

Voices: Bridging generational views of grace

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Ministry is a context sport. The apostle Paul knew this. He wrote, “I have become all things to all people so that by all means possible I might save some” to convey this to his Corinthian audience (1 Corinthians 9:22).

Paul refers to himself as a “slave to everyone”—the Jews, those under the law, those not having the law, the weak—all “for the sake of the gospel.”

In gospel ministry, context matters. Paul knew the gospel intersects various cultural, ethnic and generational narratives differently. He learned that exploring those narrative dynamics positioned him best to bring the gospel to all types of people. As a result, Paul set up churches in a variety of cultural contexts along his missionary journeys.

When it comes to young adult ministry, context often is overlooked, misunderstood or underdeveloped in favor of “practicality” and “doing something.” When consulting with pastors and church staff about developing young adult ministries, one of the most challenging conversations involves getting them to understand that exploring context is indeed “doing something.”

Looking before you leap is not procrastination; it’s strategic. Listening with an ear to understand is not passive; it’s active. Understanding to whom you will minister is not abstract; it’s concrete.

Grace’s significance to older adults

One of the ways exploring context has helped my ministry to young adults

over the last decade is centered on the core concept of grace. Grace is an indispensable part of the gospel message we've heard from pulpits for decades. But, I contend, the conversation around grace is not always the same in every context.

Take the song "Amazing Grace." It was written at a time when nothing in life came without hard work or persistent, determined effort. The writer of this classic hymn did not enjoy the conveniences we have today.

His peers would have emphasized if you want something—anything—out of life, you have to work for it. Nothing came for free. This shaped how his generation saw the world and how the gospel intersected that world.

To that audience, the soteriological—salvific—value of grace indeed is amazing. That Christ Jesus would pay the cost or, better, do the work for us to have the greatest gift of eternal life, while everything else of far less value comes through the grit and grime of a hard day's work—that's amazing!

The focus on the sacrificial death of Christ lies at the forefront of the spiritual conversation of most Boomers. For them, the gospel—the good news—is Christ gives us the greatest gift without our need to break our backs to receive it.

Grace's significance to younger adults

As technology has advanced and changed society, we no longer get everything we need from the sweat of our brow. We can decide on dinner and have it delivered while sitting on the couch binge-watching shows.

People and technology are doing things for us all the time. "Grace," at least to some degree, is ordinary. To imagine someone paying the cost or doing the work is increasingly less extraordinary. It still matters to the next

generations, but it's simply not as captivating as it is for Boomers.

Grace for the next generation is a statement of personal value, not effort. For them, grace enforces and protects the value of all people regardless of race, creed or any other social category.

The most beautiful thing about Jesus to the next generation is not the radical way he died, but the radically inclusive way he chose to live as he interfaced with people living on the edge of Israelite society. It's the obvious way his love for people cut against the grain of his society.

It's amazing to the next generations that Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is at hand" to both the religious elites and those marginalized, maligned and dismissed by the religious elites—those told they were cursed by God for their sin or their parents' sin and were destined for hell with no hope of recourse.

The gospel—the good news—from Jesus the King was the kingdom was opening its doors to those socio-religious outcasts, too. They were not forgotten or dismissed. Jesus loved them, too, and he proved it by demonstrating love and grace in the way he lived.

Grace communicates value for Millennials and Generation Z and moves the life of Jesus to the forefront of their understanding of the gospel.

The grace of the gospel welcomes all to the kingdom of heaven with equal value, regardless of heritage, history or social status. What an amazing gift!

A complete understanding of grace

To older and younger generational contexts, I say, "Yes." The complete gospel understanding of God's grace is celebrated in Jesus' life and death. And yet, where there should be synergy around the generational implications of God's grace, there is tension.

In true Romans 14 fashion, we often are too busy questioning other's salvation and neglect exploring ways the expansive gospel of grace can intersect a narrative unlike our own. The product typically is division. In our time, this division is realized in unnecessary church hurt, deconstruction and general distrust of church institutions.

If we want to minister well to young adults, we need to allow contextual shifts like this to challenge us. For Paul, the gospel was big enough to intersect the contexts of all people, and he chose to "enslave" himself to understand those contexts for the gospel's sake.

May Paul be a clear example for us to take practical and strategic action to discover the heartbeat of the next generation in order to bring God's beautiful, comprehensive and complete love to them.

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