all, our whole society is increasingly structured that way. We separate the generations in school and in community activities. Church education separates the ages for the most part. Advertisers design their commercials to focus on one group, knowing they cannot reach all generations at once. Even a large mall near our home is clearly designed for a certain slice of the age spectrum.

Why shouldn't worship be that way too?

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES TO CONSIDER

Is intergenerational worship a lost cause? No. Will it be a tough task? Yes. But there are good reasons to take on a task so complex. This chapter aims to spell out five good reasons in the form of biblical principles that shape the Christian congregation and together make the case for intergenerational worship. Though none of these considerations could individually carry the weight of the argument for intergenerational worship, their cumulative impact is convincing.

The Unity of the Church

Much has been said about the unity of the church - its importance, its maintenance, its brokenness, and all our efforts to protect it. The Bible makes it clear that unity is a gift of Christ to his church. He provides it and so the Bible speaks of the unity of the church as something that *is*. In his high-priestly prayer we are given the privilege of listening in on the conversation between Jesus and his Father. He prays, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."² And Paul writes to the Ephesians, "There *is* one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."³ Notice the number of times that the words "all" and "one" appear together in the same sentence. In his classic metaphor to the Corinthians Paul explains that the unity of the church is characterized by wide diversity and he uses the human body to illustrate his point. "For just as the body is one and has many members,

and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."⁴ Similarly, Paul says in Romans 12:5, "...we who many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."

But the unique character of this unity is found in the fact that the members of this unified body are so very different! Some are Jews with a long history of relationships with God; some are Gentiles who have long been considered outside of God's love. Some serve in visible roles like a hand or foot or mouth; others serve in less visible roles like the parts of our physical body we consider more private and personal. Some are strong; some are weak. Some are slaves; some are free. And some are children; some are adults.

On the one hand the Bible tells us this unity *is*. It exists because Christ has bound us all together. Yet, on the other hand, it must be preserved because it can be very fragile and easily lost. So the apostle exhorts us to make "...every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."⁵ Therefore, it is impossible to address the matter of generational differences in the life of the church without giving careful consideration to both sides of this teaching - unity *is* and it needs to be maintained.

The Pattern of Worship

Students of early Christian worship have often wished that both Scripture and early historical accounts had given us more detailed accounts of early worship practices. Having more information would seem helpful. On the other hand we must admit that having more complete information might make us feel constrained to follow only the first Christians' pattern and limit our ability to adapt worship practices to our current needs. Yet, though we are not given details,

we have been given enough glimpses of early worship life to make a number of principles very clear. One such principle is that God's people have always included all ages in their worship.

When God delivered the Hebrews from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, he instructed them to observe the Passover regularly as a reminder of his gracious deliverance.⁶ This ceremony was intended to be a constant reminder to the Hebrews that God had mightily delivered them with his gracious hand. God even gave them specific instructions on how to observe it - about when to schedule it, the lamb to be selected, the use of the lamb's blood, the food to be prepared and the clothing to wear. God's intent was that this celebration should be permanent among the Hebrews and that it should include a retelling of the Exodus story throughout their history. Therefore, it is significant that the children of the Hebrew family are expected not only to be present, but to participate by asking the probing question: "what do you mean by this observance?"⁷ This question from children would be the trigger throughout the generations for a recounting of their history. Whenever the child would ask the question, the family would hear the whole story again.

At numerous times in Israel's history, we are able to observe their worship life when the people of Israel are experiencing a renewal of God's covenant. In many of these instances the Scriptures clearly show that all generations are present. We might expect that only the father of the family, or the elders of the nation, would be present, but references show these times of worship are intergenerational events.

In Deuteronomy, while Moses was leading Israel through the wilderness, he called the people to renew their covenant with God in a time of worship, and Moses described the intergenerational nature of the congregation - "the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your

camp...."⁸ When Israel had crossed the Jordan under the leadership of Joshua, Moses' successor, they carried out the conquest of Jericho but then experienced a humiliating defeat in battle in punishment for one warrior's sin. So once again they were called together for a renewal of the covenant, and Joshua led them. "There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the aliens who resided among them."⁹

Much later, after King Solomon had built the Temple for Israel in Jerusalem, we find similar worship events involving all generations. Jehoshaphat led them in renewal and "...all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives, and their children."¹⁰ When Nehemiah led them in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem after their return from Exile, Ezra called them together as an intergenerational congregation. He read the book of the law to them before the Water Gate from early morning until midday "...in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand...."¹¹ When we collect all these valuable glimpses, we are not surprised that Psalm 148 should exclaim "Young men and women alike, old and young together! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven."¹² This is our story just like it was theirs, and we are living it out in our communities each week.

A Covenant Community

Another thing we notice is how regularly we are reminded of God's interest in all generations. Early in biblical history, in Genesis 17, God said to Abraham, "I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you."¹³ And then God

provided circumcision for their male offspring as a sign of belonging to this community. What we see here is a glimpse into the nature of God and his method of working. He does not start from scratch with each new generation but deals with parents and their offspring as a unit.

Many churches readily use the word "covenant" in their theology to express this value. They often practice infant baptism as an expression of what they call their covenant theology. Through baptism, they believe, even infants are received into the Christian church. In other churches the word "covenant" rarely appears and only adults are baptized. Yet, when they "dedicate" their children they profess that God has a unique and special interest in them. In nearly all congregations, the underlying belief is that God is interested in all ages from one generation to the next and He does not start from the beginning with each new generation as though he has had no vested interest in the family before this time. God speaks about doing his work from "generation to generation", and he expresses a special interest in both parents and their children.

God's dealings with the generations are regularly reinforced in the rest of the Bible, particularly the New Testament. Jesus paid special attention to children and he became indignant when others tried to dissuade him from giving his blessing to little ones.¹⁴ At Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Christian church, many in Jerusalem were astonished and confused, so Peter explained the significance of this event in his sermon. Then he concluded his sermon by claiming that this gift of the Holy Spirit was available to all who would believe in the name of Jesus Christ. And he went on to say, "For the promise is for you, *for your children*, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him."¹⁵ In the next few years "household" baptisms occurred in the early Christian church as evidence of believer's conviction that God deals with people as a family unit.¹⁶

In addition, we find the Scriptures often affirm that the work of the Holy Spirit can be expected in believers of all ages, adults and children. Joel the prophet claimed that God would be pouring out his Spirit "on all flesh; your sons and daughters...your old men... and your young men....even on the male and female slaves...."¹⁷ Obviously, the work of God's Holy Spirit is age inclusive, an insight into the heart of God himself. These references help us to understand the significance of the phrase "all generations" which appears 91 times in the Bible. The church God calls together is a community in which all ages are valued.

Formation of Character

Chapter 3 of this book will address the matter of spiritual formation. The formation of our faith and character is a complex process, one that is never fully completed during our days on this earth, and many influences shape it. Yet, while complex, it is an important process and one that determines in large part our qualifications for effective and productive service in the kingdom of God.

What interests us here is that God does not give us a fully formed character. Nor does he form our character as a sovereign act all by himself, or expect us to unilaterally form our own character. The formation of our character in the economy of God is a community event. We aid each other in such formation. God acts on us through others. And, in particular, the interaction of different generations is a necessary component of healthy formation. Each age learns from another. The young learn from the old who have become seasoned by the experiences of life. And the old learn from the young in their new exploration of life. Everywhere in this process, the assumption is that the different generations are interacting with each other. And since the formation of faith and character is an essential concern of the Christian church, we should aim to

keep the generations interacting with each other, both in ministry activities and in corporate worship.

We have already seen how the parents and children talk together during the Passover celebration. Children ask what the event means and parents explain the Exodus, so that the young learn and the older don't forget. Moses directly addresses this need:

"Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."¹⁸

These words are a bold plea for people of all ages to remain involved in each other's lives.

I find the words of Psalm 78, a psalm of instruction, even more striking. These words probably come from the time of the divided monarchy and carry a strong warning to those present not to repeat the awful disobedience of previous generations. Listen for this in these words of Psalm 78:1-8:

Give ear, O my people, to my teaching;
Incline your ears to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in a parable;
I will utter dark sayings from of old,
things that we have heard and known,
that our ancestors have told us.
We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell the coming generation
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,

and the wonders that he has done.
He established a decree in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors to teach to their children,
so the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
so they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
and that they should not be like their ancestors,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose hearts were not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.

We hear pain and fear in the words of this psalm. Asaph is pleading for practices to be put in place that will minimize the possibility of future apostasy. If you read these words carefully you hear reference to at least four, if not five, generations. First Asaph speaks about "our ancestors" in verse 3, and then he speaks of "us" in the same verse. But he speaks of the "next generation" in verses 4 and 6. And again in verse 6 he refers to "the children yet to be born" and even goes on to the next generation, "they in turn would tell their children". Here is a very clear picture of Asaph's concern that God's people remain faithful to God and he urgency instruction that the generations must participate in the instruction and formation of each other for this to happen!

It seems that early new testament era believers lived with the assumption that, of course, the generations needed each other. This was an urgent concern among their ancestors in the Old Testament era, and we could expect it to carry over to new generations. So when Paul says to the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom...."¹⁹ we can assume he pictures old and young interacting with each other for further in the chapter we find him specifically referring to wives and husbands, children and parents, and slaves and masters.

We get the best view of this interaction in the pastoral epistles. When Paul exhorts Timothy concerning his ministry in Ephesus, he speaks of how to treat "an older man", "younger men", "older women", and "younger women" all in the same sentence.²⁰ We can infer that he must have seen the different age groups as part of the congregation. When Paul gives instruction and encouragement to pastor Titus on the life and behavior of the church he raises the same subject. He encourages Titus to provide a setting where much instruction, admonition, encouragement, teaching, modeling and training take place. And we also notice that he sees all age groups involved in this. He mentions the "older men", "older women", "young women", "younger men", "slaves" and "masters".²¹ Each had a part in the formation of the others.

A Continuing Community

God wants his church on earth to be present through every age. So we speak about the perpetuation of the Christian church. This is not only God's desire, but it is also his plan. On the one hand, the church will always continue because of his faithfulness in building it and preserving it, even through the most severe trials. And so Jesus could promise the disciples, "...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."²² In

addition, the church will be perpetuated as it obediently follows the lead of the Holy Spirit in reaching and discipling others. Jesus said not only, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...."²³ but also, "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."²⁴ So the church will continue here on earth because of the faithful work of Christ and the powerful work of the Spirit enabling his people to disciple others.

But there is also a third consideration. Because the church will and must continue, each generation must shape the next generation so each will know of God and his acts. The interaction of the generations in reminding each other of the truth of the Gospel and the acts of God are an indispensable element of the continuation of the church. Even though missions and outreach are a key part of the church's ministry, we must acknowledge that more people have been brought into the Christian church by way of the Christian family and the instruction received there than through any other means.

When Ethan the Exrahite proclaims in Psalm 89, "I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations"²⁵ he seems to have in view a people of God who continues through the generations because each age tells the next. So the continuation of the Christian church in society will be dependent on the faithfulness of the Christ who builds and protects his church, the Holy Spirit who empowers it to reach out, and the generations who form and teach each other.

SOME HELPFUL GUIDELINES

If we look ahead 25 years down the road we see that another generation is in place. And if we ask whether that generation will know the Lord and walk in his ways, we should ask some

questions about what we are doing now. Will our current efforts most likely be successful in helping the new generation come to know the Lord, be his church, and come to worship him? Should we, perhaps, worry about those who do not learn to worship with their families? Should we wonder if they will grow up never having built patterns of worshiping with adults? Should we be concerned that those who worship today in their own "age-appropriate" settings will not be able to make the transition into adult worship?

The march of the generations is proceeding. We adults were once children ourselves. And one day these children over whom we fuss and fret will be parents who fuss and fret over their children. As the march of the generations goes on, the continuance of the Christian church depends on learning and developing healthy interaction.

The task of being an intergenerational church is a complex task, one that will make the work of pastors and worship planners more difficult. Yet, the work will be worth it. The values we are taught give us the highest motivation to continue our efforts to keep the generation richly interacting with each other.

Throughout this book, many constructive ideas will be given to aid you in this work of building and maintaining an intergenerational congregation. After looking at all the biblical material in this chapter, let's spell out a half-dozen guidelines that will be helpful.

Consider All the Chapters of Life's Journey to be Equally Valuable

Often today we find that certain stages of life receive more concentrated attention than others. Out of concern for the healthy growth of children, a church will focus extra efforts on children's education. Because teens have so many struggles, youth ministry becomes a high priority. But when we view all the information from Scripture we don't find any greater emphasis

on one chapter over another. God's work, Christ's attention, and the Holy Spirit's ministry does not favor one generation over another. Listening to the concerns and needs of parishioners convinces a pastor of the same thing. In my pastoral experience over 40 years I have been struck by the fact that Christians of all ages have struggles, questions, and growth issues. An 82-year-old parishioner once said to me, "In all your attention to the needs of youth, please don't forget that a lot of us older Christians still have a tough time of living the Christian life!" A 78-year-old man admitted to me that he expected that by this time in life, his struggles with temptations and big questions would be pretty well resolved. "Not so", he said. If every chapter in life has its own unique needs and challenges, then all must remain in focus in our ministries.

Avoid Stereotypes

Surely, you've heard the stereotypes about generational differences, and we all have a number of them floating around in our heads. "The children all prefer...." "Twos are terrible...." "Youth all really like this better...." "Seniors always...." They are expressed so often that soon we accept them uncritically. We ought to be asking ourselves whether such statements are true. Human preferences and behavior are just too complex to reduce them to sweeping statements like these. While some generalizations may be warranted, we need to be very cautious about ever promoting sweeping stereotypes, especially if we are planning ministry built on such stereotypes. Human beings are diverse, and diversity appears both between the different age groups and within each age group.

Worship Planning Should Be Age-Inclusive

In Chapter 10 we will explore the issues associated with worship planning more carefully, but the matter ought to be raised here also. Those who carry the responsibility for designing the worship services of a congregation have a much more complex task when the church is committed to intergenerational worship. Though we encouraged you to avoid sweeping stereotypes, it must be admitted that different age groups often do have different values and communication forms. No one person can be expected to stay in touch with the desires and needs of all generations, and so the group in charge of planning should be aware of and sensitive to the circumstances of each. In the services they plan, songs they select, and prayers they write and offer, the circumstances and needs of different age groups must be represented. Those who are selected for readings and leadership should represent all chapters of life in the congregation.

Encourage Activities that Prepare Worshipers to be Age-Inclusive

Many of the activities outside of worship influence how well we can worship when we come together. By the time we enter the worship space, many influences have prepared us to interact healthily and comfortably with those of other age groups, or to feel uncomfortable and awkward. Parents who explain the main movements of worship to their children are preparing them well. Youth education classes which intentionally teach the basic principles of worship and explain the parts of the liturgy will promote healthy worship by youth. Service projects in which youth and adults serve side-by-side will make it easier for them to worship side-by-side. Fellowship opportunities like soup suppers and pancake breakfasts will provide golden opportunities for being together. Teaming up youth and seniors as prayer partners reaps rich benefits in many congregations. Choirs that include several generations are good models for the entire congregation. Marva Dawn encourages that children's sermons be focused on teaching the

parts of the liturgy to the children because it provides the essential preparation they need to be a thoughtful worship participant.²⁶ Each congregation should aim to stretch its imagination to plan events and methods by which they help people to live, work, serve and talk together so they can worship together.

Plan Periodic Worship Events to Be Intentionally Inclusive

While most intergenerational worship will occur in the weekly pattern of a congregation's worship life, a congregation would do well to have special worship events from time to time that are more intentionally and obviously age-inclusive. These intentional events will be able to speak more loudly and clearly about worshiping together.

Watch a video of your worship service and observe the ages of those who are in leadership. What conclusion would one draw about the nature of your congregation - that all worshipers are in their 50's, or that all ages belong here? For instance, imagine the beauty of an older man and his granddaughter side-by-side at the microphone reading Scripture. When we have distributed a Worship Resource Bank Survey²⁷ (Appendix A) to ask for volunteers to lead worship, we have always encouraged volunteers of all ages. Often those who were younger and inexperienced needed some assistance and coaching, but such efforts were well worth it. Some congregations make sure that the visuals and art in their worship space or on their church bulletin represent the efforts of both adults and children.

Prayer times in worship offer an opportunity to practice age inclusiveness. When you listen to an audio or watch a video of your recent worship services, ask some questions about the intercessory prayers. Do they address the needs of all ages? Are the needs of children mentioned? Infants? Parents? Adolescents? Retirees? Age inclusive prayers are a must in age

inclusive worship. If your congregation practices infant baptism, is attention focused on the children in the congregation? On parents? Grandparents? When adult baptisms take place, are other members of the family in other generations also visible? Are those who lead the liturgy always of the same age bracket, or is there inclusiveness?

The sermon is also an important time for integrating the ages in worship. Sermonic material can be a helpful way to explain the needs of one generation to another. For instance, a message on young Daniel and his needs can be a time to remind those who are no longer young what it's like, the needs youth face, and that they need adults to encourage them. Similarly, a message about the death of Abraham can be a time to speak to the adolescents and young parents about the concerns that older folks have as they reach their declining years. Let the different ages experience dialog with each other through the sermon. In Appendix B, you will find the outline of a series of worship services, "The Chapters of Life", that was an intentional effort to help the generations better understand and provide support for each other.

We should not shape our worship life by convenience, or ease, or popular preference, but by biblical values that are timeless. The task we are given may be somewhat more difficult if we are faithful to these principles, but the end result will be healthier and to the greater glory of God.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Review the five biblical values that are presented in this chapter.

- Which value contains significant new insight for your congregation?
- Which value calls you to do more study and research to understand it better?
- Which value have you been neglecting and should receive better attention?

2. Identify two or three stereotypes that your congregation has accepted uncritically. What can you do about that?

3. Evaluate the worship of your congregation during the past twelve months:

- Which services have been intentionally age-inclusive?
- Which elements of your worship service illustrate the greatest sensitivity to all ages?

4. If visitors were to worship at your congregation for five weeks, what conclusions do you think they would draw about your inclusion, or lack of inclusion, of all ages? What events or illustrations do you think they would cite to support their conclusion?

¹ See Luke 14:28-31

² John 17:22,23

³ Ephesians 4:4-6 (italics added)

⁴ I Corinthians 12:12

⁵ Ephesians 4:3

⁶ See Exodus 12

⁷ Exodus 12:26 and 13:14

⁸ Deuteronomy 29:10,11

⁹ Joshua 8:35

¹⁰ II Chronicles 20:13

¹¹ Nehemiah 8:3

¹² Psalm 148:12,13

¹³ Genesis 17:7

¹⁴ See Mark 10:13-16

¹⁵ Acts 2:38,39 (italics added)

¹⁶ Acts 16:15, 31-34 and I Corinthians 1:16

¹⁷ Joel 2:28,29

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 6:6-9

¹⁹ Colossians 3:16

²⁰ I Timothy 5:1,2

²¹ See Titus 2:1-15

²² Matthew 16:18

²³ Matthew 28:19

²⁴ Acts 1:8

²⁵ Psalm 89:1

²⁶ See *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture*, M. Dawn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), pages 305-307.

²⁷ See *Designing Worship Together: Models and Strategies for Worship Planning* (The Alban Institute, 2005) page 30-33.