

Commentary: What Boomers can learn from Millennials and Gen-Xers

January 5, 2017

Editor's Note: Hal Ostrander says the churches of which he's been a member through the years seemingly ministered only to society's well-off and advantaged. At the Lord's doing, his understanding of the issue has changed. With his daughter, Alison, leading the way, their family is learning week-to-week how wide of the mark such a confined ministry misses the heart of true religion (James 1:27). So, they address themselves to Hal's generation, Baby Boomers.

Having watched Baby Boomers delight in and promote their own respectability at church for too long, the time is here them to move beyond all this lack-of-true-religion and to embrace, love and serve all those so unlike themselves.

To be sure, the 'hood surrounding our church isn't pretty to look at, is made up of disadvantaged peoples of all stripes, isn't at all what most Christians would consider safe, and definitely isn't a place of refuge for the typical suburban dweller. But young people are serving there by the droves, Millennials and Gen-Xers with a heart for the disenfranchised and marginalized.

Watching them work in the community comes close to being an epiphany. To see how unencumbered their worship is on Sundays is convicting and inspiring. Our desire is to follow their lead with the same informed zeal and to match their same lack of self-consciousness about what outsiders say or think about them.

Millennials and Gen-Xers recognize the forgotten have worth and dignity. Believers and unbelievers alike are made in the Creator's image. The outward brokenness of urban settings and among the homeless poignantly models our own inward brokenness before the Lord saved us. So, how can we continually pass by the broken, needy and lost? Insert yourself here as the priest and Levite who avoided the left-for-dead man on the road to Jericho (Luke 10:30-37).

Learning by asking

Boomers must ask hard questions. Are we willing to move ahead personally with the gospel by:

- Living sacrificially as Christ and Paul did?
- Dying to self to serve the least of these?
- Giving up certain creature comforts longer than temporarily?
- Pursuing those different from us the way Christ pursued us?
- Realizing neighbors are dying spiritually and haven't heard the good news?
- Considering how much longer we'll watch and do nothing?
- Treating people as we would have them treat us?

If not, there's a problem somewhere. To illustrate, years ago a wealthy banker, a Christian in name, shoved a young destitute street kid to the hard pavement when all he'd asked for was a bit of spare change. How's that going to play on Judgment Day, along with our own less drastic actions?

Yes, Christ's invisible church will advance despite the visible church's wrong-headed ways, means and concerns to which history can attest. But to play a dynamic role side-by-side with all God is doing through Millennials/Gen-Xers is the issue. God is calling Christians to the hard places. Are you in or out? The question must be faced.

Learning by doing

Can a heart for reaching the marginalized be learned from younger Christians? Yes, and practical steps can be taken, but they must flow from a deep-rooted desire within. Moreover, recognizing our own unworthiness and need for repentance will strengthen this desire until, hopefully, helping truly needy individuals with whom we haven't dealt previously becomes foundational to who we are.

Here are some steps to take for God to use you. Christianity 101. Will you pass the course?

- Pray you'll desire Christ above all else, asking God for opportunities to talk to neighbors, co-workers, and the down-and-out in general. Pray he'll give you boldness and Spirit-led promptings.
- Acknowledge homeless people. Make eye contact and smile. If the Spirit leads, stop and talk. Ask their name. Listen well. Carry a few \$5 and \$10 gift cards in your purse or wallet for these special moments.
- Reach out to neighbors. Maybe you've lived in the same place 10 years or more and still feel awkward and uncomfortable interacting with them. But what's that compared to making Christ known?
- Make friends of diverse races and low-income folks. Listen when tragedy strikes their community. Mourn with them. Learn about their culture and history, how they've been impacted by government, businesses, other races, etc. Admit you'll never know what a day in their shoes is like.
- Is your church moving toward diversity? If not, approach the leaders and ask why not. Maybe the Lord wants you to step up and lead the charge. If a ministry for the disadvantaged is already in place, join up.

Closing thoughts

Maybe the recent move toward social justice is God's way of reawakening

his people. Perhaps God is using the passion of Millennials/Gen-Xers to see justice wrought for the homeless, urban neighborhoods, human trafficking victims, etc., and to reignite the hearts of Baby Boomers in churches across America. Maybe God's mercy and grace are persuading us to serve the kingdom in this way.

The Lord is calling you, whatever your season of life, walk in faithful obedience to reach the lost. We've been commanded: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22: 37-39).

There's no greater joy. Ever felt it?

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